

The Belarusian government hits at the system for funding NGOs

On 4 August, a leading Belarusian human rights activist, Ales Byalatski, was arrested on suspicion of concealing income. The Belarusian tax authorities based their allegations on data from an account in a Lithuanian bank belonging to Byalatski, which the Lithuanian Ministry of Justice forwarded to Minsk under an interstate agreement on mutual legal assistance. This calls into question the mechanism for the external funding of Belarusian NGOs. Belarus has taken steps to freeze this system and discredit those countries which participate in it.

The *Viasna* Centre run by Byalatski has been involved in monitoring human rights violations for many years, and manages most of the programmes for assistance to those oppressed by the regime. The centre's activity is largely funded by Western donors. The Belarusian government's use of the account information has allowed them to bring charges of tax evasion against Byalatski, which is punishable by up to seven years' imprisonment with confiscation of property. Lithuania's sharing of Byalatski's data has raised serious controversy in Belarus, Lithuania and the West. Lithuania has acknowledged the error and set up a special government commission to investigate the circumstances of this case.

Byalatski's arrest is a serious blow to organisations supporting the victims of repression in Belarus. In the near future, it may lead to further arrests; nor can it be ruled out that the Belarusian government has exploited the Lithuanian officials' error in order to discredit Lithuania, which until now had been one of the main refuges for the Belarusian opposition. On one hand, this could be a plan to antagonise relations between the Belarusian opposition and the Lithuanian government; on the other, a chance to present Lithuania as an unreliable partner in the mechanism for transferring funds to the opposition in Belarus. <kam>