

Belarus: Released opposition leader talks about torture

On 28 February, one of the Belarusian opposition activists detained last December, Ales Mikhalevich, reported that during his weeks-long detention he was subjected to torture and was forced to cooperate with the KGB. Other detainees are beginning to confirm reports of the use of torture in custody. In this situation, a reaction from the EU is possible, including a harsher policy by Brussels towards the Belarusian regime.

Mikhalevich was one of nine opponents to Alyaksandr Lukashenka in the presidential elections held last 19 December. He was detained several days after the demonstration, and then released on 19 February, but forbidden to leave his residence. He is one of a group of 42 people charged with the organisation of and participation in mass public disturbances which, under Article 293 of the Penal Code, is punishable by 15 years' imprisonment.

At a press conference on 28 February, Mikhalevich stated that he was subjected to physical and mental torture, which he had been forbidden to speak about. Among the tortures he listed were arm-twisting, sleep deprivation, and humiliating searches in his cell. At the same time, he admitted that he was forced to sign a commitment to cooperate with the KGB, which he considers null and void since leaving detention. The use of physical violence against the detainees has been indirectly confirmed by the journalist Natalia Radzina, who was also arrested last December. These testimonies may harden the EU's position, and it cannot be ruled out that Brussels will consider toughening its policy towards the Belarusian authorities. <kam>