

Belarus: loss of citizenship for opposition activities

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An amendment to the law *On the citizenship of the Republic of Belarus*, signed by Alyaksandr Lukashenka, was published on 10 January. Its provisions include the possibility of revoking the citizenship of a person living abroad who has been convicted by a final judgment for 'extremist' activities or other acts threatening state security. The new legislation will come into force on 10 June, and Lukashenko personally will decide who is to be deprived of their citizenship. As explained by the initiator of the amendments, deputy Lilia Ananich, the intention was to legally stigmatise those engaged in 'anti-state activities' outside the country.

The trial in absentia of the Belarusian political leaders in exile, including Svetlana Tsikhanouskaya and Pavel Latushka, is likely to begin on 17 January (this option became available after a July 2022 amendment to the Criminal Law). The indictment includes charges of seeking to illegally seize power, organising mass riots and creating anti-state & terrorist structures. In turn, on 10 January, a group of dozens of former Belarusian political prisoners and family members of the detainees made a public appeal to the international community to take stronger steps – including dialogue with the regime – towards obtaining the release of political prisoners (of which there are currently over 1400).

Commentary

- The option to revoke citizenship has primarily been introduced for propaganda purposes, and the purpose of the amendment is to further discredit the political émigrés. All indications are that in the coming months its leading representatives will be sentenced in their absence to long prison terms; this will probably be accompanied by Lukashenko's decision to strip them of their citizenship, which will be heavily promoted in the state media. The regime will thus demonstrate its consistency in fighting its opponents, whom the state mass media presents as a group of frustrated refugees detached from Belarusian reality, and who are incapable of influencing the situation in the country to any degree or challenging Lukashenko's real power. The change in the law is also another indication that Minsk in no way considers the democratic groups as a political force with which it could conduct any negotiations, even with possible Western mediation.
- The mechanism of revoking citizenship may significantly complicate the legal (and consequently residential) situations of some of the Belarusian emigrants living in the EU and other countries. This is because they will need to regularise their legal status anew, which in some cases (although not the opposition leaders) may lead to applications for citizenships of their host countries. This problem will become particularly noticeable if

the regime applies the amended regulations more broadly to cover more than just a few dozen of the most recognisable activists.

- The amendment once again shows that the regime intends to continue ratcheting up the repression. The actions taken in recent weeks include prison terms ranging from 13 to 23 years being handed down for a group of the so-called 'railway guerrillas', individuals accused of destroying or damaging railroad infrastructure in response to Belarus' complicity in Russia's aggression against Ukraine. As further radical harassment of political emigrants is introduced, there will be increasing calls for dialogue with Lukashenko if the policy of repression continues. An open letter on the issue published on 10 January testifies to the frustration felt in at least some opposition circles; this has been rising due to what they see as the ineffectiveness of Western sanctions on Belarus, and the lack of any signs that the internal situation in Belarus is being normalised after the rigged presidential elections in 2020 and the social unrest which followed them.