

Socio-Economic Inequality in Belarus

Testimony of Political Activists

The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights requires states to guarantee that the rights contained within it, including those to education and work, be exercised without discrimination on any grounds, including that of “political or other opinion”. In its recent EU-funded project in Belarus, ERT discovered widespread discrimination against political opponents of the Belarusian regime. In particular, we found that, as a result of their political opinions, political and social activists in Belarus are exposed to disadvantages when participating in employment and education.

In January 2014, ERT spoke with two Belarusians whose views are, in one way or the other, not in line with those of the Belarusian regime. Tatsiana Shaputska, a journalist, spoke of her experience of discrimination in higher education. Andrey Leonidovich Zawadski, a teacher, told us that his political views were the reason for the termination of his job teaching law to undergraduates.

Tatsiana Shaputska

I am 23 years old. I was born and have lived all my life in Minsk. From 2007 to 2011, I was a member of the Young Front, a youth political organisation. Now, I am trying to enrol in the European Humanitarian University and simultaneously working part time as a journalist while on maternity leave.

I initially started thinking about the political situation in my country following the political demonstrations and “Squares” (camps in one of the main city squares in Minsk) which were connected to elections in Belarus in 2006. At the time, I was 16 years old and my parents did not allow me to participate in

those events. A year later, on 26 March 2007 (the day of Belarusian liberty not recognised by current authorities but celebrated by the political opposition), I participated in demonstrations. At the same time, I joined the Young Front. My political views came from the influence of mass media and my own consideration of issues. When I first joined the organisation in 2007, I became involved in website development and, after some months, I was given the position of Press Secretary.

The Young Front is a Christian democratic organisation with conservative views that has a history of organising cultural and ed-



educational activities. As with most political opposition organisations, it is a democratic opposition with the major aim of establishing democracy through democratic elections. This is usually done through street protests around the time of the election. In particular, the Young Front protested against the Belarusian government's manipulation of the electoral process by compelling certain citizens to vote in the pre-election term period. However, at the present time, the organisation is not as active as it used to be because of conditions on its activities imposed by the local authorities.

The general situation in Belarus is that your political views influence all aspects of your lifestyle. There are many ways of supporting the current powers. For example, teachers are automatically expected to support the regime. Many teachers are members of the electoral commission and it is usual practice for teachers to be such members because the counting of election votes occurs in schools. It is a vicious cycle: if you do not support the current authorities, you inevitably stand out from the crowd because the majority does not want to oppose authorities. However, you must oppose the authorities because of your political views. As a result, you feel different from everyone else and this becomes

your special lifestyle as you have become "special" in the country.

My personal experience of discrimination on grounds of my political views was when I was a law student at a university in Belarus. In mid-November 2009, as a representative of the Young Front organisation, I was invited to the civil society forum of the [European Union] Eastern Partnership in Brussels. My attendance at the forum meant that I was absent from classes for three days. At the time, there was a rule that students may not leave the country's borders during the school term unless they had special written permission from the administration. However, this rule was nominal and rarely enforced.

After my return, on 3 December 2009, I was summoned to the dean's office and was presented with an order of dismissal signed by the rector of my university. I was shocked. I had a good attendance, had participated in scientific conferences and the public life of the faculty, and had a high grade point average of 8.5 points. By contrast, other students who had committed a similar infraction by crossing the borders, sometimes for far longer, and who had worse performances in their studies than me, continue to study in the university.

In my view, the way I have been treated by the faculty is an exception to the usual approach. Even the dean of the faculty proposed in a memo to limit the punishment. The copy of the dismissal order stated that the dismissal was based on two things: first, on my failure to explain my absence from classes upon being confronted with the dismissal order that had shocked me; and, secondly, on two memos, the contents of which have not been explained to me. The European Commission intervened in my defence to oppose the dismissal but I was not surprised that I got expelled anyway.

I think that my expulsion was motivated by my political beliefs. As I was the press secretary of the Young Front, my participation in the Eastern Partnership forum was widely covered in the media and the Belarusian authorities were aware that the forum did not invite pro-government and public organisations.

The formal reason for my absence was my participation in the forum, and a three day absence for such an event was justifiable – I did not think it was disrespectful. First, I gave notice to my superior, and second, my participation in the civil society forum of the Eastern Partnership has allowed me to gain important experience as a political activist student, which is particularly important as this was my specialist subject at university. Later on in court, my lawyer reasoned that I did not need a written permission because my specialisation at university was political science and so it was logical that being a representative of a political organisation in an international forum was a benefit to my studies. But the university administration insisted that I had to take a written permission from the central office of the university and this was the basis of my expulsion.

In reality, people violate this unenforced rule all the time – it would be difficult to find a person who did not go abroad at some point during term time – and many people have been absent for much longer periods than me without sanction. It would be ridiculous to enforce the rule fully because then people would not be able to go anywhere at all. In my case, the administration used this requirement as the basis for my expulsion. There was no further investigation into whether the requirement applies only during the school term time and not holidays and the rule is drafted in such a way that you cannot understand whether you have to

receive permission or not. But, in any case, if the administration needed to use it, they could do so – as they did in my case. Its application was arbitrary.

I appealed against the decision of the Ministry of Education to the court of the Moscow district. In court, I pointed to the discriminatory nature of my charges. However, the court rejected the petition. In court, my lawyer requested to make a comparison of my case to similar cases of others where students in university went abroad without permission to prove that I was not guilty, or, alternatively, at least the fact that nobody follows this requirement. The judge declined this request.

At the trial, I was blamed along with some other students. But among those other students, the days missed were as many as 70 days! The court's final decision was made on the formal grounds of the violation of internal rules.

Most of my friends are members of the Young Front or are like-minded people. They suffer because of their political views in many ways – some of them are arrested, others have received administrative fines. Our political views affect all of our lives in some way here.

In terms of the future of Belarus, all we can do is hope for the best. I believe that the time will come for change, and it is important for now that there are enough people with fresh ideas and resources to take the initiative and make the necessary changes.

Andrey Leonidovich Zawadski

I am 52 years old. I was born and grew up in Minsk. I originally trained as an engineer and later, in 2001, graduated in law. I have also been involved in politics for many years. Since 1993, I have been an active member of

a civic organisation named in honour of one of the most prominent Belarusian figures, Lev Sapieha, whose main aims are to restore traditions, promote democratic principles, develop local self-government and support local initiatives. I am also the author of many publications on the development on local self-government.

In 1990-1996, I was the Deputy of a City Council. The major source of my political beliefs is and was my family who were critical of the Soviet regime and were positive of the democratic events in Poland and the other neighbouring countries in the 1980s and 1990s. This, along with the strong sense of nationalism I gained from my family and background, influenced my political views and opinions. I made friends with leaders of Belarusian national political groups including the Belarusian Popular Front and the Belarusian Social Democratic Party, which were originally aimed at promoting cultural identity and organised cultural events. From those political groups, later on political leaders emerged. My most memorable event at the time was when I participated in restoring Belarusian culture names to Belarusian streets (i.e. the pre-communist historical street names).

On 1 September 2003 I became a teacher of several subjects including Administrative Law, Constitutional Law, Municipal Law, and the History of the State and Law at a university. On 1 October 2008, under a fixed-term contract, I obtained the position of Associate Professor of Theory and History of Law. The content of my teaching focused on the juridical aspects of my country's situation. I tried to present objectively a critical view of the current situation in the country with the aim that my students could understand laws as they should be implemented in practice.



On 1 September 2011, I was dismissed from my teaching position in the university, so my teaching career came to an end. I am convinced that my political beliefs were the reason for my dismissal. In May-June 2011, members of national security and the president's administration came to the university for an inspection visit. The decision to dismiss me was made by the end of July and was made in complete silence. I then was notified of the non-renewal of my contract. When I asked for the reason behind my dismissal, they responded by saying that they do not remember. It is not normal to have a silent non-renewal of contract especially as I had worked for the university for eight years, not two weeks or two months. The university has obligations towards dismissed employees. I should have been invited by the commission to a meeting when the decision to not renew my contract was made, and I should have been given reasons for my dismissal. This did not happen – the proper procedure was not followed.

I suspect that the national security and the president's representatives advised, during their visit, on what type of people should be teachers and what should not. I suspect they were not happy with me teaching, on

account of my political beliefs, and told the university to dismiss me. I can think of no other explanation. Throughout my teaching career, I never received any complaints, I was an honorary associate professor and, in the university ratings, I was the top rated among the students. Furthermore, another senior lecturer who was a member of a religious organisation that was not popular with the government was dismissed as well. There is no reasonable justification for the non-renewal of our contracts.

I had a lot of support. I am grateful for the support of my colleagues and my students who collected a total of 300 signatures protesting my dismissal. Further, my Faculty expressed surprise at the university's administrative decision in a written statement in August 2011, unanimously recommending that the administration reconsider its decision and renew my contract. This did not happen. When I took the matter to court for compensation, although I had the law on my side under the Labour Code, I was denied compensation in the end.

The situation is difficult in Belarus. Even though organisations are by nature far from being political, if they express an opinion different from that of the official authorities, they are considered to be political opposition bodies. This was the case with me, as I am a member of a cultural organisation and my colleague is a member of a religious organisation. The fact that I had expressed an opinion that did not coincide with the official view had resulted in me being labelled as someone who associates with the political opposition.

In my view, there are many people in Belarus who are not afraid to express their political opinion. However, in practise, life is unpredictable for such people.

Political activities are suppressed in Belarus. Presidential candidates in the previous election have been illegally detained, including for example Mikalaj Statkievič. Some organisations have been denied registration, resulting in the absence of organisations in some regions, and other organisations are given conditions which restrict their Activities.

Although I have lost my full time job as a teacher, I still have other means of earning income. I have contracted some work outside of the teaching sector, and I have recently been involved in European initiatives. I have held seminars on questions of local self-government in Minsk and edited brochures on the topic of the possibility of Belarus joining the European Charter of Local Self-Government. I also have contacts in different countries.

However, that is not my main concern. I want to do what I think is right and promoting democracy remains my priority. Although I know that it is difficult to make forecasts, the actions of my colleagues and I, in particular the preparation of a concept on the reform of local self-government, are for the sake of the future. I understand that change will not happen overnight. In Poland, for example, the concept of social reforms born in the mid-1960s was only brought to life 15-20 years later.

I think that we must be ready for gradual progress and we must understand that the changes will eventually come and when they do we must be ready to accept them. Otherwise, we will not be hoping for anything and when something changes we will not be ready for it, which would be worse. Even if I do not live to see the changes, I am sure that they will come and I want to help set the foundations for reform for this inevitable change.