

Gays in Belarus Face Reprisals for Activism

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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MINSK — Police in Belarus are going after gays, raiding their clubs and locking up clubbers overnight, and summoning gay activists for questioning. One activist accuses police of beating him during questioning, while others say they were interrogated about their sex lives. The leader of a gay rights organization was stripped of his passport just ahead of a planned trip to the United States.

That is the government's response to a decision by gay activists across the country to try in January to legally register their rights organization, GayBelarus. It marked a more resolute attempt to emerge from the shadows after being slapped down repeatedly by the authorities.

Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko, who once said "it's better to be a dictator than a gay," has long denigrated homosexuals in the former Soviet republic. As he counters discontent from Belarusians who want to see democratic reforms and a more European-oriented society, Lukashenko has portrayed gays as agents of a decadent West. Gay rights

activists are part of the broader opposition to Lukashenko, who has ruled the nation's 10 million people with an iron hand for the past 18 years, earning the nickname of "Europe's last dictator" in the West.

A similar dynamic is at work in Russia, where gay rights activists have joined the protest marches against President Vladimir Putin. Such public promotions of gay rights will be illegal if legislation now working its way through Russia's parliament becomes law.

Homosexuality was formally decriminalized in Russia and Belarus with the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, but anti-gay sentiments still run high in both Slavic countries.

"In the 21st century in the middle of Europe we are forced to prove to the government that homosexuality is not an illness and not a crime," said Nasta Senyuhovich, a gay activist in Belarus.

She and about 70 other GayBelarus members signed the documents necessary to formally establish the organization and submitted them to the Justice Ministry in January. They did not have to wait long for a response.

Three days later, police burst into a gay night club in the city of Vitebsk and ordered everyone to stand against the wall. With a video camera rolling, the club patrons had to state their name, place of work and sexual orientation, according to Siarhey Androsenka, the 24-year-old leader of GayBelarus, who was in the club at the time.

"This was more like a special operation against criminals," Androsenka said. "Of course, this action was intended to frighten and intimidate those who dared to proclaim their homosexuality publicly in Belarus."

Three similar raids have been conducted in gay clubs in Minsk, the capital. The most recent raid took place last Saturday when seven club patrons were taken to a police station and held overnight, Androsenka said. He said police have told him that the raids are connected to the activities of GayBelarus.

Separately, more than 60 founders of GayBelarus have been summoned by the police for questioning in Minsk and seven other cities.

"During the police interrogation the majority of the questions were about my private life: how I became gay, how many partners I have, what role I prefer for sex, where I met my partners," said Artem Ivanou, a 21-year-old welder from Brest. He said police threatened to inform his employers.

One activist said police dragged him out of a hospital where he was undergoing treatment and took him to a police station, where he was beaten. "They hit me in the stomach with their knees, and when I fell they began to hit me on the head," said Ihar Tsikchanyuk, who lives in the city of Grodno. He said they called him derogatory names and went through the information stored on his cell phone.

Police have refused to comment on the questioning of the gay activists, as has the Justice Ministry.

The repression has caused panic among gays in Belarus. Many are cleaning out their accounts on social networking sites, deleting photographs and any references to gay culture.

"We are tired of being afraid and are thinking more about emigrating as a last resort," said 23-year-old designer Iryna Zhebrak, holding the hand of her partner, 24-year-old Karyna Trus.

The women, who have been together for years, said they planned to go to Europe to get married, but they hoped to be able to build a life together in Belarus.

"We want social change, integration with Europe," Trus said. "In today's Belarus we have no future. The state stirs up hatred of people who have an untraditional sexual orientation, which only strengthens the already high level of intolerance in society."

Lukashenko has openly insulted gays, who he has said should be sent off to collective farms to perform public works.

After a meeting in 2011 with German Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle, who is gay, Lukashenko made his now famous statement that "it's better to be a dictator than a gay."

Lukashenko, an admirer of the Soviet Union, has relentlessly stifled dissent and extended his rule through elections that Western observers have criticized as undemocratic. The United States and the European Union have imposed economic and travel sanctions on the Belarussian government over its crackdown on opposition groups and independent news media.

Any attempt to stage a gay rights demonstration in Belarus is usually quickly dispersed by police. But last year, activists managed to evade police by renting a streetcar and driving it through Minsk decorated with rainbow flags and signs.

Members of GayBelarus hold underground educational seminars and meetings in small towns, where gays have even a more difficult time. In Grodno, where Tsikchanyuk claims he was beaten, several seminars are planned for February.

"Gays for the first time got some hope that they could change their marginal existence, they came to believe that they could fight for their rights even in Belarus," said Androsenka, who has led the gay rights group for three years. The rented apartment where he lives with his partner is the group's headquarters, strewn with books, brochures and rainbow flags.

Androsenka was supposed to leave Feb. 2 for the United States to participate in a program for civil society leaders sponsored by the State Department.

But Belarussian border guards seized his passport under what appears to be an absurd pretext. Androsenka said they told him his passport was listed as lost, and that he himself had reported it missing.

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