

## **Enira Bronitskaya**

26-year-old human rights, civil society activist imprisoned for six months in 2006 for her work as co-leader of the elections monitoring non-governmental organization “Partnership.”

I would like to speak about repressions against youth in Belarus and a central realm of freedom – the right to education. Problems in this sphere in Belarus are not new, but the situation is becoming much worse.

The young generation is the most active group in Belarus. They were the most active participants in the peaceful civil opposition of March 2006. For the most part, it is youth between the ages of 19 and 25—students in different universities and colleges that are active. Youth in Belarus are not afraid to be arrested. Yet, authorities are looking for new ways to put pressure on them.

Belarusian Universities have a lot of possible avenues through which to pressure students. Since 2005, all students who want to study abroad, in a foreign institution of higher education, on a temporary or exchange basis, are required to obtain written permission from the Ministry of Education.

Universities in Belarus are becoming less and less about education and more about ensuring that citizens are ideologically aligned with the regime. The Ministry of Education of Belarus has prepared a decree that now is waiting to be signed by president. According to this decree, those entering the university next year will be required to participate in interviews to determine their level of ideological commitment. Without a positive score in these interviews, students will be unable to pursue different humanities specialties in the universities.

Five months ago, students were deprived of social benefits. The government claims to want to help those who have a difficult material situation. The tendency, however, is that university administrations will be given the resources and will become responsible for determining who needs supplementary financing.

The majority of universities are granted the right to exclude students on the basis of administrative or criminal cases. Most universities use these statutes to advance their own interests and agenda.

Since the spring of 2006, expulsion of students from universities on the basis of political ideology became common. We know of 200 students who were expelled after the March events, but real figures could actually be higher.

Official reasons for student’s expulsions were the following:

- Breaking the rules and/or regulations of the internal educational establishment;
- Poor progress

The real reasons of expulsion were:

- Penalty under administrative law for deprivation of liberty, 3 to 15 days;
- Penalty under administrative law through fees;
- Membership in a democratic youth organization;
- Membership in political parties;
- Distribution of agitation materials during the presidential campaign of 2006.

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There were several waves of exclusion (during spring events of 2006, the spring-summer university examinations; in autumn of 2006, the period of the examinations; and during the local elections campaign, October 2006–January 2007). Several expulsions and waves of intimidation also occurred before and after the European march in October 2007.

Many European countries have responded to the repression of Belarusian students by opening scholarship programmes for expelled or repressed Belarusians. Since 2006, due to these circumstances, about 430 students began their education abroad.

During last two years, there were only two students who protested their expulsion from the university in court. Both cases were lost. The main charge in these cases was to prove that these students were expelled for political reasons. We hope that such court practices will be improved.

During the last year, we regularly received information about pressure on school children. But, the administrations of Belarusian educational establishments enjoy impunity. More attention should be paid to these cases. Each case of such pressure or exclusion must be known and criticized by democratic forces and the international community. Further, any contacts and funding between the European Union, and other European and American organizations with university administrations who participate in these political repressions, should be ended.