

Even a Picnic in the Park May Be Declared Illegal in Belarus

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A Belarussian bill published Friday would explicitly outlaw "silent" protests by the opposition — and could lead to jail time for just about anyone who gathers in a group and does nothing.

Taking part in unsanctioned protests is illegal in Belarus, so the opposition has found creative ways to challenge Lukashenko's leadership since his disputed re-election in December. The protests, usually coordinated through social networking web sites, take place at least once a week. Participants gather in agreed locations without any banners and just stand silently or clap in unison.

Lukashenko, in power since 1994, has described such protests as part of a plot to overthrow his government. Police routinely disperse such gatherings and arrest dozens of protesters.

Proposed amendments to the law, published on a government web site, bans the "joint mass presence of citizens in a public place chosen beforehand, including outdoors, and at a scheduled time for a form of action or inaction planned beforehand and is a form

of expression of the public or political sentiments or protest."

The wording of the proposed law suggests that people could be arrested for just meeting in a park or gathering in a square to chat. The bill envisages up to 15 days in jail for offenders.

Analysts say the protests, which mostly attract younger people in big cities, are no direct threat to Lukashenko.

But a prolonged economic crisis could alienate his core working-class supporters, who have so far been content with limited political freedoms as long as the state maintained a generous welfare system and subsidized most prices.

Belarus, faced with a large current account deficit, devalued its ruble by 36 percent in May. Consumer prices have soared as a result, eating into ordinary Belarussians' incomes and prompting thousands of people to join the protests.

The crisis, according to economists, was largely triggered by a sharp increase in government spending last year in the run-up to the December presidential election in which Lukashenko secured a fourth term in office.

Western observers criticized the vote as fraudulent and have introduced sanctions against Lukashenko's government, a move that could make it harder for him to secure much-needed bailout loans abroad.

(MT, Reuters)

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