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## **Ales Bialiatski: Political prisoner in Belarus.**

***Presentation by Secretary general Bjørn Engesland at a breakfast event co-hosted by Civita, Amnesty International Norway, Human Rights Foundation and Norwegian Helsinki Committee within the Oslo Freedom Forum 2012.***

After the crackdown in Belarus in December 2010, when most of the opposition presidential candidates were beaten and jailed, we knew that it was a question of time before Ales would be arrested. Ales visited us last time here in Oslo in June 2011, in order to address a meeting we organized with the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe in the Norwegian Parliament. At that time most of our staff, myself included, were banned from entering Belarus. We advised him to stay abroad. He would have been granted asylum in any Western country. Ales laughed, in characteristic fashion, and said: I have done nothing wrong. Why should I run away from my home? The NHC have been working in Belarus since President Aleksandr Lukashenko came to power in 1994. We have witnessed how Lukashenko slowly established a new form of dictatorship that since then has become the norm in many of countries in the post-Soviet region: Democratic in form, autocratic in content. Sometimes comically preoccupied with the legality of its oppression, at other times chillingly capable of making critics disappear without a trace.

Ales is a writer, and received his education from the department of philology in the University of Gomel. He became politically active from before the Glasnost years, and was arrested first time in 1988. He established the human rights center Viasna (which means "spring" in Belarusian) in 1996. Viasna was soon the main human rights group in the country, and our closest partner there. The authorities banned Viasna, but due to the managements skills of Ales and the moral strength of Viasna, the group continued its work. Its network of 17 regional branches documented human rights violations, provided legal advice, human rights education and maintains a very informative website. The NHC funded some of the activities w grants from the Norwegian MFA. Because Viasna was prohibited, funds were transferred to accounts in the name of Ales in banks in Lithuania and Poland. Unfortunately, some of these banks handed over records of the transfers to the Belarusian authorities, which used them to fabricate a case against Ales for tax evasion. The story is an example of the dangers involved in cooperating with governments that do not respect human rights. The real criminal in the story is Aleksandr Lukashenko, the President who earlier this year stated that: "I'd rather be a dictator than gay," after receiving criticism from the German Foreign Minister. Yet in November of last year, Ales was sentenced to 4,5 years in a strict penal colony, where he remains today, in the company of ordinary criminals who at any time may be told to make life difficult for him.

The German thinker Theodor Adorno coined the concept of the authoritarian personality, submissive towards authority, aggressive towards people it deems inferior. To me, Ales is the anti-authoritarian personality. He leads by example, treats every one as equals and Viasna's staff have always been independent and resourceful, a network rather than a pyramid. This is especially visible now. Ales is in jail, yet Viasna continues to work.

During his thirty year long struggle for human rights in Belarus, Ales has kept his subtle sense of irony. The self-deprecating jokes keep coming from prison. In a letter he sent in April he wrote about his prison employment in a sewing workshop, where he handled a sewing machine for the first time in his life. "I started blazing away as a blind machine gunner," he wrote, and asked the owners of the working caps he was sewing for forgiveness in advance.

But he has refused to ask the authorities to pardon him, as he neither accepts the sentence, nor the authority of president Lukashenko. Some of the other political prisoners in Belarus have been released lately. The message is that we must all continue to demand for the release of Ales, and show president Lukashenko that if he behaves like a criminal, he will be treated as a criminal. If civil society and governments work together, I have no doubt that Ales will gain his freedom, and that a day will come when Belarus will see freedom, too.