

IRYNA TOUSTSIK

BELARUS 2007 AGE 25

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AMIDST CRITICISM AND OPPOSITION, IRYNA TOUSTSIK SEEKS DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS IN HER BELARUS HOMELAND.

For five years, Iryna Toustsik was the human rights officer for Zubr, a pro-democracy and human rights youth movement in Belarus dedicated to the non-violent resistance of the dictatorial government. Iryna monitored harassment of Zubr activists, documented complaints against Belarusian security forces, ensured media coverage of detentions, and established communications with international media and human rights organizations. Iryna was also responsible for looking after the welfare of the detainees, ensuring that they received food parcels and legal support. She also ensured that Zubr always knew the location of its activists.

Since the formation of Zubr, its members have been regularly subjected to harassment, ill-treatment, arbitrary detention and torture due to their visible, peaceful protests against the regime of Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka and the regime's longstanding policy of silencing the voices of dissent in Belarusian society.

As one of the founding members of Zubr, Iryna became a leader of this movement in 2001. Since the start of their public activities at the beginning of 2001, Zubr's members have been subjected to arbitrary detention on many occasions. In April 2001, Iryna took part in an anti-presidential event at Gorky Park in Minsk during which the protestors mocked and criticized President Lukashenka. She was detained with a group of activists for five days, which was the first time that female Zubr activists had been detained. Since 2001 Iryna has been detained numerous times on administrative charges for opposition activities which included distributing a registered newspaper and stickers on behalf of the Zubr movement. On December 28, 2004, Iryna was detained for showing her support for the "orange revolution" events in Ukraine.

In December 2004 Iryna published an article in the opposition newspaper Narodnaia Volia in which she expressed her concern that the presidential elections scheduled for 2006 would not be fair. In March 2005, Iryna was expelled from Belarusian State Pedagogical University. Although the reason given by university authorities was that she had not taken her exams on time, Iryna was convinced the expulsion was due in large part to her opposition activities and activism.

Since the 2004 referendum lifting presidential term restrictions and President Lukashenka's re-election in 2006, Lukashenka has been asserting his control over civil society and clamping down on opposition with renewed confidence. Although Belarus has come under increasing international criticism for its poor human rights records, most recently at the United Nations Commission on Human Rights (UNCHR), Lukashenka remains defiant. So defiant, in fact, that the government forced Zubr to close its doors. Iryna, however, continues her commitment to democracy, human rights and the country she loves by monitoring and reporting on human rights issues for the Youth Human Rights Center in Minsk.

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