

# 2025 Trafficking in Persons Report: Belarus

## BELARUS (Tier 3)

The Government of Belarus does not fully meet the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking and is not making significant efforts to do so. Belarus remained on Tier 3. During the reporting period there was a government policy or pattern of forced labor in government “labor therapy centers.” Authorities forced thousands of individuals with reported drug or alcohol addiction, as well as political prisoners, to perform a wide range of labor at “labor therapy centers;” reports indicated the government held at least 10,852 people in these centers in 2024. Despite this, the government took some steps to address trafficking, including supporting a child trafficking awareness campaign. However, the government did not report investigating or prosecuting trafficking cases, convicting any traffickers, or identifying any trafficking victims. Belarusian authorities facilitated the transfer of unaccompanied Ukrainian children to Belarus, increasing their vulnerability to trafficking. Authorities continued to facilitate the entry into Belarus, and onward travel of, third-country nationals and asylum-seekers as part of a state-sponsored migration initiative that did not include screening for trafficking indicators. The government widely restricted the activities of civil society organizations, including organizations providing support to trafficking victims.

## PRIORITIZED RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Cease the use of forced labor in “labor therapy centers.”
- Vigorously investigate and prosecute trafficking crimes, using Articles 181 and 181-1, and seek adequate penalties for convicted traffickers, including complicit officials, which should involve significant prison terms.
- Increase resources devoted to trafficking victim assistance and protection within Belarus to improve effectiveness, including for state-owned centers, and partner with NGOs providing assistance to trafficking victims.
- Cease the facilitated transfer of Ukrainian children to Belarus and take all necessary steps to prevent trafficking among this population, including by ensuring these children’s safe return to their parents or guardians.
- Proactively identify trafficking victims by screening vulnerable populations, including migrants, refugees, Chinese nationals, and individuals in commercial sex, for trafficking indicators.
- Raise awareness about the voluntary nature of “subbotniks” and increase training for government officials at both the national and regional level to ensure coercive measures are not used to elicit participation.
- Increase the number of labor inspectors to identify internal forced labor and investigate illegal recruitment practices.
- Expand training for all relevant officials on the NRM and allocate sufficient resources for its full implementation.
- Increase funding for specialized services for child sex trafficking victims, continue to refer all identified victims to care facilities, and ensure criminal justice actors use a trauma-informed approach in child trafficking cases.
- Increase victims’ access to free legal aid and ensure defense attorneys receive training on trafficking and a trauma-informed approach.
- Train judges on restitution in criminal cases, establish procedures to seize assets from traffickers, and create effective methods to allocate restitution to ensure victims receive restitution in a timely manner.
- Clarify in the criminal code that no penalties involving compulsory or forced labor may be imposed for the peaceful expression of political views and ensure that children are

not subjected to compulsory labor as punishment.

## PROSECUTION

The government decreased anti-trafficking law enforcement efforts.

Article 181 of the criminal code criminalized sex trafficking and labor trafficking and prescribed penalties ranging from three to seven years' imprisonment and forfeiture of assets for offenses involving adult victims and seven to 15 years' imprisonment and forfeiture of assets for those involving child victims. These penalties were sufficiently stringent and, with regard to sex trafficking, commensurate with penalties prescribed for other grave crimes, such as rape.

The government did not report investigating or prosecuting any trafficking crimes in 2024, compared with 79 trafficking-related investigations and 38 prosecutions under Article 171, which prohibited the "use of prostitution or creation of conditions for prostitution," and Article 171-1, which prohibited the "recruitment into prostitution or coercing someone to continue in prostitution," in 2023. For the fourth consecutive year, the government did not report convicting any traffickers under Articles 181 or 181-1. The government previously attributed the decrease in trafficking-related investigations and prosecutions to a shift to focus on child sexual abuse and pornography crimes. The Main Department for Drug Control and Combating Trafficking in Human Beings led anti-trafficking law enforcement efforts. The government did not report providing anti-trafficking training to law enforcement officials during the reporting period.

The government did not report any investigations, prosecutions, or convictions of government employees complicit in trafficking crimes; however, corruption and complicity in trafficking crimes remained significant concerns. Multiple observers reported the government exploited individuals with reported drug or alcohol addiction, as well as political prisoners, in forced labor at "labor therapy centers," holding at least 10,852 individuals in these centers in 2024. In January 2025, the government removed "asocial lifestyle" and failure to repay state child support as grounds for confinement in these centers but expanded the use of substance abuse-related grounds. However, the government did not report any changes to detention practices related to this legislative change. Observers reported authorities forced individuals at these centers to perform a wide range of labor, including woodworking, charcoal production, agricultural work, and metal fabrication. The law allowed authorities to send persons with drug or alcohol addiction to these centers by court order for 12-24 months. The government maintained nine labor therapy centers – six dedicated for males and three for females – in 2024. Observers reported the centers were de facto detention centers, and authorities often did not provide – or only minimally provided – treatment. Observers also reported authorities sent 4,494 persons to "labor therapy centers" in 2020, but approximately one third did not have a substance addiction. Separately, observers expressed concern that some provisions of the Belarusian criminal code, which included forced labor as possible punishment, were worded broadly enough to lend themselves to application as a means of punishment for the expression of views opposed to the government. A March 2024 UN High Commissioner for Human Rights report covering the period from May 2020 to December 2023 stated the government subjected political prisoners to forced labor at penal colonies. Since 2022, Belarusian authorities facilitated the transfer of more than 2,400 unaccompanied children from vulnerable communities in Ukraine to Belarus where authorities placed the children in various facilities, including sanatoriums, "health" or recreational camps, and hospitals, and subjected many of these children to "re-education," military training involving firearms and combat training, and/or medical procedures. These children are considered by observers to be particularly vulnerable to human trafficking. This practice continued in 2024, however, no data was available on the number of children brought to Belarus.

## PROTECTION

The government decreased victim protection efforts.

The government did not report victim identification data in 2024, compared with 381 trafficking victims identified in 2023. Publicly available government statistics indicated the government identified some Belarusian men, women, and children exploited in commercial sex, noting the number of identified victims decreased compared with 2023; however, available figures did not disaggregate reported trafficking victims from victims of related non-trafficking crimes. NGOs and an international organization reported identifying and assisting 56 victims (33 sex trafficking and 23 forced labor) in 2024, compared with 85 victims in 2023. The government did not report screening vulnerable populations, including Ukrainian refugees and other migrants, for trafficking indicators. Authorities and civil society maintained an NRM to identify and refer victims to services. NGOs reported a variance in the degree of cooperation with regional law enforcement.

NGOs and an international organization provided the majority of victim assistance; the government did not provide direct financial support to NGOs. The government offered a range of victim services, including shelter, legal assistance, medical and psychological aid, and assistance finding employment. However, while free, these services continued to be underutilized and had burdensome bureaucratic requirements, delays in service delivery, and inconsistent quality of service, often leading victims to choose to pay for necessary services elsewhere or find support through NGOs. The government did not have trafficking-specific facilities available to care for victims, but local authorities operated approximately 134 “crisis rooms” that offered temporary shelter, including beds, meals, and personal hygiene products, to vulnerable adults, including victims of trafficking, regardless of nationality; the government did not report if trafficking victims used these facilities in 2024. Although some crisis centers remained inaccessible to persons with physical disabilities, observers reported the government increased the accessibility of shelters and provided sign language interpreters free of charge to persons with hearing impairments. However, observers continued to report most victims sought assistance at private shelters because the government’s centers were poorly equipped and lacked qualified staff trained in trafficking. According to the law, victims’ access to services was not dependent on their willingness to participate in the criminal process. Observers reported some victims were required to participate in investigations conducted under Articles 171 and 171-1 to access protection services. The law entitled foreign victims to the same benefits as Belarusian victims; however, in cases where victims were undocumented or believed to be in violation of immigration law, the government only offered access to emergency services. Observers noted children and persons with disabilities often lacked access to government services, and the government did not provide some services, including medical assistance and legal aid, in remote areas. The government restricted the activities and foreign funding of nearly all civil society groups, including those dedicated to anti-trafficking activities.

Children vulnerable to trafficking between the ages of three and 18 could receive shelter and basic provisions at centers run by the Ministry of Education; children could stay at these centers for a maximum of six months, after which they were returned to their family, assigned to a foster family, or transferred to an orphanage or boarding institution. The government could provide child-friendly rooms for interviews, the provision of assistance, and reintegration services at a select number of these centers. The government did not report if any child trafficking victims received services at these facilities. Observers note the wide use of child-friendly interview rooms; however, the government did not report using these to interview potential child trafficking victims. Although the criminal code required the recording of testimony of victims and witnesses younger than the age of 14 during pre-trial investigation for later use in court, observers previously reported child sex trafficking victims continued to be subjected to multiple questionings, including in court hearings, and in a non-friendly environment. Observers noted in previous years authorities penalized some sex trafficking victims for unlawful acts committed as a direct result of being trafficked. Observers also reported authorities did not consistently screen individuals in commercial sex for trafficking indicators, and authorities dismissed claims by Belarusians who stated they had been subjected to forced labor in Russia. Victims were entitled to free legal assistance, and victims could request protection measures to include the non-disclosure of information, exemption from attending hearings, delivering testimony remotely, and closed court sessions. However, observers noted the legal aid provided to victims was inadequate, defense attorneys able to represent victims were in short supply, and many attorneys providing free legal aid were not familiar with trafficking and a

victim-centered approach. Courts could grant restitution from traffickers in criminal cases, but the government did not report if victims were granted restitution in 2024.

In retaliation for EU policy, starting in May 2021, the government orchestrated and continued to actively support a migration crisis along its borders with Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland; this significantly increased these migrants' vulnerabilities to trafficking as law enforcement did not screen migrants for trafficking indicators, and in some instances, authorities forced migrants to attempt illegal border crossings. This activity continued in 2024; however, authorities in Poland and Lithuania recorded a decrease in illegal border crossings from Belarus. Media and NGO reports indicated authorities returned many third-country migrants and asylum-seekers who arrived in Belarus seeking to cross into the EU as part of the ongoing state-sponsored migration crisis to their countries of origin without screening them for trafficking. Due to inadequate screening, the government did not take effective measures to prevent the inappropriate penalization of potential victims solely for unlawful acts committed as a direct result of being trafficked.

## **PREVENTION**

The government maintained minimal prevention efforts.

The Minister of Interior served as the national coordinator on trafficking issues and led implementation of the 2023-2025 State Program on Combating Crime and Corruption, which included anti-trafficking activities, although there have been no reports on the effectiveness of its implementation. All regional interdisciplinary bodies, composed of representatives from the law enforcement, education, healthcare, labor, and social welfare sectors, as well as judiciary, media, clergy, and civil society, conducted annual meetings to discuss implementation of the NRM. The government did not report funding for awareness campaigns or other prevention activities, though in-kind support was sometimes provided in the form of use of government facilities or the participation of civil servants or law enforcement. Observers reported the government conducted awareness-raising activities in schools and local communities focused on child trafficking. The government promoted an NGO-run national trafficking hotline; reports to the hotline led to the identification and referral of six potential victims. The Ministry of Interior continued to operate a hotline for safe travel abroad to inform potential Belarusian labor migrants, identify illegal recruitment practices, and route calls reporting potential incidents of trafficking to specialized NGOs. For the eighth consecutive year, the government did not report if it investigated or filed charges against companies related to illegal recruitment; comparatively, it charged 50 companies in 2016, the last year for which data was available. The government did not report if labor inspectors conducted inspections in 2024; overall efforts to combat labor trafficking remained inadequate. The government did not make efforts to reduce the demand for commercial sex acts. The government did not report providing anti-trafficking training to its troops prior to their deployment as peacekeepers.

## **TRAFFICKING PROFILE:**

Trafficking affects all communities. This section summarizes government and civil society reporting on the nature and scope of trafficking over the past five years. Human traffickers exploit domestic and foreign victims in Belarus, and traffickers exploit victims from Belarus abroad. Data collected by NGOs suggest the majority of trafficking victims are Belarusian men subjected to forced labor, primarily in Russia. Traffickers exploit Belarusian victims primarily in Belarus and Russia, as well as in Poland, Türkiye, and other countries in Europe, Central Asia, and the Middle East. Traffickers exploit some Belarusian women traveling for foreign employment in the adult entertainment and hotel industries in sex trafficking. The government has identified Belarusian, Moldovan, Russian, Ukrainian, Vietnamese, and Ghanaian victims exploited in Belarus. The majority of traffickers are Belarusian citizens. The percentage of children among identified victims continues to increase. Traffickers increasingly use online methods, including instant messaging applications, to coerce victims into forced labor and sex trafficking, and children are especially

vulnerable to online forms of exploitation. Traffickers increasingly exploit victims for forced labor in online scam operations and for livestreamed commercial sex acts. NGOs report an increased risk of trafficking, especially labor trafficking, as a result of the continued flow of migrants and refugees into Belarus, including those fleeing the Russia-Ukraine war. The government also allows workers from China to engage in government-affiliated construction and other projects in Belarus; this population is vulnerable to trafficking.

The government exploits thousands of Belarusian citizens in forced labor at “labor therapy centers,” where authorities force them to perform a wide range of labor. Authorities send individuals with drug and alcohol addictions and political prisoners to these centers; there were at least 10,852 individuals in these centers in 2024. Separately, observers report authorities subject political prisoners to forced labor at penal colonies. The UN Special Rapporteur noted in 2020 its continued concern about the practice of forced labor in places of detention, especially with regards to children and youth; the report generally does not provide time frames during which specific incidents of concern occurred.

Ukrainian children transferred to Belarus by Belarusian authorities are highly vulnerable to trafficking. Belarusian authorities continue to facilitate illegal migration into Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland, as well as the entry into Belarus of thousands of migrants and asylum-seekers, from Middle Eastern countries, sub-Saharan Africa, and Central Asia; these migrants and asylum-seekers remain vulnerable to trafficking.

The government continues the practice of subbotniks, or voluntary service days (held on Saturdays). The government held one national-level subbotnik during the reporting period, as announced by official decree; regional, district, and local authorities also organized subbotniks mobilizing residents in their administrative divisions. As an alternative form of participation, participants can allocate a portion of a single day’s salary toward government projects announced by the authorities prior to the subbotnik. Historically, individuals have been subjected to government reprisals for failure to participate in subbotniks. In past years, observers reported authorities threatened individuals who refused to work with fines or unpaid premium compensation. However, contrary to previous years, approximately 500,000 citizens abstained from participating in the national subbotnik in 2020. Observers did not report any retaliation for nonparticipation in 2024, 2023, 2022 or 2021. Government decrees announcing subbotniks are required to state their voluntary nature. Authorities have previously corrected subbotnik announcements that fell afoul of the law and rebuked implicated officials.