



FREEDOM IN THE WORLD 2025

Belarus

NOT FREE

7
/100

<u>Political Rights</u>	1 /40
<u>Civil Liberties</u>	6 /60

LAST YEAR'S SCORE & STATUS

8/100 **Not Free**

A country or territory's Freedom in the World status depends on its aggregate Political Rights score, on a scale of 0–40, and its aggregate Civil Liberties score, on a scale of 0–60. See the methodology.

Overview

Belarus is an authoritarian state in which elections are openly rigged and civil liberties are severely restricted. Security forces have violently assaulted and arbitrarily detained journalists, activists, and ordinary citizens who challenge the regime. The judiciary and other institutions lack independence and provide no check on President Alyaksandr Lukashenka’s power.

Key Developments in 2024

- No opposition candidates were allowed to register in the year’s highly restricted parliamentary elections. No independent election monitors were invited, and polling stations featured a heavy presence by security services.
- More than 1,200 people were being held as political prisoners during the year, according to the rights group Viasna.
- Amendments that took effect in January require religious organizations to reregister, with unregistered organizations facing criminal liability if they continue their activities. They also established broad legal grounds for liquidating a religious organization, and introduced extensive state controls on religious education and literature.
- Several legislative measures approved during the year targeted the rights of LGBT+ people. One classified depictions of LGBT+ people as pornography, the public display of which is punishable with up to four years’ imprisonment. Another introduced administrative punishments for promotion of “nontraditional family relations.”

Political Rights

A. Electoral Process

A1 0-4 pts

Was the current head of government or other chief national authority elected through free and fair elections?	0 / 4
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The president is elected for five-year terms. A two-term limit, reintroduced by 2022 amendments to the constitution, will be imposed after the 2025 presidential

election.

Alyaksandr Lukashenka was first elected president in 1994, in the country's only democratic election. Authorities heavily controlled the 2020 presidential campaign period and arrested major candidates and activists. Protests after the announcement of the election results were met with disproportionate force, including the use of live ammunition and mass, arbitrary detentions. Lukashenka inaugurated himself in a secret, unannounced ceremony.

The presidential election campaign in late 2024, ahead of a January 2025 vote, was conducted in a highly restricted political environment. Registered candidates did not oppose Lukashenka or meaningfully campaign for themselves. Authorities had not issued an invitation to the Organization for Security Co-Operation in Europe (OSCE) to observe the election by the end of the year.

A2 0-4 pts

Were the current national legislative representatives elected through free and fair elections?

0/4

Legislative elections in Belarus are tightly restricted. The 110 members of the Chamber of Representatives, the lower house of the National Assembly, are elected by popular vote to four-year terms from single-mandate constituencies. The upper chamber, the Council of the Republic, consists of 64 members serving four-year terms; regional councils elect 56 and the president appoints 8.

Parliamentary elections were held in February 2024. The OSCE did not receive an invitation to monitor the polls. No opposition candidates were allowed on the ballot, polling stations featured a heavy security presence, and the four parties competing all supported Lukashenka. The elections were denounced by democratic governments as characterized by the absence of competition and severe repression. According to the Belarusian Human Rights Defenders for Free Elections, all stages of the electoral process were, from nomination of candidates to campaigning, controlled by the government.

Constitutional amendments pushed through in a 2022 referendum introduced a new governing body, the All-Belarus People's Assembly, which has extensive executive and legislative powers. The assembly's 1,200 members serve five-year

terms and include the incumbent president and former presidents, all national assembly members, judicial and executive representatives, local leaders, and civil society. More than a third of members are *ex officio* delegates who already play roles in the country's repressive governing apparatus. In April 2024, Lukashenka was approved as the chairman of the assembly, and now occupies two powerful positions at once.

A3 0-4 pts

Are the electoral laws and framework fair, and are they implemented impartially by the relevant election management bodies?

0/4

The legal framework for elections fails to meet democratic standards. Electoral commission members of all levels are beholden to the government. The composition of electoral commissions and the names of their members are not published.

The All-Belarus People's Assembly has the constitutional right to assess the validity of an election's result, but neither the bill that outlined its operations nor the electoral code provides specific legal grounds for deeming an election illegitimate.

B. Political Pluralism and Participation

B1 0-4 pts

Do the people have the right to organize in different political parties or other competitive political groupings of their choice, and is the system free of undue obstacles to the rise and fall of these competing parties or groupings?

0/4

Political parties face severe legal and practical obstacles. Involvement in political activism can result in loss of employment, expulsion from educational institutions, smear campaigns in the media, fines, property confiscation, threats, harassment, criminal charges, and imprisonment. The law on political parties was amended in

February 2023 to introduce more onerous registration and membership requirements and forced parties to reregister. Only four political parties were officially registered, all of which were government-aligned. Opposition parties, including the oldest political party, the Belarusian Popular Front (BNF), were officially dissolved.

B2 0-4 pts

Is there a realistic opportunity for the opposition to increase its support or gain power through elections?

O / 4

Opposition activity is harshly persecuted, and there is no opportunity for independent candidates to gain power through elections. Belarus has never experienced a democratic transfer of power. In 2020, vast numbers of Belarusians responded enthusiastically to the participation of opposition candidates, but the prodemocracy movement was crushed.

B3 0-4 pts

Are the people's political choices free from domination by forces that are external to the political sphere, or by political forces that employ extrapolitical means?

O / 4

Private citizens and political candidates have limited opportunities to express their views and make political choices. The police and military used severe, sometimes fatal, violence and arrested and detained over 35,000 people to crack down on the August–November 2020 prodemocracy protests, ensuring that Lukashenka would remain in power. Antigovernment demonstrations during a February 2022 constitutional referendum were also repressed by authorities, who arrested more than 800 people. More than 1,200 people were being held as political prisoners in 2024, according to the rights group Viasna.

B4 0-4 pts

Do various segments of the population (including ethnic, racial, religious, gender, LGBT+, and other relevant groups) have full political rights and electoral opportunities?

O / 4

No registered party represents the specific interests of ethnic, religious, or other minority groups. In recent years, Belarusian authorities have dissolved nonprofit advocacy groups, charity organizations, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) that represented the interests of minority groups, including LGBT+ people and people living with disabilities. Increasing restrictions on opposition activity and political activity in general since authorities crushed the 2020 prodemocracy movement has left all Belarusians, including its various minority populations, with no avenue to meaningfully advocate for their interests.

Women formally enjoy equal political rights but are underrepresented in leadership positions. Independent civil society initiatives to raise awareness of issues like gender-based violence and discrimination against women have been unsuccessful. State-sponsored women's advocacy groups and the government refrain from addressing these issues. Repressive laws targeting LGBT+ people and negative state rhetoric against them discourages their open involvement in politics. Authorities restrict the use of the Belarusian language in official settings and communication.

Score Change: The score declined from 1 to 0 because increasing restrictions on political rights, particularly since the antigovernment protests that followed the fraudulent 2020 presidential election, have left minority populations with no avenue for meaningful political representation.

C. Functioning of Government

C1 0-4 pts

Do the freely elected head of government and national legislative representatives determine the policies of the government?

0 / 4

The legitimacy of Lukashenka's 2020 electoral victory office is disputed domestically and internationally.

Presidential decrees supersede legislation, according to the constitution. The parliament always supports Lukashenka's policies and rarely initiates legislation on its own. The 2022 constitutional amendments and a January 2023 law on the presidency further entrenched Lukashenka's power, including by guaranteeing

that after leaving office, former presidents are granted immunity from prosecution for their actions while president and given a permanent seat in the Council of the Republic.

C2 0-4 pts

Are safeguards against official corruption strong and effective?

1 / 4

There are no independent bodies to investigate corruption cases, and graft trials are typically closed. Presidential clemency has been issued occasionally to free convicted corrupt officials, some of whom Lukashenka has returned to positions of authority. Spurious bribery and tax evasion charges have been used against Lukashenka's political opponents and human rights activists.

C3 0-4 pts

Does the government operate with openness and transparency?

0 / 4

The government largely fails to adhere to legal access-to-information requirements, though authorities have moved to make some basic information about government operations and foreign policy available online in recent years. In March 2023, Russian authorities announced that they had reached an agreement with the Belarusian government to station tactical nuclear weapons in Belarus, marking a significant shift in policy without any public debate. The same month, Belstat, the national statistics agency, issued an order granting itself the authority to withhold information from the public, citing potential harm to the national security of Belarus, public order, and morals.

Civil Liberties

D. Freedom of Expression and Belief

D1 0-4 pts

Are there free and independent media?

0/4

The government exercises unrestricted control over mainstream media. The 2008 media law secures a state monopoly over information about political, social, and economic affairs. Libel is both a civil and criminal offense, and the criminal code contains provisions protecting the “honor and dignity” of high-ranking officials. The government owns the only internet service provider and controls the internet through legal and technical means. It has the ability to disrupt internet access in almost the entire country, block specific webpages, and limit access to social media networks.

The official definition of mass media includes websites and blogs, placing them under the Information Ministry’s supervision. Independent journalists operate under the assumption that the Committee for State Security (KGB) surveils them. Reporters are subject to fines, detention, intimidation, and criminal prosecution for their work, including under harsh antiextremism legislation.

The government has cracked down on independent media more forcefully since 2020. According to the Belarusian Association of Journalists (BAJ), at least 45 media workers were in prison in 2024. Many legal cases against journalists during the year targeted small regional media outlets, often with charges of promoting extremist activities.

D2 0-4 pts

Are individuals free to practice and express their religious faith or nonbelief in public and private?

1/4

Despite constitutional guarantees of religious equality, government decrees and registration requirements restrict religious activity. Legal amendments made in 2002 provided for government censorship of religious publications and barred foreigners from leading religious groups.

Amendments to the law on freedom of conscience and religious organization came into force in January 2024. The measures require religious organizations to reregister, with unregistered organizations facing criminal liability if they continue

their activities. UN experts said that provision restricts “the right to freedom of thought, conscience, religion, or belief.” The new rules also establish broad and imprecise legal grounds for liquidating a religious organization, place strict limitations on religious groups active in Belarus for less than 30 years, and impose extensive control over religious education and literature, including mandatory reporting on educational activities.

Since 2020, a number of clergy and religious leaders have been charged with administrative and other crimes in connection with speech perceived as political dissent. In 2024, one pastor was reportedly detained for a month for violating an administrative rule on organization of mass events, in connection with a sermon in which he called on people to pray for “those who are in prisons for falsified reasons” and expressed frustration with state authorities. There were at least seven similar cases reported during the year, according to Viasna.

D3 0-4 pts

Is there academic freedom, and is the educational system free from extensive political indoctrination?

0/4

Academic freedom remains subject to intense state pressure. Academic personnel face harassment and dismissal if they use disfavored curriculum or are suspected of disloyalty. Students who express political dissent risk dismissal.

The government has tightened control over private schools and kindergartens, which has resulted in the closure of many alternative educational centers and has restricted Belarusian-language instruction in schools and universities.

In January 2022, Lukashenka ordered historians to devise a single, unified “correct interpretation of history” to be taught in Belarus, and enacted legislation criminalizing any deviation from the approved historical narrative. The revised textbooks and curricula have since been introduced in Belarusian schools. Authorities also instructed schools that for the academic year beginning in September 2023 they should only use officially authorized teaching materials and should revise how they teach foreign languages in order to foster patriotic feelings.

Since 2023, the government has actively involving the military and security forces in education. A 2023 report by the Belarusian Helsinki Commission, submitted to the UN Special Rapporteur on the right to education, said that aspects of this militarization program include teaching hatred of the political opposition and “imposing the myth of ‘Ukrainian fascists.’”

D4 0-4 pts

Are individuals free to express their personal views on political or other sensitive topics without fear of surveillance or retribution?

0/4

The use of wiretapping and other surveillance by state security agencies limits the right to free private discussion. Authorities routinely threaten, harass, and arrest people who speak out against Lukashenka, postelection violence, and the war in Ukraine.

Private citizens often avoid discussing sensitive issues over the phone or via the internet for fear that state security agents are monitoring conversations. Authorities actively monitor internet users’ social media activity to find evidence of protest involvement or other dissent. Sharing of social media posts deemed “extremist” has resulted in criminal charges, with ordinary internet users at times sentenced to more than a year in prison. Video surveillance and facial-recognition technology are used to identify and arrest citizens who participated in the 2020 demonstrations. Police often coerce, threaten, and torture detained individuals, forcing them to open their mobile devices in search of evidence of antigovernment sentiment. Security forces also organize raids of private homes, detain people in workplaces, and conduct random searches and interrogations to silence dissent. Authorities have detained citizens who donated to organizations banned by the state.

In March 2024, state security agencies gained full access to banking operations of citizens suspected of making unauthorized payments. An automated system has been installed to collect transaction data, and security agencies can block bank accounts up to 10 days without notice.

E. Associational and Organizational Rights

E1 0-4 pts

Is there freedom of assembly?

0/4

The government severely restricts freedom of assembly. Protests require permission from local authorities, who often arbitrarily deny it. Laws impede organizers' ability to raise funds for protests.

Police and military forces only partially succeeded in blocking unprecedented prodemocracy protests in 2020. In the weeks after the year's election, the regime deployed military equipment and armed riot police who indiscriminately attacked and arrested people. Numerous instances of cruel treatment, beatings, and torture of protesters were recorded, with total impunity for the security forces involved. In 2024, the regime was still persecuting people who participated in peaceful demonstrations in 2020.

Hundreds of antiwar protesters who turned out to oppose the full-scale Russian military invasion of Ukraine were similarly arrested in 2022, with many facing physical abuse by security forces while detained.

E2 0-4 pts

Is there freedom for nongovernmental organizations, particularly those that are engaged in human rights- and governance-related work?

0/4

Freedom of association is severely restricted. Human rights activists who remained in the country following the 2020 prodemocracy protests have faced harassment and threats from security forces.

Prominent organizations like the BAJ, the Belarusian Helsinki Committee, and the Belarusian PEN Center were ordered to dissolve in recent years. Lawtrend, a rights monitor, reported in December 2024 that at least 1,186 nongovernmental

organizations were in forced-dissolution processes or had been removed from an official register between 2021 and 2024, while at least 705 had decided to self-liquidate. In January 2022, criminal-code amendments recriminalized participation in unregistered or dissolved organizations; those accused of participating in such organizations face steep fines and up to two years in prison.

The government employs antiextremism legislation against independent organizations and individuals to restrict public outreach and suppress dissent. In August 2023, the Viasna Human Rights Center, one of the oldest human rights organizations in Belarus, was added to the list of “extremist organizations.” The designation also criminalizes sharing information from Viasna channels.

E3 0-4 pts

Is there freedom for trade unions and similar professional or labor organizations?	0 / 4
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Independent labor unions face harassment, and their leaders risk dismissal and prosecution for engaging in peaceful protests. No independent unions have been registered since 1999, when Lukashenka issued a decree setting extremely restrictive registration requirements.

Independent unions were prominent in the prodemocracy movement in 2020. Leaders and rank-and-file members were arrested, fined, dismissed from their posts, sent to psychiatric institutions, and forced into exile.

Between 2021 and 2023, security forces arrested dozens of workers, accusing them of involvement in an independent labor movement. The arrested workers face lengthy prison sentences on charges of treason, conspiracy, and national-security related offenses.

F. Rule of Law

F1 0-4 pts

Is there an independent judiciary?	0 / 4
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Courts are entirely subservient to President Lukashenka, who appoints Supreme Court justices with the approval of the rubber-stamp parliament.

F2 0-4 pts

Does due process prevail in civil and criminal matters?

0/4

The right to a fair trial is not respected. In a departure from international norms, the power to extend pretrial detention lies with prosecutors rather than judges. The absence of independent oversight allows police to routinely violate legal procedures. The government regularly attacks attorneys, who often are the only connection between imprisoned activists and their families and society. Lawyers are often denied the right to meet with their defendants. Many lawyers defending political prisoners haven been disbarred or arrested. Prisoners arrested for participation in the 2020 protest movement have been held incommunicado for long periods.

F3 0-4 pts

Is there protection from the illegitimate use of physical force and freedom from war and insurgencies?

0/4

Law enforcement agencies regularly employ physical force against suspects, who have little opportunity for recourse if they are abused. Excessive force has been used to extract confessions from detainees.

F4 0-4 pts

Do laws, policies, and practices guarantee equal treatment of various segments of the population?

0/4

The Belarusian constitution affirms principles of equality before the law, but these are not upheld in practice.

Authorities have sought to increase the dominance of the Russian language, and official usage of the Belarusian language remains rare. Since 2021 the government has intensified efforts to restrict the use of the Belarusian language, including by

refusing to provide Belarusian-language materials to voters, changing rules requiring transliteration for geographic names, designating certain Belarusian-language materials as “extremist,” and placing restrictions on independent publishing houses.

Women are prohibited from entering 88 different occupations. Societal norms in much of the country hold that women should be mothers and housewives.

LGBT+ people face widespread discrimination, including harassment by public figures and anti-LGBT+ bias in state media, and law enforcement authorities are reluctant to investigate and prosecute attacks and hate crimes against them. In April 2024, the Ministry of Culture passed a measure classifying depictions of LGBT+ people as pornography; public displays of pornography are punishable with up to four years’ imprisonment. In October, authorities adopted a measure introducing administrative punishments for promotion of “nontraditional family relations,” as well as gender reassignment and childfree ideology. The law classified these in the same category as promotion of pedophilia. LGBT+ activists reported an increase in the number of detentions, raids, and interrogations by security services in 2024.

In 2021, Belarusian authorities deliberately facilitated the transportation of large numbers of asylum seekers and migrants to the border, most from Iraq. Heightened migration has continued since. According to the Polish border authorities, Belarusian authorities continue to encourage irregular border crossings, and more than 30 thousand people attempted to cross the Belarusian border with Poland in 2024. An EU-backed report on migrant deaths on the EU-Belarusian border found that between summer 2021 and the end of March 2024, 116 border deaths had been documented in Belarus, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland. The report added that Belarusian authorities provide minimal information about migrants who die on Belarusian territory.

G. Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights

G1 0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy freedom of movement, including the ability to change their place of residence, employment, or education?

1/4

Passports are used as a primary identity document in Belarus, and authorities are known to harass people living in a different location than the one indicated by the domestic stamps in their passport. In 2023, authorities installed restrictive measures targeting Belarusian citizens relocating abroad and their relatives. Belarusian citizens are obliged to report their relocation abroad to state authorities, providing detailed information about the destination, purpose of relocation, and their family members remaining in Belarus. Citizens can also be prohibited from leaving the country for up to six months if their departure is deemed against the interest of national security by the Committee of State Security (KGB).

In September 2023, a presidential decree amended the list of consular services available to Belarusian citizens abroad. Under the decree, Belarusians abroad can no longer visit a consular office to renew or extend their passports, register power of attorney, confirm marital status, register a birth, or confirm their education. Among others, the move impacts the rights of Belarusians who fled the country for political reasons and are unable to return to the country. Authorities have canceled the travel documents of dissidents abroad and harassed activists' relatives who remain in Belarus.

In 2024, there was a significant increase in the number of criminal proceedings in absentia initiated by Belarusian authorities against Belarusian citizens residing abroad: 110 people were tried in absentia in 2024, compared to 18 people in 2023. Belarusians convicted on extremist charges, as it is often the case of in absentia prosecution, can be stripped of their Belarusian citizenship.

G2 0-4 pts

Are individuals able to exercise the right to own property and establish private businesses without undue interference from state or nonstate actors?

1/4

State interference still affects the economy and profitable business owners can face arbitrary government pressure and harassment. Many businesspeople who

became involved in postelection prodemocracy efforts were criminally prosecuted on groundless claims.

In January 2023, a law came into force stipulating that individuals can be deprived of their property for unfriendly actions toward Belarus, which are not well defined. The law establishes a legal ground of confiscating property of individuals sentenced in absentia.

G3 0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy personal social freedoms, including choice of marriage partner and size of family, protection from domestic violence, and control over appearance?

2/4

Domestic violence is a pervasive problem in Belarus, and police register about 150,000 incidents per year. Threats of losing custody of children are often used to intimidate and harass political activists.

Constitutional amendments made in 2022 define marriage as a union solely between a man and a woman. The amendments further declare that marriage, motherhood, and fatherhood are protected by the state, creating further obstacles for same-sex partners to obtain legal recognition and to plan their family life.

G4 0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy equality of opportunity and freedom from economic exploitation?

1/4

Mandatory unpaid national workdays, postgraduate employment allocation, compulsory labor for inmates in state rehabilitation facilities, and restrictions on leaving employment in certain industries have led labor activists to conclude that all Belarusian citizens experience forced labor at some stage of their life.

Sexual exploitation remains the prevalent form of trafficking in Belarus. The Council of Europe's Group of Experts on Actions against Human Trafficking in Human Beings (GRETA) has concluded that Belarusian authorities contributed to trafficking of human beings and prevented the work of local antitrafficking NGOs.



On Belarus

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Country Facts

Population

9,228,000

Global Freedom Score

7/100 **Not Free**

Internet Freedom Score

22/100 **Not Free**

Other Years

2024

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