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Belarus 2020

The year was characterized by recurrent peaceful protests, with the presidential election in August serving as a catalyst for the most egregious crackdown on freedoms of expression, peaceful assembly and association in Belarus’ post-independence history. Opposition candidates, their campaign teams and associates were arrested on false charges or forcibly exiled. Police used excessive and indiscriminate force to disperse demonstrations. Tens of thousands of peaceful protesters and bystanders were detained, and many of them tortured or otherwise ill-treated. Journalists, medics, students, union leaders and others were also targeted with arrest, beatings and prosecution. The government’s initial response to the COVID-19 pandemic was inadequate. Death sentences continued to be imposed.

Background

A worsening economic outlook, poor handling of the COVID-19 pandemic and numerous incendiary comments by President Alyaksandr Lukashenka, amongst other issues, saw his popularity drop dramatically. In the run-up to the presidential election on 9 August, he made misogynistic pronouncements in statements broadcast on prime time television while arbitrary arrests, politically motivated prosecutions and other reprisals escalated against opposition candidates and their supporters, political and civil society activists, and independent media. An opposition coalition around presidential candidate Svyatlana Tsikhanouskaya led women to the forefront of a burgeoning protest movement which spread across the country and society. President Alyaksandr Lukashenka claimed a landslide victory, although the result was strongly disputed by Svyatlana Tsikhanouskaya and regarded as fraudulent by numerous independent election monitors. The OSCE, which was prevented from observing the elections, noted credible reports of widespread irregularities and serious administrative misconduct. Protests against the conduct of the election and the results quickly engulfed Belarus and were overwhelmingly peaceful despite a brutal crackdown by the authorities. Individuals regarded as protest opinion leaders were swiftly arrested or forcibly exiled. Relations with much of the international community deteriorated drastically and targeted sanctions were introduced against scores of Belarusian officials implicated in electoral and human rights violations. Russia expressed its support for the Belarusian authorities, providing financial assistance.

Freedom of expression

The right to freedom of expression was severely curtailed in an attempt to curb all opposition and dissent, including through the targeting of individuals and media outlets, legislative changes, administrative pressure and the use of technical means such as internet blackouts.

The media remained under tight government control. Independent journalists and media organizations were harassed and prevented from carrying out their legitimate work. Local monitors documented over 400 such instances, including arrests, torture and other ill-treatment of media workers, between May and October alone. International media outlets had their accreditation denied or revoked to prevent uncensored reporting. Domestic newspapers, such as *Komsomolskaya Pravda in Belarus*, faced refusals from state-controlled printing houses to print issues criticizing authorities. Major online news outlet TUT.by had its licence suspended by the authorities. Natallia Lyubneuskaya, a journalist working for the independent newspaper *Nasha Niva*, was one of at least three journalists shot at by police with rubber bullets, on 10 August. She required surgery and was hospitalized for 38 days. Several bloggers and journalists were targeted with politically motivated criminal prosecutions, including the co-author of a popular Telegram channel, Ihar Losik, arrested on 25 June on trumped-up charges pending trial.

The authorities co-opted internet providers and imposed a near-total shutdown of mobile internet during the first three days of post-election protests – and subsequently during weekly protests – to prevent the co-ordination of demonstrations and undermine the exchange of information. Access restrictions were routinely imposed on independent media websites.

Dissenting views that spread across all sectors of society were brutally and directly suppressed. Students, academics, athletes, religious and cultural figures and employees of state enterprises were expelled or sacked from their posts and many faced administrative and even criminal sanctions for speaking against the authorities, supporting peaceful protest, or taking part in strikes.

Women

Women with dissenting views faced gendered reprisals and were targeted via their perceived vulnerabilities, including through threats of sexual violence or of their young children being placed in state care.¹

Freedom of assembly

The right to freedom of assembly remained severely and unduly restricted. Penalties issued to peaceful protesters under administrative law were often heavier than sanctions applied for certain criminal offences.

At the start of the year, dozens of activists were heavily fined or sentenced to “administrative arrest”, including lengthy consecutive multiple terms of 15 days (the legal maximum) for “administrative offences”, purportedly committed during peaceful protests at the end of 2019.

Overall, between the start of the presidential campaign in May and the election, hundreds of peaceful protesters, online activists, independent journalists and others were arbitrarily detained, including by men in plain clothes using unlawful force and unmarked vehicles, and dozens received fines or “administrative arrest”. Following the election, hundreds of thousands of Belarusians regularly and peacefully took to the streets across Belarus to protest, tens of thousands were arrested, and hundreds were subjected to torture and other ill-treatment and heavily penalized. Amnesty International directly witnessed the unfounded, arbitrary, and brutal nature of a number of these arrests.²

Between 9 and 12 August alone, the government confirmed the detention of 6,700 protesters. Weekly peaceful protests continued across the country, both on the streets and within government-owned enterprises, theatres, universities and elsewhere. By mid-November, official and independent figures estimated that over 25,000 people had been detained including numerous bystanders and journalists. Repeatedly, over 1,000 people were detained in a single day.³ Local human rights organizations documented over 900 criminal cases with at least 700 individuals facing charges.

Police (often plain-clothed) used excessive and indiscriminate force, including rubber bullets fired at short-range into crowds, stun grenades, chemical irritants, water cannons, automatic firearms with blank cartridges, truncheons and other means to disperse peaceful crowds and apprehend individuals. At least four people were killed by government forces⁴ and several others died under suspicious circumstances.

While many protesters and bystanders were attacked randomly and arbitrarily, others were targeted for their professional activity, including media workers documenting events or medics who voluntarily attended to the wounded. Others were singled out because of their sexual identity. On 26 September, human rights defender Victoria Biran was detained on her way to a rally after being identified by police officers as an LGBTI activist and sentenced to 15 days’ “administrative detention”.

Freedom of association

The authorities waged a campaign of brutal persecution against all forms of independent association intended to protect human rights and peaceful opposition to the regime, including monitoring initiatives, opposition campaigning teams and independent trade unions. Scores of people were subjected to arrest, unfounded criminal prosecution or “administrative detention”, threats of imprisonment and forcible exile.

On 6 May popular blogger and presidential hopeful Syarhei Tsikhanouski was subjected to 15 days’ unfounded administrative detention to prevent his candidacy, prompting his wife, Svyatlana Tsikhanouskaya, to stand herself. On 29 May, while he was gathering signatures for her in Hrodna, an attempt was made to provoke him and he was immediately arrested alongside at least seven of his associates.⁵ They and several other prominent opposition bloggers were later prosecuted as part of the same criminal investigation under Article 342 of the Criminal Code (“organization or active participation in group actions that grossly violate public order”).

Another presidential hopeful, Viktor Babaryka, his son Eduard Babaryka, members of his team and former colleagues were also detained on trumped-up economic charges, to exclude him from the election and warn other presidential hopefuls.

The opposition Coordination Council, formed by Svyatlana Tsikhanouskaya and led by a Presidium of seven people, was condemned as “an attempted seizure of power” by President Lukashenko, and on 20 August a criminal investigation was opened under Article 361 of the Criminal Code (“calls to actions seeking to undermine national security”). By the end of the year, all Presidium members were under arrest or forced into exile, as were many of their associates.⁶

On 7 September, the authorities abducted opposition leader Maryia Kalesnikava and drove her and two colleagues to the border of Ukraine, demanding that they leave the country under threat of imprisonment. The colleagues crossed into Ukraine but Maryia Kalesnikava tore up her passport to prevent expulsion. She remained in unacknowledged, incommunicado detention for two days, after which she was remanded as a criminal suspect on trumped-up charges, as was another Presidium member, Maksim Znak.

Marfa Rabkova from the NGO Human Rights Centre “Viasna”, was arrested on 17 September and remanded as a criminal suspect, charged with “preparation of mass riots” in connection with her human rights work.

The leader of the Belarusian Independent Trade Union, Anatoli Bakun, was repeatedly arbitrarily detained in connection with political strikes at the Belaruskali potash mine in Salihorsk, and consecutively sentenced to a total of 55 days of “administrative arrest” for violating the law on mass gatherings. Three other trade union activists, Yury Karzun, Syarhei Charkasau and Pavel Puchenya, served 45 days each for the same “offence”, between September and November.

Torture and other ill-treatment

The authorities systematically used torture and other ill-treatment against people detained during protests, including participants, journalists and bystanders. Local and international groups documented hundreds of cases across the country.

UN human rights experts received 450 testimonies of ill-treatment of detainees supported by photo, video and medical evidence, documenting a horrific litany of abuses. They describe how protesters were tortured and ill-treated during arrest, transportation and detention in severely overcrowded facilities. Protesters were humiliated, brutally beaten, subjected to sexual violence, including against women and minors, and deprived of access to food, clean water and medical care during lengthy periods of detention. Detainees were also denied the right to inform their relatives of their whereabouts, in some instances for the entire period of “administrative arrest”, and denied access to their lawyers. Parcels and letters were withheld, and warm clothes and hygiene products were confiscated including for menstruating women.

The Belarusian authorities admitted receiving some 900 complaints of abuse by police in connection with the protests but by the end of the year not a single criminal investigation had been opened, nor had any law enforcement officer been charged with respective violations.

Right to health

The government’s initial response to the pandemic was inadequate. President Alyaksandr Lukashenka dismissed COVID-19 as a “psychosis”, blamed the first confirmed casualties on their own lifestyle, recommended tractor driving, vodka and visits to the sauna as remedies and refused to impose major restrictions.

Death penalty

Belarus remained the sole country in Europe and the former Soviet Union to impose death sentences. At least four men were on death row at the end of the year, and at least three death sentences were handed down; two of which were to brothers aged 19 and 21. No executions were reported.

1. [Crackdown from the top: Gender-based reprisals against women activists in Belarus \(Public statement, 17 July\)](#)
2. [Belarus: Police unleash appalling violence on peaceful protesters \(News story, 10 August\)](#)
3. [Belarus: More than 1,000 people arrested in a single day of peaceful protests amid escalating repression of rights \(News story, 9 November\)](#)
4. [Belarus: Peaceful protester held by police after beating dies in hospital \(News story, 13 November\)](#)
5. [Belarus: A criminal case involves a growing number of the regime’s critics \(Public statement, 30 July\)](#)
6. [Belarus: “They are stealing the best of us”. Arbitrary arrests and forced expulsion of leading opposition activists \(Public statement, 10 September\)](#)

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