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Belarus

8

NOT FREE

/100

<u>Political Rights</u>	2 / ₄₀
<u>Civil Liberties</u>	6 / ₆₀

LAST YEAR'S SCORE & STATUS**8 /100 Not Free**

Global freedom statuses are calculated on a weighted scale. See the methodology.



Overview

Belarus is an authoritarian state in which elections are openly rigged and civil liberties are severely restricted. In 2020, Alyaksandr Lukashenka, who maintains a firm grip over the military and security forces, cracked down on a massive prodemocracy protest movement that was sparked by his reelection in a fraudulent presidential poll. Since then, security forces have violently assaulted and arbitrarily detained journalists and ordinary citizens who challenge the regime. The judiciary and other institutions lack independence and provide no check on Lukashenka's power.

Key Developments in 2022

- In February, several constitutional amendments were adopted via a referendum that was neither free nor fair. The approved amendments included provisions granting President Lukashenka lifelong immunity from prosecution.
- Belarus served as a staging ground for Russian military forces before they invaded Ukraine in February, and Lukashenka continued to allow Russian troops to operate on Belarusian territory through year's end. During the year, the government deliberately obscured information about the scale and extent of Belarus's involvement in the war against Ukraine.
- Authorities violently cracked down on antiwar demonstrations during the year, arresting more than 800 protesters in February alone. Security forces were also excessive when responding to people accused of disrupting railway links and supply lines used by the Russian military; authorities additionally harassed and threatened relatives of Belarusian volunteers in the Ukrainian military.
- The government approved several legislative measures targeting political activists living in exile during the year. In July, Lukashenka enacted legislation permitting authorities to hold trials in absentia for those accused of threatening Belarus's national security; in December, the parliament approved a legislative amendment that allows the citizenship of both native-born and naturalized Belarusians residing abroad to be revoked if they are convicted of charges related to "extremism."

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

The president is elected for five-year terms. A two-term limit, reintroduced by the 2022 amendments to the constitution, will be imposed after the next presidential election. Alyaksandr Lukashenka was first elected president in 1994, in the country's only democratic election. The 2020 campaign period was heavily controlled by authorities, who permitted only 15 of 55 applicants to register as candidates. The government arrested two major candidates, Siarhei Tsikhanouski and Viktar Babaryka, and forced another, Valery Tsepkalo, to flee Belarus before voting day. Scores of activists were similarly arrested or fled. Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya registered as a presidential candidate after her husband, Siarhei, was arrested. She received the endorsements of Maryia Kalesnikava and Veronika Tsepkalo, respectively representing the Babaryka and Tsepkalo campaigns. The three women, who led the largest opposition rallies in the country since the fall of the Soviet Union, experienced severe pressure from the authorities, and both Tsikhanouskaya and Veronika Tsepkalo went into exile after the election.

Authorities failed to send a timely invitation to the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), and the elections took place without an independent monitoring mission. The government's claim that Lukashenka won 80 percent of the vote was widely denounced as fraudulent. A parallel and independent vote count using the mobile phone application Golos, with data from nearly 23 percent of polling stations, revealed that Tsikhanouskaya likely received 13 times more votes than were reported. Protests after the announcement of the results were met with disproportionate force, including the use of live ammunition and mass, arbitrary detentions, among other abuses. By the end of 2020, 33,000 people had been detained and fined.

In September 2020, amid ongoing massive protests and growing calls for a repeat election, Lukashenka inaugurated himself in a secret, unannounced ceremony.

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.

A parliamentary election was held in November 2019, nearly a year ahead of schedule. Candidates loyal to Lukashenka won every seat in the lower house, while independent candidates won none. OSCE election monitors reported an overall lack of transparency, restrictions on observation of the vote count, and indications of ballot box stuffing.

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, and authorities have dismissed OSCE recommendations to improve it. Electoral commission members of all levels are politically aligned with and dependent on the government; out of the 1,989 members of local electoral commissions formed for the 2020 presidential election, only two representatives of independent political parties were allowed to register. Independent observers have no access to ballot-counting processes.

A national referendum on constitutional amendments that will further cement Lukashenka's grip on power was held in February 2022. According to the Central Election Commission (CEC), the amendments passed with the support of 65 percent of voters. The voting process was characterized by numerous flaws, including the exclusion of independent observers. Opposition members were not permitted to campaign, while citizens residing abroad were not allowed to vote. Antigovernment demonstrations on election day resulted in the detention of more than 800 people, many of whom were protesting both the referendum and the war in Ukraine.

The constitutional amendments reintroduced a two-term limit for presidents, which will take effect once a newly elected president assumes office and do not apply to Lukashenka's current term. Lukashenka would thus be able to be reelected as president until 2035. Among other changes, the amendments also introduced a new governing body, the All-Belarus People's Assembly, which has extensive executive powers. The amended constitution does not specify the election procedure for assembly members.

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

Involvement in political activism can result in a loss of employment, expulsion from educational institutions, smear campaigns in the media, fines, the confiscation of property, and imprisonment. Political parties face formidable challenges when seeking official registration. Political initiatives are actively persecuted and can lead to criminal charges for their leaders. Authorities harass and threaten political opponents, public figures, and political dissidents through state media.

Prominent political opponents to Lukashenka's regime face politically motivated criminal charges and lengthy prison sentences. In 2021, Viktor Babaryka was sentenced to 14 years in prison and Siarhei Tsikhanouski to 18 years. Numerous activists and opposition members received lengthy prison terms in 2022, including Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) journalist Andrey Kuznechyk.

In August 2020, Maryia Kalesnikava, who campaigned with Tsikhanouskaya and Babaryka, announced the creation of a new political party called "Together." That September, Kalesnikava was kidnapped and later incarcerated, effectively ending the initiative. That same month, Tsikhanouskaya and other activists formed the Coordination Council, a civil society group that sought a peaceful resolution to the

postelection violence and a rerun of the presidential poll. Belarusian authorities arrested and prosecuted several of its leaders, claiming that they were attempting to seize power illegally and that they were a national security threat. Coordination Council founding members Maryia Kalesnikava and Maxim Znak were sentenced in September 2021 to 11 years and 10 years in prison, respectively, on dubious charges including conspiracy to seize power. In December 2022, the general prosecutor announced that exiled members of the Coordination Council, including Tsikhanouskaya, would be tried in absentia on numerous charges; Tsikhanouskaya specifically faces a charge of treason.

B2 0-4 pts

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

0 / 4

There is effectively no opportunity for independent candidates to gain power through elections, and Belarus has never experienced a democratic transfer of power. During the 2020 presidential election, vast numbers of Belarusians responded enthusiastically to the participation of opposition candidates. This interest manifested itself at the early stages of campaign and, despite the regime's attempts to eliminate challengers, developed into a broad civil resistance movement. However, Lukashenka's regime has proven unyielding to the popular demand for political change.

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?

0 / 4

Private citizens and political candidates are limited in their opportunities to express their views and make political choices. Meaningful participation in politics is generally not possible. The police and military used severe, sometimes fatal, violence and arrested and detained over 33,000 people to crack down on the August–November 2020 prodemocracy protests, ensuring that Lukashenka would remain in power. Antigovernment demonstrations during the February 2022 constitutional referendum were also repressed by authorities, who arrested more than 800 people, preventing

many from voting; at year's end, approximately 1,450 people were being held as political prisoners.

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?

1 / 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.

Women formally enjoy equal political rights and make up 40 percent of the legislators elected in November 2019. However, women are underrepresented in leadership positions. Independent civil society's initiatives on raising awareness of gender-based violence and discrimination have been unsuccessful. State-sponsored women's advocacy groups and the government refrain from addressing these issues.

Authorities restrict the use of the Belarusian language in official settings, and Belarusian-language ballots were not available during the 2022 national referendum.

Throughout 2022, the government implemented various measures designed to target political opponents, civil society activists, and journalists in exile and exclude them from the domestic political process. For example, Belarusians living abroad were not permitted to vote in the February constitutional referendum. In December, the government adopted a legislative amendment allowing the authorities to revoke the citizenship of both native-born and naturalized Belarusians abroad if they are convicted of charges related to "extremism"; the law had not entered into force before year's end.

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?

O / 4

Though Lukashenka claimed victory in the 2020 presidential elections, the legitimacy of his office is disputed both domestically and internationally. The constitution vests power in the president, stating that presidential decrees supersede legislation. Lukashenka considers himself the head of all branches of government, including the parliament, which always supports his policies and rarely initiates legislation on its own. Observers say that constitutional amendments enacted in February 2022 further entrenched Lukashenka's power, including by guaranteeing that after leaving office, former presidents will be 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

The state controls at least 70 percent of the economy, and graft is encouraged by a lack of transparency and accountability in government. 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.

Powerful oligarchs enjoy the protection of the government and adjustment of regulations and government policies in their favor, so long as they channel money to Lukashenka in a quid pro quo arrangement. Spurious bribery and tax evasion charges have been used against Lukashenka's political opponents and human rights activists; for example, in 2021, Viktor Babaryka was sentenced to 14 years' imprisonment on corruption charges after he announced his intentions to register as a presidential candidate.

C3 0-4 pts

Does the government operate with openness and transparency?

O / 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 available online in recent years.

From August through November 2021, Lukashenka intentionally withheld information about the increased numbers of economic migrants and asylum seekers that were being allowed into the country. Journalists and human rights groups have regularly been prevented from accessing migrant camps in Belarus near the Polish border.

Additionally, during 2022, the government deliberately obscured information about Belarusian involvement in the Russian invasion of Ukraine, including the stationing of Russian troops in Belarus.

Civil Liberties

D. Freedom of Expression and Belief

D1 0-4 pts

Are there free and independent media?	0 / 4
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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. From August 9 to 12, 2020, during the height of the mass prodemocracy protests, the government disrupted internet access in almost the entire country, limiting reporters’ ability to provide accurate information to the public. Internet disruptions were registered during protest rallies throughout 2020.

The official definition of mass media includes websites and blogs, placing them under the Information Ministry’s supervision. Most 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. The regime has used antiextremism legislation and investigations into alleged financial crimes to curtail media activity. In 2021, the government amended legislation on “mass media,” “mass events,” and “criminal liability,” all of which tightened restrictions for independent media and significantly increased the already disproportionate criminal penalties for legitimate journalistic activities.

The government has forcefully cracked down on independent media in recent years. In 2021 and 2022, security forces raided the offices and homes of independent journalists, arrested journalists and staff members of news outlets, and seized equipment. At least 40 journalists were detained in 2022. Several journalists were given lengthy prison sentences in 2022, including Ksenia Lutschina, who was detained in 2020 following the prodemocracy protests and sentenced to eight years’ imprisonment on charges of “conspiring to seize state power” in September 2022.

Authorities blocked access to over 100 news and media sites, including the country’s most popular internet portal, Tut.by, in 2021. In March 2022, the government blocked access to several Ukrainian media sites, labeling them “extremist.”

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 in 2002 provided for government censorship of religious publications and barred foreigners from leading religious groups. The amendments also placed strict limitations on religious groups active in Belarus for less than 20 years. In 2003, the government signed a concordat with the Belarusian Orthodox Church, which is controlled by the Russian Orthodox Church, giving it a privileged position.

After the 2020 elections, Lukashenka attempted to weaken the influence of the Catholic Church, which had denounced state violence against peaceful prodemocracy protesters. Several Catholic priests faced administrative detentions and fines, and some were forced to leave the country. Tadeusz Kondrusiewicz, a Belarusian citizen and archbishop of Minsk-Mahileu, was denied reentry to the country in August 2020.

Though he was allowed to return to Belarus that December, he resigned in January 2021.

Political pressure on the Catholic Church continued throughout 2022. In August, the government closed a Catholic school in Minsk and in October, terminated a decades-long agreement that had allowed the Catholic Church to occupy and use the Church of Saints Simon and Helena in Minsk.

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 ideological pressures, and academic personnel face harassment and dismissal if they use a liberal curriculum or are suspected of disloyalty. Students and professors who join opposition protests or express political dissent face threat of dismissal and revocation of degrees. In recent years, the government has increasingly restricted Belarusian-language instruction in schools and universities.

The government pressures young people to join the state-sponsored, pro-Lukashenka Belarusian Republican Union of Youth (BRSM). The government has tightened control over private schools and kindergartens, which has resulted in the closure of many alternative educational centers.

Many students were involved in the August 2020 prodemocracy protests. Authorities responded with unprovoked brutality and repression, as plainclothes security forces attacked peaceful student protests within and outside of university campuses. Lukashenka replaced at least eight deans at different universities. Between August 2020 and May 2021, at least 153 university students were arbitrarily expelled, many of whom fled to neighboring countries. Throughout 2021 and 2022, student activists were arrested and given yearslong prison sentences on a variety of spurious charges, including allegedly “violating social order.”

In January 2022, President 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. Constitutional amendments adopted in February state that the government must “ensure the

preservation of historical truth” of Belarusian heroism during World War II, further reinforcing Lukashenka’s narrative. The new official history was introduced in Belarusian schools in September.

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. Private citizens often avoid discussing sensitive issues over the phone or via the internet, for fear that state security agents are monitoring conversations.

Authorities routinely threaten, harass, and arrest people who speak out against Lukashenka, postelection violence, and the war in Ukraine.

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 actively monitor internet users’ social media activity to find evidence of protest involvement. The private company Synesis, which was sanctioned by the European Union (EU), reportedly helped authorities identify and arrest demonstrators after the 2020 elections by providing video surveillance technology with facial recognition.

Voicing criticism of public officials and security forces on social media platforms, including sharing posts from other users or media sites that have been labeled “extremist,” can lead to criminal charges. Security forces have violently detained and arrested people who had posted allegedly critical or insulting comments about state officials on social media. Defamation charges were used to prosecute such speech, with ordinary internet users being sentenced to more than a year in prison. Local authorities routinely surveil and monitor individuals who publicly or privately display opposition symbols, including coded phrases or colors, and, since February 2022, antiwar signs or Ukrainian symbols and songs. People who participate in public antiwar appeals face criminal prosecution for “extremism” and “harming national security interests.”

Security forces use various strategies to persecute political activists abroad. In 2021, for example, Belarusian authorities forced an Athens–Vilnius Ryanair flight to land in Minsk in order to arrest exiled blogger and opposition activist Raman Pratasevich. Authorities have also canceled the travel documents of dissidents abroad and harassed activists’ relatives who remain in Belarus, including the families of Belarusian military volunteers in Ukraine.

E. Associational and Organizational Rights

E1 0-4 pts

Is there freedom of assembly?	0 / 4
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The government severely restricts freedom of assembly. Protests require permission from local authorities, who often arbitrarily deny it. The 2021 amendment to the law on mass events imposes strict authorization requirements and impedes organizers’ ability to raise funds for protests.

During the 2020 electoral period, hundreds of thousands of people participated in unprecedented prodemocracy protests. Major campaign rallies for Tsikhanouskaya were held across the country. Police and military forces only partially succeeded in blocking people from congregating before voting day on August 9. In the following weeks, the regime deployed military equipment and armed riot police who indiscriminately attacked and arrested people, killing many. Numerous instances of cruel treatment, beatings, and torture of protesters were recorded, with total impunity for the security forces involved.

Under the criminal code, those who participate in an unauthorized mass event can face administrative fines or 15- to 30-day detention periods. The regime instrumentalized administrative detention against participants in the prodemocracy movement that began in 2020.

Antiwar protests were held in at least 12 Belarusian cities following the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. More than 800 people were arrested during the

protests; most of those arrested were held for 15 days, with many being physically abused 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. 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.

Prior to the 2020 prodemocracy movement, few human rights groups managed to operate due to resource shortages and pressure from the authorities, and staff and supporters risked prosecution and fines for their activism.

NGOs and public associations, including prominent organizations like the Belarusian Association of Journalists, the Belarusian Helsinki Committee, and the Belarusian PEN Center, have been ordered to dissolve in recent years. According to Lawtrend, 757 NGOs were in forced-dissolution processes or were removed from an official register between 2021 and the end of 2022, while 416 had decided to self-liquidate. The government actively uses antiextremism legislation against independent organizations and individuals to restrict public outreach and suppress dissent.

Human rights activists who remained in the country following the 2020 prodemocracy protests have faced harassment and threats from security forces. During 2022, human rights activist Nasta Loika was repeatedly detained on a variety of spurious charges, including “extremism”; in December, Loika was further charged with two criminal offenses, including “violating public order.” Loika remained in pretrial detention at year’s end.

E3 0-4 pts

Is there freedom for trade unions and similar professional or labor organizations?

0 / 4

Independent labor unions face harassment, and their leaders are frequently fired and prosecuted 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, striking to protest the fraudulent presidential election and police violence toward peaceful demonstrators. The state increasingly targeted and pressured workers to prevent them from going on strike. Union leaders and rank-and-file members were arrested, fined, dismissed from their posts, sent to psychiatric institutions, and forced into exile.

In 2021, security forces arrested at least 11 people, accusing them of involvement in an independent labor movement. The arrested workers faced charges of treason and conspiracy to seize power, with a maximum punishment of 15 years in prison. According to the Belarusian Independent Trade Union, approximately 40 trade union activists were imprisoned as of December 2022.

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
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The right to a fair trial is not respected and often flatly dismissed in cases with political overtones. In a departure from international norms, the power to extend pretrial detention lies with a prosecutor rather than a judge. 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.

Since the 2020 presidential campaign, arbitrary arrests, police brutality and torture, and the denial of due process have continued with impunity. Lawyers are often denied the right to meet with their defendants. Many lawyers defending political prisoners were disbarred or arrested. In July 2022, Lukashenka enacted a law permitting the authorities to conduct trials in absentia for crimes that “entail a threat to national security.”

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 have broad powers to employ physical force against suspects, who have little opportunity for recourse if they are abused. Human rights groups continue to document instances of beatings, torture, and intimidation during detention. During and after the presidential election period in 2020 and throughout 2021, detained peaceful prodemocracy protesters experienced cruel and dehumanizing treatment during their arrests, while being transported to detention centers and when incarcerated. Excessive force has been used to extract confessions from detainees. Extracted confessions, where detainees appear beaten, distressed, and humiliated, have been recorded, published, and distributed by state agencies, violating the principle of human dignity and the right to a fair trial.

Belarus served as a staging ground for Russian military forces before and during their invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, and President Lukashenka continued to allow Russian troops to operate from Belarusian territory through year's end. Belarusian dissidents have resisted the Russian military presence, with so-called railway partisans notably attacking Belarusian rail infrastructure; their sabotage prevented the transit of Russian military forces and equipment to Ukraine. Authorities quickly labeled the railway partisans as “terrorists,” and used excessive force to detain several people for their alleged participation. In May, Lukashenka enacted new legislation to make such attacks punishable by death; as of December, several people had been convicted of engaging in rail sabotage and received lengthy prison sentences.

F4 0-4 pts

Authorities have sought to increase the dominance of the Russian language. Official usage of Belarusian remains rare. The UN Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) recognizes Belarusian as “vulnerable.” Since Lukashenka became president, the share of first graders who study in Belarusian fell from 40 to under 10 percent as of 2019. During 2022, authorities continued to restrict the use of the Belarusian language, including by refusing to provide Belarusian-language materials to voters before or during the constitutional referendum in February. The authorities also arbitrarily shut down at least one publishing house specializing in Belarusian-language publications and designated numerous Belarusian-language books and newspapers as “extremist materials” during the year.

Women are prohibited from entering 181 different occupations, and societal norms in much of the country hold that women should be mothers or housewives. However, Tsikhanouskaya’s mass support in the prodemocracy movement has become a slight counter to long-standing gender roles.

LGBT+ people face widespread societal discrimination, and law enforcement authorities are reluctant to investigate and prosecute attacks against them.

In 2021, Belarusian authorities began deliberately facilitating the passage of asylum seekers and migrants—most of them from Iraq—through Belarus to the borders of the EU. Polish and Belarusian authorities used tear gas and water cannons against the migrants, who were left in freezing temperatures without adequate shelter, supplies, and assistance. Approximately 2,000 asylum seekers, refugees, and migrants were stranded in Belarus by the end of 2021, and over 1,000 people chose to return home voluntarily as of the end of that year. Belarusian authorities continued to push asylum seekers and migrants to cross the EU border throughout 2022, though individuals have also left via repatriation flights; over 3,800 Iraqis were repatriated according to the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies in its November 2021–May 2022 report.

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

Opposition activists are occasionally detained at the border for lengthy searches. Passports are used as a primary identity document in Belarus, and authorities are known to harass people living in a different location than indicated by domestic stamps in their passport. Routine citizenship and documentation services abroad have been restricted, resulting in severe delays or denial of service for people who fled the country for political reasons.

On numerous occasions, authorities have forced the expulsion of politically active Belarusians since 2020, including Tsikhanouskaya and Catholic archbishop Kondrusiewicz. That December, authorities prohibited Belarusians from leaving the country at land border crossings, except with Russia, ostensibly to prevent the spread of COVID-19; the policy was likely enforced to prevent political dissidents from fleeing. In May 2021, the EU banned Belarusian airlines from traveling over its airspace and accessing its airports. This has limited travel options for Belarusian citizens and significantly increased the cost of leaving the country. Further restrictions on air travel were imposed in response to the border crisis instigated by the Belarusian authorities.

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

Though limits on economic freedom have eased in recent years, state interference still affects the economy and profitable business owners are never secure from arbitrary government pressure and harassment. Many businesspeople that became involved in the postelection prodemocracy efforts, often to support victims of human

rights abuses or to incentivize policemen to resign from law enforcement, were criminally prosecuted on groundless claims. Other businesses and their owners who supported candidates other than Lukashenka have been arrested under false pretense. Multiple businesses relocated their employees to neighboring countries for fear of state harassment or prosecution.

In October 2022, Lukashenka announced price regulation measures for 370 consumer goods. At least one chain store was heavily fined and more than 40 people were detained for unsanctioned price increases before year's end; in one case, a business owner received a suspended sentence of to up to two years in prison for "abuse of office."

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. In 2018, Lukashenka blocked a draft law on the prevention of domestic violence jointly developed by law enforcement agencies and civil society representatives, calling attitudes against the corporal punishment of children "nonsense from the West." Threats of losing custody of children are often used to intimidate and harass political activists.

The constitution explicitly bans same-sex marriage. 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. The Belarusian government led a 2016 effort to block LGBT+ rights from being part of a UN international initiative focused on urban areas.

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. Many women become victims of international sex trafficking.



On Belarus

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Country Facts

Global Freedom Score

8/100 Not Free

Internet Freedom Score

28/100 Not Free

Other Years

2022

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