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The rights to freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly remained severely restricted. Torture and other ill-treatment remained endemic and were committed with impunity. The justice system was systematically abused to suppress dissent. Children's rights were routinely violated in the criminal justice system. Death sentences and executions continued. Migrants suffered abuses at the hands of the authorities. Arbitrary dismissals and prosecutions of medical professionals adversely affected the quality and availability of healthcare.

Background

Following the disputed presidential election in August 2020 and the refusal by the EU and the USA, among others, to recognize the incumbent Alyaksandr Lukashenka as the elected president, the country faced growing international isolation, with further sanctions introduced against its leadership.

The Belarusian authorities facilitated the transit of people from refugee- and migrant-sending countries to Belarus and pushed them towards the EU, implementing Alyaksandr Lukashenka's threat to "stop protecting" its borders from refugees.

Allegations repeatedly emerged suggesting the authorities were pursuing dissenting voices in exile, including by deadly means.

Around half of the population was vaccinated against Covid-19, including nearly 40% with two doses; available vaccines exceeded the uptake. The number of officially reported pandemic-related deaths exceeded 5,500, but the real number may have been considerably higher, due to deliberate under-reporting, the absence of free media and independent health watchdogs and retaliation against whistle-blowers.

Freedom of expression

Freedom of expression remained severely restricted. Dozens of independent journalists and bloggers were prosecuted and imprisoned. More than 480 websites, including those of major national and international news media outlets, and over 400 Telegram groups were blocked for their independent reporting and some were arbitrarily banned as "extremist". Dozens of government critics were imprisoned for insulting officials, which remained a crime.

In March, TUT.by reporter Katsyaryna Barysevich was sentenced to six months in prison and an extortionate fine on trumped-up charges for uncovering official falsification of evidence regarding the November 2020 killing of artist and peaceful protester Raman Bandarenka.

In May, the authorities blocked access to TUT.by for purported "numerous violations of the Mass Media Law", conducted mass searches of its premises across Belarus, and detained 14 members of staff on unfounded charges, including tax evasion. On 13 August, TUT.by and its mirror site, Zerkalo.io, were declared "extremist", criminalizing dissemination of their materials.

At the end of the year, 32 journalists remained jailed for their independent work.

On 23 May, exiled journalist and blogger Raman Pratasevich and his partner Sofia Sapega were arrested after their flight from Greece to Lithuania was forced to land in the Belarusian capital, Minsk, following a manifestly false bomb alert. Both were held incommunicado for several days and charged arbitrarily with inciting mass riots and "gross violation of public order"; Raman Pratasevich was additionally charged with "incitement of social hatred". He appeared on television three times to "confess" and testify against others, and to give assurances he was not being ill-treated, although the first video showed possible injuries. He and Sofia Sapega were then moved to an undisclosed

location, under house arrest, on 25 June, and allowed to post on Twitter until August. Both were still awaiting trial in December, although their whereabouts remained unknown and their lawyers were barred from disclosing any information.

All instances of critical free speech by people from various walks of life were prosecuted in unfair proceedings.¹

Freedom of association

The authorities stepped up suppression of independent civil society organizations, including NGOs and lawyers' professional associations, trade unions, political groups, and self-organized ethnic and religious communities.

On 22 July alone, the authorities ordered the closure of 53 NGOs. By the end of the year, over 270 civil society organizations had been arbitrarily dissolved or were in the process of forced closure. Hundreds, possibly thousands, of civil activists left Belarus fearing reprisals. In a BBC interview in November, in response to a question about mass NGO closures, Alyaksandr Lukashenka conflated NGOs with the political opposition and promised to "massacre all the scum that you [the West] have been financing".

In February the authorities raided the office of the prominent human rights group Viasna in Minsk, and in March unfounded criminal proceedings against Viasna were opened. During the year five staff members, including its founder Ales Bialiatski, were detained. In November, Leanid Sudalenska and Tatsyana Lasitsa were sentenced to three and two-and-a-half years' imprisonment respectively for their purported role behind a "violation of public order". Other Viasna members, including previously detained Marfa Rabkova and Andrei Chapyuk, were awaiting trial at the end of the year.

Freedom of assembly

The authorities maintained an effective ban on peaceful protest, targeting participants with detention for up to 15 days or hefty fines. Over 900 individuals were arrested and prosecuted in politically motivated proceedings according to Viasna; many of them were given lengthy prison sentences under false "mass disorder" and other protest-related charges.

In January, a leaked audio recording came to light in which a top police official instructed officers under his command to disregard international human rights law when dealing with protesters and condoned firing rubber bullets at protesters' vital organs, implying that their deaths would be acceptable.²

In July, legal amendments to "the laws protecting sovereignty and the constitutional order" were enacted. Expressly drawing on the lessons of suppressing peaceful protests in 2020, these included extending the applicability and scope of state of emergency measures, increasing the authority of law enforcement agencies and tasking the Armed Forces with "suppression of mass disorder".

Torture and other ill-treatment

Torture and other ill-treatment remained widespread and endemic, while perpetrators continued to enjoy absolute impunity. In a November BBC interview, Alyaksandr Lukashenka admitted violence had been inflicted on detainees in the Akrestsina Detention Centre in Minsk in August 2020; he and his officials had previously dismissed evidence of this as "fake". His admission was not followed by any attempt to prosecute those responsible.

Law enforcement officers who used torture and other ill-treatment, including excessive force against protesters, enjoyed total impunity. Demonstrators prosecuted for participating in the 2020 protests were singled out for particularly harsh treatment and jail conditions.

In May, peaceful opposition activist Vitold Ashurak died suddenly in prison in Shklou, where he was serving a five-year sentence. In a letter he had complained that the prison administration had forced him and other "political" prisoners to wear distinct yellow labels on their prison clothes. The authorities refused to treat his death as suspicious and issued a video, apparently doctored, in which Vitold Ashurak is seen walking and collapsing suddenly in an empty cell.

Unfair trials

The justice system was systematically abused by the authorities to crack down on all dissent, imprison political opponents and human rights defenders, and intimidate and silence their lawyers. Judges were manifestly biased towards the prosecution and law enforcement agencies, which were widely deployed to initiate unfounded criminal and administrative procedures and provide the

necessary “evidence” for the trials. Closed hearings in criminal cases became the norm in politically motivated cases, with entire case materials being classified as secret and lawyers routinely forced to sign non-disclosure undertakings or face severe penalties.

According to the Defenders.by project, between February and August over 30 lawyers were disbarred or refused extension of their licences, after they defended victims of politically motivated prosecutions or took part in peaceful protests. In November, a new law further increased the Ministry of Justice’s control over the legal profession and, following other new regulations, the number of licensed lawyers fell by 7% between January and November.

In July, the Supreme Court sentenced a former banker who had tried to stand in the 2020 presidential election to 14 years’ imprisonment on false charges of bribery and money laundering. Viktor Babaryka was also fined the equivalent of US\$57,000 and ordered to pay more than US\$18 million as “compensation for the damage caused”.

In September the two most prominent opposition members remaining in Belarus, Maryia Kalesnikava and Maksim Znak, were convicted following a swift closed trial, and sentenced to 11 and 10 years’ imprisonment respectively on false charges of conspiracy, “extremism” and national security-related offences.

Children’s rights

Children’s rights were routinely violated in the context of criminal justice.

At least 10 child protesters and one blogger were arrested after the post-election protests. All were convicted in 2021 in closed, politically motivated trials and given custodial sentences. Three turned 18 in 2021 while awaiting trial and were tried as adults. Many complained of torture in detention.

Mikita Zalatarou, aged 16 when arrested in 2020, was denied his epilepsy medication and subjected to repeated beatings and electrocution. He was sentenced to five years’ imprisonment and subsequently accused of violence towards a prison guard for which he was given an additional prison term.

Children continued to be imprisoned for minor, non-violent drug offences and sentenced to between seven and 12 years’ imprisonment. The number of such convictions in 2021 was unknown but the authorities indicated a growing number of such prosecutions of children.³

Death penalty

Death sentences continued to be imposed and executions carried out, in secret. Two brothers in their twenties sentenced to death in 2020, Stanislau and Ilya Kostseu, were granted clemency, only the second such clemency since Belarus’s independence.

Refugees’ and migrants’ rights

Belarusian authorities facilitated the entry of thousands of people from migrant- and refugee-sending countries to Belarus, lured by a false promise of easy passage into the EU. Instead, migrants and refugees faced pushbacks from Poland, Lithuania and Latvia.⁴ Migrants who were returned or failed to cross into Poland were beaten and subjected to other forms of violence; were deprived of food, water, shelter and sanitation; and were the targets of phone theft and extortion by Belarusian forces. Belarusian border guards regularly prevented people stranded in the border area from leaving the fenced border strip area. Several people, including at least one child, died of hypothermia.

An Iraqi national, Rebin Sirwan, was expelled from Belarus after he tried to seek asylum in the country.

Right to health

A continuing shortage of capacity in the healthcare sector caused by the pandemic was further exacerbated by severe reprisals, including arbitrary dismissals and criminal prosecutions, against medical professionals who supported the peaceful protests in 2020 or exposed the ferocity and scale of police violence against protesters.⁵

Such moves impacted the quality and availability of healthcare. In Hrodna, an independent children’s hospice funded by private donations was shut down in response to its director showing solidarity with post-election protests.

1. ["Stand with Belarus" campaign](#), January
2. ["Belarus: Government's threats and history of crackdown on protesters require urgent international response"](#), 24 March
3. ["Belarus: Crackdown on children"](#), January
4. ["Belarus/EU: New evidence of brutal violence from Belarusian forces against asylum seekers and migrants facing pushbacks from the EU"](#), 20 December
5. ["Belarus: Crackdown on medics"](#), January

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