

Belarus

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RISK LEVEL: CURRENT CRISIS

Authorities in Belarus have perpetrated widespread, systematic and grave human rights violations and persecution against perceived opponents, some of which, amount to crimes against humanity.

BACKGROUND:

Since assuming office in 1994, President Alexander Lukashenko has systematically dismantled democratic institutions and silenced dissent in Belarus. During the 2020 presidential election, widespread protests over alleged electoral fraud were met with brutal state violence, including tear gas, rubber bullets, stun grenades and blank ammunition. Between 9-12 August 2020, approximately 7,000 protesters and bystanders were detained under inhumane conditions; by mid-November, that number grew to around 25,000. Demonstrators, political opponents, human rights defenders, journalists, trade unionists, lawyers and ordinary citizens expressing dissent were subjected to arbitrary detention, torture, sexual and gender-based violence and denial of fair trial rights. The UN Human Rights Council-mandated Group of Independent Experts (GIE) on Belarus determined that

the authorities engaged in a widespread and systematic campaign against perceived opponents, with some violations amounting to crimes against humanity, and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe's (OSCE) Moscow Mechanism Rapporteur, reported that the waves of arrests targeting specific social and professional groups suggests a deliberate, state-organized campaign of repression.

Following the 2020 crackdown, Belarusian authorities adopted a set of legislative reforms, introducing new criminal and administrative offences, extending the death penalty, restricting freedom of assembly and association and widely impacting freedom of expression through expanded surveillance. President Lukashenko's regime has targeted civil society extensively. In July 2021 he announced a "purge," during which authorities shut down over 1,000 independent organizations. Peaceful demonstrations continue to be repressed, while independent associations, trade unions and political parties are systematically dismantled and face persecution.

The government has intensified its widespread policy of arbitrary arrest and detention, with torture and inhuman or degrading treatment systematically inflicted in detention facilities, particularly against perceived political opponents. From 2023 to 2024 politically motivated court cases increased by approximately 1,200.

Authorities have increasingly rejected findings from human rights bodies, obstructed independent monitoring and refused cooperation with international mechanisms. The perpetrators of these abuses – primarily state security forces, such as the State Security Committee (KGB), Special Purpose Police Detachment and Interior Ministry troops – operate with complete impunity, under executive directives. In some cases, pro-government militias have engaged in harassment and intimidation of opposition members.

In this climate of fear, the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) estimates that up to 300,000 individuals have been forced to flee. Belarusians in exile face continued judicial harassment, trials in absentia, hate speech, as well as targeted intimidation of themselves and their families. In 2024 UN Special Procedures documented 110 people tried in absentia, up from 18 in 2023. These practices have led to de facto statelessness for many, due to loss of access to identification documents and essential public services.

In response to growing repression, the European Union (EU), United States and United Kingdom have imposed targeted sanctions on Belarusian individuals and entities. The

OSCE has invoked its Moscow Mechanism multiple times to appoint rapporteurs to investigate human rights violations, with reports highlighting systemic abuses connected to the 2020 elections and beyond.

In September 2024 Lithuania referred the situation to the International Criminal Court (ICC), requesting an investigation into alleged crimes against humanity, including deportation, persecution and other inhumane acts since 1 May 2020.

RECENT DEVELOPMENTS:

In January 2025 Belarus held presidential elections widely condemned by international observers as neither free nor fair. Conducted in an atmosphere of severe repression and intimidation, the election resulted in President Lukashenko securing a seventh term. In response, the EU expanded sanctions in March, targeting an additional 25 individuals and seven entities, including the Central Election Commission. Following the election, authorities intensified repression against political opponents, civil society and independent media. Human Rights Watch has documented widespread arbitrary arrests, forced disappearances and torture of detainees.

In February 2025 the GIE concluded that crimes against humanity remain ongoing. Their latest report documented severe reprisals and politically motivated persecution against women human rights defenders, surveillance, forced exile and gender-based violence.

UN Special Procedures, OHCHR and the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women have repeatedly raised alarm over the inhumane conditions endured by female political prisoners, including overcrowding, poor hygiene, lack of medical care and punitive measures such as solitary confinement, public humiliation, incitement of violence and sexual violence. In May a group of UN Special Procedures reported ongoing cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment in women's correctional colonies, particularly affecting women convicted in connection to the 2020 protests.

Despite recent waves of presidential pardons, the overall number of people unjustly imprisoned remains high, with the Viasna Human Rights Centre reporting 1,175 political prisoners currently in custody. The UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Belarus stated that the pardons have sometimes been accompanied by new human rights violations, such as forcing prisoners to make propaganda videos or sign cooperation agreements with the KGB to secure their release.

ANALYSIS:

The situation in Belarus reflects a state-driven, institutionalized campaign of repression. Belarusian authorities have implemented policies to incite fear, intimidate and punish those perceived as “disloyal” through a campaign officials have repeatedly described as a “cleansing of society.” Prolonged incommunicado detention may constitute torture or enforced disappearance. The use of Article 411 of the Criminal Code, which allows indefinite extension of prison sentences for “disobedience,” exemplifies the arbitrary and punitive manipulation of law to suppress dissent. Abuse of counterterrorism and so-called anti-extremism laws further enables judicial persecution.

The targeting of women underscores the gendered dimension of repression. The violations against detained women may constitute gender-based persecution, as defined under the Rome Statute, and align with patterns of systemic abuse previously outlined by UN bodies. Vulnerable groups, including ethnic and religious minorities, LGBTQIA+ individuals and persons with disabilities, face additional, underreported risks of discrimination and violence.

Crimes against humanity are enabled by a deliberate policy of state violence, institutional complicity and a complete absence of accountability. Courts, law enforcement agencies and security services operate together to suppress opposition, with repression codified into law. The regime’s criminalization of dissent and dismantling and persecution of civil society actors demonstrate the systematic nature of these violations.

Russia’s strategic alliance with Belarus provides key diplomatic, economic and technical support, emboldening the regime and shielding it from international accountability. This support not only enhances the state’s capacity to commit abuses but also weakens the impact of multilateral pressure and sanctions.

RISK ASSESSMENT:

- Security forces and judicial institutions weaponized to suppress dissent without accountability amid no domestic, independent oversight or redress mechanism.
- Legal and institutional infrastructure designed to silence perceived opposition, enabling the state to carry out repression under the guise of legality.

- Widespread and systematic persecution through actions that are organized, intentional and directed against identifiable groups.
- Dismantling of civic space and a surveillance state – characterized by censorship, internet shutdowns, disinformation and propaganda – to hide abuses and incite hostility.
- Presence of exclusionary ideology, entrenched authoritarianism, international isolation, collapse of independent institutions and state capacity for mass repression heighten the risk of future atrocities.

NECESSARY ACTION:

The Belarusian government must immediately and unconditionally release all political prisoners and guarantee that civil society actors can carry out their work without fear of reprisal. Belarusian authorities must halt politically motivated prosecutions, reform repressive laws and re-engage with international human rights mechanisms.

EU and OSCE member states should strengthen diplomatic pressure, expand support for exiled civil society and coordinate with international accountability efforts.

The ICC should open a formal investigation into crimes against humanity in Belarus. UN member states should open universal jurisdiction cases to address crimes beyond Lithuania's referral, including torture, sexual violence and enforced disappearance. OHCHR and UN Special Procedures must continue documenting violations to support future justice initiatives.