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BELARUS 2022

The rights to freedom of expression, association and assembly remained severely curtailed. At least one man was executed. Torture and other ill-treatment were widespread and impunity prevailed. The justice system was abused to suppress dissent and trials were routinely unfair. National and religious minorities faced discrimination. Refugees and migrants were subjected to violence and refoulement.

Background

Belarus remained largely isolated internationally owing to the continuing refusal by the EU and USA to recognize Alyaksandr Lukashenka as president. It chiefly aligned its foreign and defence policy with that of Russia, including by contributing to Russia's war against Ukraine.

GDP plunged and inflation rose after trade with Ukraine halted and new sanctions were imposed by Western governments on Belarusian companies.

Freedom of expression

Freedom of expression remained severely restricted. Thousands were prosecuted, including for expressing support for Ukraine, reporting on the movements of Russian troops and military equipment, or criticizing the government. Forty independent journalists were arbitrarily arrested and new charges were brought against others already imprisoned. At the end of the year, 32 journalists remained imprisoned for their work.

Hundreds of individuals were prosecuted in closed trials for “insulting” officials, “discrediting” state institutions and symbols, or “inciting societal animosity and enmity”. In July, student Danuta Peradnya was imprisoned for six-and-a-half years for reposting a message criticizing the war in Ukraine and the role of Alyaksandr Lukashenka in it.¹

The authorities continued to arbitrarily label organizations, online resources, printed and other material as “extremist”. Thousands of individuals were prosecuted for association with such content, for example “liking” a social media post or wearing a t-shirt with an “extremist” logo. The official list contained over 2,200 people considered “extremists”, most of them imprisoned under politically motivated charges.

Journalist Yury Hantsarevich was sentenced in July to 30 months’ imprisonment for “facilitating an extremist activity” after he sent photos of Russian military equipment to independent media outlets.

In November, the Ministry of the Interior banned the use of the traditional salute “Long Live Belarus”, adding it to the list of “Nazi symbols and paraphernalia”.

Freedom of association

The authorities continued the crackdown on independent civil society organizations that began after the disputed 2020 presidential election, targeting NGOs, media outlets, professional organizations and ethnic and religious communities.

The authorities used arbitrary charges of “extremism” and “terrorism” to shut down organizations. Over 250 civil society organizations as well as major independent media outlets were shut down, many following their designation as “extremist organizations”.

In April, the authorities raided the homes and offices of leaders of independent trade unions, arresting 16 people on undisclosed grounds. In July, the Supreme Court liquidated the Belarusian Congress of Democratic Trade Unions, effectively banning all independent trade unions.

Freedom of assembly

Following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February, police brutally dispersed peaceful protests across Belarus, arresting at least 700 protesters on 27 February alone. Following closed trials, many were sentenced to detention for up to 30 days on trumped-up charges of "organizing, preparing or participating in activities grossly violating public order" and others were fined.

The authorities continued to prosecute peaceful participants of the 2020 protests, arresting 280 individuals in the first six months of 2022.

In May, legislative amendments were enacted allowing troops from the Ministry of the Interior to use combat weapons and special military equipment to disperse public protests and other activities said to be disturbing public order.

Death penalty

At least one man was executed .

In May, legislation was amended extending the application of the death penalty to "attempted crimes" in terrorism-related cases, in violation of the country's obligations as a state party to the ICCPR.² In December parliament approved in its first reading a law introducing the death penalty for treason committed by public officials or military personnel.

Torture and other ill-treatment

Torture and other ill-treatment remained widespread. Perpetrators continued to enjoy impunity.

Individuals convicted under politically motivated charges often faced harsher treatment and worse conditions of detention. They were frequently held in inhuman conditions in solitary confinement or denied the right to make phone calls, see family members, receive food parcels or exercise outside. Prominent political activist Syarhei Tsikhanouski, serving an 18-year sentence on trumped-up charges, was repeatedly subjected to such arbitrary restrictions and spent over two months in a punishment isolation cell.³

Human rights defenders

The authorities prevented human rights defenders from carrying out their work and subjected them to arbitrary detention, violence and intimidation. People targeted

included members of the prominent human rights organization Viasna, several of whom were in pretrial detention or received prison terms. In September, imprisoned leaders Ales Bialiatski, Valyantsin Stefanovich and Uladzimir Labkovich faced new trumped-up public disorder charges. On 7 October Ales Bialiatski was co-awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

Marfa Rabkova and Andrey Chapyuk, in detention since 2020, were sentenced in a closed trial to 15 and six years' imprisonment respectively.⁴

Nasta Loika served at least six 15-day terms of administrative detention on trumped-up charges of "petty hooliganism", during which she was denied medicines and basic necessities, including warm clothes and drinking water. In December she was charged with the criminal offence of "organizing activities grossly violating public order" and transferred to pretrial detention.

Unfair trials

The justice system continued to be widely abused by the authorities to crack down on all dissent and imprison government critics, as well as to intimidate and silence the lawyers defending them. At least seven lawyers were issued with arbitrary charges and at least five of them arrested. At least 17 more were arbitrarily stripped of their legal licence after working on politically motivated cases.

Hearings in politically motivated cases were usually closed and fraught with irregularities. In July, legislation was enacted widening the use of investigations and trials in absence of defendants, and used later in the year.

Discrimination

The authorities escalated attacks on some ethnic minorities, including Poles and Lithuanians, in apparent retaliation against Poland and Lithuania for hosting exiled opposition activists and criticizing the Belarusian government.

Military cemeteries of Polish soldiers were repeatedly vandalized, with no one held to account. The government arbitrarily barred two schools in western Belarus (home to a sizable Polish minority) from teaching in Polish and closed a Lithuanian-language school in Hrodna region. Authorities targeted schools and publishing houses teaching or publishing in Belarusian, despite its status as an official language, regarding it as a language of the political opposition. Belarusian bookshops were closed, and Belarusian-speaking activists, academics and literary and cultural figures and tour guides faced arbitrary arrest.

Freedom of religion and belief

The authorities targeted local Christian leaders and activists who spoke out against police violence during the 2020 protests and Belarus's role in Russia's war in Ukraine. In March, the police searched the homes of several Catholic priests, arbitrarily detaining one, Aliaksandr Baran, for 10 days and fining another, Vasil Yahorau, for displaying solidarity with Ukraine.

Following a suspicious fire on 26 September, the authorities terminated the agreement for a local Catholic parish to use the landmark St Simon and Alena Church in the capital, Minsk. During the 2020 demonstrations, the church had defiantly offered shelter to protesters facing police violence.

Right to health

The quality and availability of healthcare remained severely compromised, including by the continued exodus of medical workers dismissed on political grounds, as well as shortages of certain drugs and medical equipment as a result of international sanctions. Medical professionals sacked for supporting peaceful protests in 2020 were arbitrarily refused re-employment. The authorities suspended the licences of at least seven large private medical clinics in what appeared to be a coordinated campaign targeting independent provision of health services.

Refugees' and migrants' rights

The authorities continued to force refugees and migrants, including those from Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan, to cross the border into Poland, Lithuania and Latvia. Many were pushed back into Belarus, where they faced torture and other ill-treatment by border guards and other officials, obstacles to claiming asylum, or refoulement. In March, the authorities reportedly evicted refugees and migrants from a makeshift camp in the village of Bruzgi, leaving nearly 700 people without shelter or support, including many young children and people with severe illnesses and disabilities.⁵

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1. [“Belarus: Free student jailed for 6.5 years for reposting criticism of Ukraine war and Lukashenka”, 6 July](#)
 2. [“Belarus: New death penalty law is the ultimate attack on human rights”, 19 May](#)
 3. [“Belarus: Jailed activist subjected to ill-treatment: Sergey Tihanovski”, 5 October](#)
 4. [“Belarus: Harsh sentences for Rabkova and co-defendants illustrate crushing of civil society”, 6 September](#)
 5. [Poland: Cruelty Not Compassion, at Europe's Other Borders, 11 April](#)

