

Back to Belarus

The rights to freedom of expression, assembly and association remained severely curtailed. The government sought to repress religious minorities via a compulsory, opaque registration process. The justice system was abused to suppress dissent. Torture and other ill-treatment were endemic and impunity prevailed. Refugees and migrants suffered abuses at the hands of the authorities. Environmental commitments remained weak or non-existent.

Background

In January, incumbent President Aliaksandr Lukashenka won re-election in a climate of total fear and repression.¹ Belarus retained close political, economic and military links with Russia, hosting its troops and joint military exercises. Significant economic disruption occurred when Poland and Lithuania closed their borders with Belarus for several weeks, citing security concerns and the smuggling of cigarettes from Belarus by balloons. Ongoing emigration, including in response to reprisals following disputed elections in 2020, deepened workforce shortages. Authorities continued pursuing the return of émigrés by denying them consular services abroad. Belarus's sense of international isolation eased after diplomatic overtures by the USA, including the lifting of some sanctions, widely believed to be in exchange for prisoner releases (see below).

Freedom of expression

Freedom of expression remained severely restricted. The authorities continued to label online, printed and broadcast material that challenged them as "extremist" and arbitrarily added some 100 individuals monthly to the "List of persons involved in extremist activities". As of December, this list contained 6,127 people. Those listed faced financial restrictions and were banned from public sector employment for up to five years. Organizations that published, spread or created the "extremist" content, or were connected to individuals on the list, were banned. Any connection to them or involvement in their activities was an offence.

As of December, 28 media workers were in prison for their professional activity.

Freedom of peaceful assembly

Exercising the right to freedom of peaceful assembly remained effectively criminalized, and led to severe reprisals.² According to the NGO Human Rights Center Viasna, the authorities stepped up their efforts to identify and prosecute participants in the peaceful protests of 2020 as the statute of limitations for the charge used was expiring. Around 200

people were under criminal investigation in the capital Minsk alone, facing prison terms and fines.

Authorities reported that they were bringing charges for supporting extremist activity against over 200 Belarusian protesters who had taken part in protests abroad on 25 March, celebrated as Freedom Day by pro-democracy activists.

Freedom of association

The government assault on freedom of association continued. Participation in forcibly closed, suspended or unregistered NGOs and political or religious organizations remained criminalized, punishable by fines and imprisonment.

As of December, 99 civil society organizations, including independent NGOs and trade unions, had been closed or opted to self-dissolve during the year, due to severe legislative restrictions, interference by the authorities and financial constraints.

Freedom of religion and belief

Persecution of religious organizations and clergy who were not aligned with the authorities continued.

In July, any religious organizations that had not undergone compulsory re-registration within the previous 12-month period became subject to court-ordered closure. The opaque nature of the registration process, and the ban on participating in unregistered organizations, led to great uncertainty and it was unclear whether any court hearings had been scheduled or completed by year's end. As of 5 December, no official list of registered organizations had been published, though the registering body's website – likely outdated – listed 3,592 religious organizations.

On 1 April, the Supreme Court rejected Catholic priest Henryk Okolotovich's appeal against his 11-year jail term on treason charges. Both his trial and his appeal were closed. Henryk Okolotovich was quoted in the media as saying that he had been accused of spying for Poland and the Vatican. He was subsequently released on 20 November following an intervention by the Vatican.

Arbitrary detention and unfair trials

The authorities continued to abuse the justice system to silence and punish dissent and opposition. Hundreds of individuals, including human rights defenders, other activists, media workers and lawyers, continued to serve long prison sentences imposed following unfair, politically motivated trials. Over 170 victims of politically motivated imprisonment were released early, between June and December, as part of a US-negotiated deal. Among them were Nobel Prize winner Ales Bialiatski, political opposition leaders Maryia Kalesnikava and Viktor Babaryka, and several other high-profile prisoners, some having been long held incommunicado. However, more individuals continued to be arbitrarily prosecuted and imprisoned.

In September, the UN expressed concerns over an increasing number of trials held in the absence of the accused. Individuals concerned learned of their prosecution by chance, were unaware of the charges and grounds for their conviction and were deprived of a legal defence.

Torture and other ill-treatment

Torture and other ill-treatment in custody, including sexual violence, remained endemic, with perpetrators enjoying impunity. Individuals convicted on politically motivated charges endured harsher treatment in prison colonies. They were denied contact with the outside world, frequently put in punishment cells for extended periods and refused adequate healthcare.

According to Human Rights Center Viasna, prisoners were subjected to forced labour, under the threat of punishment and in degrading conditions.

At least two victims of politically motivated persecution, Valiantsin Shtermer and Andrei Padniabenny, died while in detention, bringing the post-2020 total to nine deaths.

Enforced disappearances

Throughout the year, there was no outside contact with and no direct information about several imprisoned high-profile activists, journalists and politicians. Mikalai Statkevich, whose whereabouts had been unknown for two and a half years prior to his release in September, was forcibly disappeared immediately after his refusal to be deported.³

Refugees' and migrants' rights

Belarus's authorities continued their practice of forcing refugees and migrants across its border with the EU. According to a joint study by Oxfam and its Polish partner Egala, people pushed back to Belarus were subjected to physical violence and deprived of water, food, shelter and medical care. Cases of sexual abuse were reported.

Right to a healthy environment

Belarus remained non-compliant with the WHO's Air Quality Guidelines, and air pollution exceeded the relevant standards threefold. Other environmental commitments, and the monitoring of their implementation, remained weak or non-existent. This was particularly evident amid a severe crackdown on environmental NGOs and the forcible exile of independent climate activists. The restrictions on public participation in environmental decision-making and the erosion of other environmental rights as part of broader human rights violations were outlined in NGO submissions to Belarus's UPR.



