

JANUARY 6, 2025

## **Belarus**

Four years after mass protests swept the country following contested presidential elections in summer 2020, the government's far-reaching crackdown on peaceful protesters and critics continues to reach new heights.

International and Belarusian rights groups, as well as the UN human rights expert on Belarus, noted a continuously deteriorating human rights situation in 2024. In March, the UN Human Rights Office reported it had found "reasonable grounds to believe that the crime against humanity of persecution may have been committed" by officials.

## **Torture and Ill-Treatment of Political Prisoners**

Between July and December 2024, authorities released 227 political prisoners following presidential pardons. Many were forced under duress to sign an official plea for pardon, which includes admission of guilt.

Belarusian rights groups recorded scores of politically motivated trials in 2024. At time of writing, at least 1275 were behind bars on politically motivated charges. In July, UN experts called for the release of 63 older political prisoners.

Political prisoners continued to face ill-treatment and torture. At least seven, including Viktor Babaryka, Siarhei Tsikhanouski, and Ihar Losik, have been held incommunicado since February-April 2023.

Prison officials severely restricted political prisoners' access to correspondence, calls, parcels, and meetings with lawyers and family. Prisoners faced isolation in punishment cells and arbitrarily harsh confinement regimes. Dozens of political prisoners in 2024 faced new trumped-up "malicious disobedience" and other charges that prolonged their sentences.

Prison management denied political prisoners access to timely and appropriate health care. In 2024, at least three political prisoners, Aliaksandr Kulinich, Ihar Lednik, and Vadzim Khrasko, died preventable deaths after delayed or inadequate medical care. At time of writing, local rights groups said that more than 224 political prisoners faced particularly high health risks due to poor conditions in Belarusian prisons.

In March, the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women requested that Belarus take interim measures to protect political prisoner Palina Sharenda-Panasiuk, whose health had significantly deteriorated.

Law enforcement routinely forces detainees in politically motivated cases to “repent” their “crimes” on camera under duress and disseminates such videos online.

Belarusian authorities harass political prisoners upon their release by subjecting them to regular checks and opening new criminal cases.

### Retaliation against Family Members and Supporters

Belarusian authorities target family members of political prisoners and activists providing support to them.

In January, authorities labeled INeedHelpBY, a group organizing food aid for political prisoners and their families, as “extremist”. As a result, law enforcement raided, detained, and questioned at least 287 recipients of food. More than 100 recipients faced administrative fines and arrests on charges of “receiving foreign aid for terrorist and extremist activities.”

In June and July, law enforcement officers raided the homes of 21 exiled independent journalists and forced their family members to record videos condemning them.

Authorities also prosecuted dozens of people for “financing terrorism” and “extremism” following their donations to funds providing aid to political prisoners and civic resistance funds deemed “extremist” or “terrorist.” Law enforcement officers forced many to pay bribes to avoid prosecution.

## **Crackdown on Human Rights Defenders, Lawyers, and Journalists**

In 2024, Belarusian authorities continued to arbitrarily detain rights defenders and journalists in retaliation for their work.

At least six rights defenders remained behind bars at time of writing, including Anastasia Lojka, Ales Bialiatski, Valiantsin Stefanovic, Uladzimir Labkovich, Marfa Rabkova, and Andrei Chapiuk. Bialiatski’s health deteriorated in detention.

In May, the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention found that human rights defender Ales Bialiatski had been arbitrarily detained and demanded his immediate and unconditional release.

At least 37 journalists and media workers were also behind bars at time of writing.

Lawyers representing clients in politically motivated cases or speaking out on rights abuses faced systematic and widespread repression. At time of writing, at least six human rights lawyers—Maksim Znak, Aliaksandr Danilevich, Vital Brahinet, Anastasiya Lazarenka, Yuliya Yurhilevich, and Aliaksei Barodka—were serving prison sentences on politically motivated charges ranging from six to ten years.

In December 2023, the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention found that the arrests and subsequent imprisonment of human rights lawyer Vital Brahinet were arbitrary and based on his political opinion and status as a lawyer for the political opposition. The working group called for his immediate release.

Authorities in 2024 also continued arbitrarily blocking and labeling as “extremist” the websites and social media pages of independent media and human rights groups. In April, the Operation and Analysis Center controlled by the presidency adopted a directive, allowing the Operations and Analysis Center under the

President of the Republic of Belarus to disconnect websites deemed “extremist” from the country’s national domain system (.by), which effectively closes them.

By mid-November 2024, authorities had shut down almost 1,200 non-governmental organizations.

## **Parliament Elections and Crackdown on Political Opposition**

On February 25, 2024, elections to the House of Representatives (lower chamber of parliament) and local councils of deputies (local representative bodies) took place in Belarus. “Human rights defenders for free elections” documented numerous violations of international standards on free and fair elections.

In November, law enforcement carried out more than 100 raids in connection with elections to the Coordination Council, a non-government body seeking a democratic transition in Belarus and presenting itself as a collective representative body of the democratic part of Belarusian society. Following the raids, authorities sentenced in absentia 20 activists, journalists, and academics for purported affiliation with opposition leader Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya. In May, when the election to the council took place, authorities also opened criminal cases against 257 people whose names were on the list of candidates.

## **Politically Motivated Repression of Belarusians in Exile**

In 2024, authorities prosecuted dozens of Belarusian exiles in absentia on politically motivated grounds, in violation of fair trial guarantees.

Authorities routinely checked the phones of Belarusians returning from abroad and increasingly detained people for following independent media labeled as “extremist,” having photos of the 2020 protests, or donating to funds deemed “extremist.”

## **Crackdown on Individuals Opposing the War in Ukraine**

Belarus has allowed Russian forces to use the country’s territory since the beginning of Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Open source data suggests Belarusian authorities have facilitated the illegal forcible transfers of over 2,000 Ukrainian children from Russia-occupied territories in Ukraine to Belarus.

In 2024, Belarusian authorities prosecuted individuals for expressing support for Ukraine, sharing photos of Russian troop movement with the media, or donating to the Kastus Kalinoŭski Regiment, a unit composed of Belarusians fighting for Ukraine.

## Death Penalty

Belarus remains the only country in Europe to carry out the death penalty.

In April, the UN Human Rights Committee found violations of the rights of Siamion Berazhny and Ihar Hershankou who were executed in 2018, including their right to a fair trial and right to life.

In June, the Minsk regional court sentenced to death German citizen Rico Krieger, convicted under six articles of the Criminal Code, including “terrorism,” “extremism,” and “rendering transport or communication routes unusable.” On July 30, Lukashenka pardoned Krieger and two days later Krieger was released as a part of a major prisoner swap between Russia and the US and Germany.

In October, the Minsk regional court sentenced Alexander Taratuta, convicted of murder, to death.

## Migrants

As in recent years, migrants, including children, continued to be stuck on the Belarusian side of the border with Poland and faced serious abuses by Belarusian officials. Human rights organizations recorded deaths of migrants on both sides of the border.

## International Accountability

In September, Lithuania referred the situation in Belarus to the prosecutor of the International Criminal Court (ICC), who then opened a preliminary examination of the situation. In September, human rights groups submitted a new report to the ICC prosecutor alleging Belarus’s involvement in displacement and indoctrination of Ukrainian children.

In April, the UN Human Rights Council established a Group of Independent Experts on the Human Rights Situation in Belarus to investigate and support accountability for international crimes committed by the Belarusian authorities. In the same resolution, the Human Rights Council renewed the mandate of its special rapporteur on Belarus.

In response to the ongoing internal repression, the EU and other key international actors adopted new rounds of sanctions against Belarusian authorities.

Language English

World Report Year

World Report 2025

Image

202412eca\_belarus\_wr

Country

Belarus

Subtitle

Events of 2024

Teaser

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Chapter Type

Country Update

Table of Contents

1. Torture and Ill-Treatment of Political Prisoners
2. Crackdown on Human Rights Defenders, Lawyers, and Journalists
3. Parliament Elections and Crackdown on Political Opposition
4. Politically Motivated Repression of Belarusians in Exile
5. Crackdown on Individuals Opposing the War in Ukraine
6. Death Penalty
7. Migrants
8. International Accountability

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**Source URL:** <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2025/country-chapters/belarus>