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World Report 2024



Belarus

Events of 2023

Activists gather in support of 'Freedom to Political Prisoners of Belarus' on Sunday, May 21, 2023, at the Market Square in Krakow, Poland .

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In 2023, widespread repression of government critics in Belarus continued. At time of writing, almost 1,500 people remained behind bars on politically motivated charges, including human rights defenders, journalists, lawyers, opposition politicians, culture workers, trade unionists, and activists. Authorities increasingly subjected political prisoners to incommunicado detention, torture, and other forms of ill-treatment.

Belarus continued to allow Russian forces to use the country's territory in Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

In February, the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) reported on systematic, widespread, and gross human rights violations committed in Belarus, concluding that some may amount to crimes against humanity.

The humanitarian crisis at the European Union borders continued. Over the past year, migrants, including children, continued to be stuck on the Belarusian side of the border and faced serious abuses by Belarusian officials and risk of death.

Arrest and Detention of Perceived Opponents

Between October 2022 and September 2023, according to leading Belarusian human rights organization Viasna, more than 400 people were sentenced on politically motivated criminal charges, and another 3,300 faced politically motivated administrative charges. At time of writing, Viasna's count of political prisoners was 1,462.

Authorities used a variety of bogus charges to prosecute their critics, including “defamation” charges over insulting Aliaksandr Lukashenka or Belarusian government or state symbols, “inciting enmity” against the “social group of law enforcement officers,” or “violent acts or threat of violence against law enforcement officers.” Authorities also widely used charges related to “extremism” and “terrorism” against critics for actions such as leaving critical comments on social media, following “extremist” Telegram channels, or having a white-red-white tattoo.

Belarusian authorities continued detaining and prosecuting people in connection with peaceful protests in 2020, including some who returned to Belarus from abroad. Workers of state companies faced mass layoffs in connection with their alleged participation in the protests.

In 2023, authorities subjected family members of political prisoners to arbitrary searches, detentions, interrogations, and other forms of harassment. In January, a court in Brest sentenced Daria Losik to two years' imprisonment on charges of “aiding extremist activity” over an interview she gave about her incarcerated husband, a popular blogger and journalist, Ihar Losik, to independent broadcaster Belsat, which Belarusian authorities had labeled extremist. Her sentencing left the Losiks' 4-year-old daughter in the care of her grandparents.

In February 2023, a court in Zhodino handed down an additional one-and-a-half-year sentence to former presidential contender Siarhei Tsikhanouski over his supposed “malicious disobedience to the demands of the prison administration.” Tsikhanouski was already serving 18 years in prison for “organizing mass protests.”

In July, the Minsk regional court sentenced Eduard Babaryka, son of former presidential contender Viktor Babaryka and a member of his campaign team, to eight years in prison for “tax evasion,” “enmity incitement,” and “aiding activities gravely violating public order.”

Between July and October, Belarusian authorities denied registration to all opposition political parties, registering only [four](#) pro-government parties.

Crackdown on Human Rights Defenders and Lawyers

In March, the Lenin District Court of Minsk handed down prison sentences to three human rights defenders from Viasna, which had been hit particularly hard by the authorities, in retaliation for their work. Ales Bialiatski, head of the group and a 2022 Nobel Peace Prize co-laureate; Valiantsin Stefanovich, his deputy; and Uladzimir Labkovich, one of the group's lawyers, were respectively sentenced to ten, nine and seven years in prison. Viasna's board member Zmitser Salauyou was sentenced to eight years in absentia.

Two other members of Viasna, Maria (Marfa) Rabkova and Andrey Chapiuk, remained behind bars, serving their respective sentences of 15 and 6 years. Leanid Sudalenka, chairman of Viasna's Homiel branch, was released in July, having served his three-year sentence in full.

Authorities increasingly labeled human rights organizations as “extremist.” In March, the Belarusian Association of Journalists (BAJ), a leading rights group working to protect freedom of expression and the rights of journalists, and some of its individual staff members, were designated “extremist.” In August, Viasna was designated as an “extremist formation.”

In June, the Minsk City Court sentenced prominent human rights defender Nasta (Anastasia) Loika to seven years in prison for “inciting enmity” against law enforcement officers over her report documenting rights violations perpetrated by police. Loika had served six arbitrary administrative arrest sentences prior to facing criminal charges. During her short-term arrests and then in pretrial custody, authorities subjected her to torture and other forms of inhumane treatment, forced her to record “confession” videos, vilified her in smear campaigns, searched her mother’s home, and disbarred her lawyers.

Between October 2022 and October 2023, authorities prosecuted at least 24 independent trade union members on politically motivated charges.

Authorities continued cracking down on human rights lawyers in retaliation for representing clients in politically motivated cases and expressing their views on rule of law issues. Since August 2020, more than 100 attorneys have lost their licenses following arbitrary decisions of the Justice Ministry or politically motivated disbarment procedures. At time of writing, six attorneys remained behind bars on politically motivated charges such as "call for sanctions," "creation of an extremist formation," "aiding extremist activity," and "inciting enmity."

Crackdown on Journalists and Harassment of Students

According to BAJ, between October 2022 and mid-September 2023, at least 7 media workers were detained on criminal charges and 20 more were subjected to administrative arrest. At time of writing, at least 34 media workers remained in prison on politically motivated charges varying from “discreditation of Belarus” to “creation of an extremist formation.” Dozens faced police raids.

Authorities label independent media outlets and social media channels as "extremist." They characterize any form of communication with them as "aiding extremist activity" and have said that following and sharing their content constitutes “dissemination of extremist materials.”

Authorities regularly prosecute those who expressed disapproval of Russia’s war against Ukraine and Belarus’s role in it, including by publicly speaking out or showing disagreement in other ways.

Freedom of opinion and expression in schools has also deteriorated. Children who express dissenting opinions face insults and threats of expulsion, and their parents risk job loss or the suspension of parental rights.

Torture and Ill-Treatment of Political Prisoners

Throughout 2023, political prisoners continued to face torture and ill-treatment during short-term arrests and in detention, including in pre-trial custody and penal colonies.

Law enforcement officers routinely subjected detainees in politically motivated cases to the degrading practice of “repent videos,” forcing them to confess their “crimes” on camera.

Since February 2022, Belarusian authorities have held dozens of jailed opposition politicians, rights defenders, attorneys, journalists, and other political prisoners in prolonged incommunicado detention. Prolonged incommunicado detention is a form of inhuman treatment that may constitute torture or an enforced disappearance.

Political prisoners face beatings and arbitrary confinement in punishment cells for supposed violations of penitentiary regulations that are then used as a pretext for harsher prison treatment. Increasingly, political prisoners face new criminal charges, including for violating prison rules, resulting in consecutive lengthy prison sentences.

Lack of health care in penitentiary facilities has led to serious health issues for some detainees, including key opposition figure Maria Kalesnikava and opposition presidential candidate Viktar Babaryka, both of whom were admitted to a hospital for urgent surgery after being denied adequate care in custody. At least two political prisoners died behind bars in 2023 due to untreated illness.

Politically Motivated Repression of Belarusians in Exile

Since September 2022, Belarusian authorities initiated at least 31 “special procedure” criminal cases, including against opposition politicians, human rights defenders, and activists. A so-called special procedure provides for trials to take place without the presence of defendants charged with crimes under 43 different articles of the criminal code.

In July, legislative amendments to a 2002 citizenship law entered into force, allowing the president to strip Belarusians abroad of their citizenship if convicted of “participation in an extremist organization” or “grave harm to the interests of Belarus,” including those convicted in absentia.

In September, Aliaksandr Lukashenka signed a decree abolishing the authority of consulates and diplomatic missions to issue, replace, or extend passports or identification cards of Belarusians abroad, making it obligatory for them to travel to Belarus. This exposes people to a risk of politically motivated prosecution upon their return and impedes their basic human rights abroad.

Death Penalty

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

In February, Human Rights Defenders Against Death Penalty in Belarus reported that Viktar Skrundzik, sentenced to death for murder and attempted murder, was executed on July 16, 2022.

In March, amendments to the Criminal Code entered into force, expanding the death penalty to cover the crime of “high treason” for state officials and military personnel.

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

Key International Actors

In 2023, the [EU](#), [Canada](#), the [United States](#), and the [United Kingdom](#) extended and launched further sanctions against Belarus, including against individuals and legal entities, in response to continuing attacks on human rights and involvement in Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.

In February, OHCHR published a report on the run-up to and aftermath of the 2020 presidential election in Belarus pursuant to its [mandate to examine human rights in the country](#), documenting systematic, widespread, and gross human rights violations, some of which, it concluded, may amount to crimes against humanity. In April, the United Nations Human Rights Council extended this mandate for another year. In May, the UN special rapporteur on the human rights situation in Belarus published her annual report, documenting the ongoing deterioration of human rights; the Human Rights Council renewed the mandate of this special rapporteur in July. Also in May, the special rapporteur on the human rights of migrants published a [report](#) on his visit to Belarus from July 16 to 20, 2022, to assess the situation of the human rights of migrants at the border between Belarus and Poland, condemning the use of migrants as a political tool and the loss of migrants’ lives due to pushbacks.

In March, 38 Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) states [invoked](#) the Vienna Human Dimension Mechanism, highlighting the growing number of persons detained for politically motivated reasons. In May, the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human

Rights [presented an expert report](#) documenting widespread violations in Belarus since November 5, 2020.

In June, the International Labour Organization adopted a [resolution](#), noting Belarus' failure to comply with its [2004 Inquiry](#) and requesting that member states review any cooperation with Belarus in response to non-respect of trade union rights in the country.

In July, the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly adopted a declaration and [resolution](#) in support of pro-democratic voices in Belarus, calling on Belarusian authorities to free political prisoners and on OSCE states to support political prisoners.

In July, the Viasna Human Rights Center was awarded the 2023 UN human rights prize.

In September, a Belarusian national [stood trial](#) in St. Gallen, Switzerland, under the legal principle of universal jurisdiction for having participated in the enforced disappearances of three major political opponents in 1999.