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2023 Country Report on Human Rights Practices: Belarus

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

There were no significant changes in the human rights situation in Belarus during the year.

Significant human rights issues included credible reports of: torture or cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment by security forces; harsh and life-threatening prison conditions; arbitrary arrest or detention; serious problems with the independence of the judiciary; political prisoners or detainees; transnational repression against individuals in another country; arbitrary or unlawful interference with privacy; punishment of family members for alleged offenses by a relative; serious abuses in a conflict related to Belarus' complicity in Russia's war against Ukraine; serious restrictions on freedom of expression and media freedom, including violence or threats of violence against journalists, unjustified arrests or prosecutions of journalists, censorship, and the enforcement of criminal libel laws to limit expression; serious restrictions on internet freedom; substantial interference with the freedom of peaceful assembly and freedom of association, including overly restrictive laws on the organization, funding, or operation of nongovernmental and civil society organizations; restrictions on freedom of movement and residence within the territory of a state and on the right to leave the country; inability of citizens to change their government peacefully through free and fair elections; serious and unreasonable restrictions on political participation; serious government corruption; serious government restrictions on and harassment of domestic and international human rights organizations; extensive gender-based violence, including domestic or intimate partner violence; trafficking in persons, including forced labor; crimes involving violence or threats of violence targeting lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or intersex persons; and prohibiting independent trade unions and systematic restrictions on workers' freedom of association.

The government did not take credible steps to identify and punish officials who may have committed human rights abuses, and authorities at all levels generally operated with impunity as directed by authoritarian leader Alyaksandr Lukashenka.

Section 1.

Respect for the Integrity of the Person

A. ARBITRARY DEPRIVATION OF LIFE AND OTHER UNLAWFUL OR POLITICALLY MOTIVATED KILLINGS

There were no reports that the government or its agents committed arbitrary or unlawful killings, including extrajudicial killings, during the year.

B. DISAPPEARANCE

There were no reports of disappearances by or on behalf of government authorities.

C. TORTURE AND OTHER CRUEL, INHUMAN, OR DEGRADING TREATMENT OR PUNISHMENT, AND OTHER RELATED ABUSES

The law prohibited such practices. Nevertheless, the Committee for State Security (KGB), riot police, and other security forces, often without identification and wearing street clothes and masks, regularly used excessive force indiscriminately against detainees, peaceful protesters, members of the independent media, and ordinary citizens. Security forces also reportedly abused and mistreated individuals during investigations. As reported by human rights nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), police regularly beat and tortured persons during detentions and arrests. Human rights groups also reported abuses in police custody, including severe beatings; psychological humiliation, such as forcing detainees to undress to humiliate them; videotaped forced confessions made public on social media; and other efforts to exhaust detainees mentally and physically. For example, at least seven riot police officers arrested Minsk resident Uladzimir Paulavets on August 4 and reportedly beat him. Police released his confession video, in which Paulavets had bruises on his face and said that he followed banned “extremist” social media pages and subscribed to the opposition-run *Victory* Telegram chatbot.

Instances of rape and sexual abuse by security forces were reported. Those appearing to be members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersex (LGBTQI+) community were often specifically targeted for abuses. For example, some LGBTQI+ individuals said they were harassed and mocked over their identities and threatened with sexual abuse during interrogations and arrests.

Reports of torture were prevalent in detention facilities and prisons across the country. In particular, human rights organizations stated the detention facility and prison located on Akrestsina Lane in Minsk were notorious for torturing detainees. They argued that the officers and doctors of those two facilities created dehumanizing conditions amounting to torture during the year. Authorities at these facilities were known to place homeless persons with communicable diseases, fleas, bedbugs, and lice in overcrowded cells with political prisoners. Penal colony No. 1 in Navapolatsk was also notorious for severe beatings and reported torture under its former director, Andrei Palchyk, who was believed to have been removed from his position as of March. According to former inmates’ extensive evidence, Palchyk either engaged in beatings himself or instructed his subordinates to torture and harass prisoners, who were subsequently placed in isolation wards to hide injuries. The penal colony’s medical personnel did not provide adequate treatment for injuries and beatings, and internal investigations into beatings, if any, did not result in punishment.

Independent media reported on March 20 that political prisoner Ihar Losik, serving his sentence at the penal colony No. 1 in Navapolatsk, attempted to commit suicide by cutting his wrists and neck to protest weeklong solitary confinement and mistreatment. Separately, former inmates and family members of political prisoners reported that administrations of the penal colonies for women No. 4 in Homyel and No. 24 in Zharecha also rigidly enforced restrictions and mistreated political prisoners, isolating and beating them, and not providing medical assistance.

Impunity for abuses remained a serious problem in the security forces. As of year’s end, there was no indication authorities had investigated or intended to take any action against officers involved in widespread human rights abuses following the 2020 presidential election. Among the myriad unpunished abuses by authorities documented after the 2020 election were severe beatings; psychological humiliation; the use of stress positions; at least one reported case of rape and sexual abuse; use of electric shock devices; excessive use of tear gas; and up to three days of deprivation of food, drinking water, hygiene products, the use of toilets, sleep, and medical assistance. Conversely, the government prosecuted former law enforcement and security officers who tried to launch investigations against their colleagues or individuals who advised officials who were dismissed for political reasons or resigned in protest of police violence.

For example, on April 27, the Minsk City Court convicted in absentia former Internal Affairs Ministry officer Stanislau Lupanosau on charges of state treason, abuse of power, and making unauthorized copies of government data, after Lupanosau defected in protest of the regime’s

violence against peaceful protesters and ordinary citizens and joined the Warsaw-based Association of Security Forces of Belarus. The court sentenced him to 18 years in a high-security prison, fined him 48,100 rubles (\$15,500), and banned him from holding any state official positions for five years.

Prison and Detention Center Conditions

Prison conditions were harsh and life threatening, especially for political prisoners, due to insufficient nutrition and potable water, lack of access to medical care, physical abuse, gross overcrowding or confinement in isolation cells for long periods of time, and inadequate sanitary conditions.

Abusive Physical Conditions: According to former prison inmates and human rights lawyers, gross overcrowding; lack of access to food, potable water, medicine, warm clothing, personal hygiene products, and bedding; inadequate access to basic or emergency medical care; and confinement in cells for long periods without an opportunity for movement, exercise, or use of showers or sanitary facilities remained serious problems. Such conditions were especially common in facilities that held political prisoners. Inmates reported prison officials deliberately targeted them as a form of retribution for opposing the regime and exercising fundamental freedoms. According to human rights groups, political prisoner Paulina Sharenda-Panasiuk undertook a seven-day hunger strike in protest of detention conditions in Rechytsa. On August 30, prison officials moved her to a pretrial detention facility in Homyel and allowed her to receive correspondence, food parcels, and money. While Sharenda-Panasiuk was due to be released on August 6 after completion of her term served, authorities charged her with additional arbitrary infractions, such as maliciously and repeatedly disobeying prison regulations. Former prisoners reported fellow inmates beat Sharenda-Panasiuk in June, citing a broken bridge of her nose and two bruised eyes. In 2021 and 2022, the Homyel women's prison administration placed Sharenda-Panasiuk in solitary confinement for more than 80 days, banning her from walking outdoors and from taking showers. The administration reportedly penalized her for refusing to work and violating other internal prison regulations.

On June 11, prominent artist and political prisoner Ales Pushkin, age 57, who was sentenced to five years' imprisonment in 2022, died in the intensive care unit at a hospital in Hrodna, where he was transported unconscious from a local high-security jail. Pushkin reportedly had ulcers, peritonitis, and multiple organ failure, aggravated by the poor quality of prison food and lack of medical care.

Administration: While there were isolated reports that authorities conducted investigations of credible allegations of mistreatment, they did not publicly release any conclusions or reports of any officials held liable for maintaining conditions that raised human rights concerns. Former prisoners and their lawyers reported prison officials often censored or did not forward their complaints to higher authorities and prison administrators either ignored or selectively considered requests for investigation of alleged abuses, which were subsequently dismissed as unjustified. Prisoners also reported prison administrators frequently refused to provide them with copies of responses to their complaints, which further complicated their defense. Complaints could result in retaliation against prisoners, including humiliation, death threats, or other forms of punishment and harassment.

Former prisoners claimed some prison administrators' repeated harassment resulted in suicides, which authorities neither investigated nor made public. For example, on June 5, independent media reported local poet, painter, and marketing specialist Dzmitry Sarokin, age 37, died at a district police precinct in Lida. His associates said police had previously detained Sarokin on politically motivated allegations several times and failed to identify reasons for his arrest or investigate his death.

Independent Monitoring: Authorities prohibited any observation of detention conditions by independent observers, hindering the verification of conditions former political prisoners reported as purposefully squalid and designed to punish individuals for their political dissent.

D. ARBITRARY ARREST OR DETENTION

The law prohibited arbitrary detention and provided for the right of any persons to challenge the lawfulness of their arrest or detention in court, but authorities routinely ignored these requirements. Authorities, including plainclothes security officers, continued to routinely arrest and detain thousands of individuals throughout the year for exercising fundamental freedoms, opposing Lukashenka's dictatorship, or for actively supporting the prodemocracy movement.

Arrest Procedures and Treatment of Detainees

By law, police were required to request permission from a prosecutor to detain a person for more than three hours. Nevertheless, persons were regularly detained without judicial authorization well beyond this limit. Detainees had the right to petition the court system regarding the legality of their detention, but authorities consistently suppressed, ignored, and dismissed such appeals. Appeals to challenge detentions were regularly denied.

According to law, an individual could be detained administratively for up to 72 hours without charge, at which point law enforcement officials were required to make a formal decision on whether the individual should be released (with or without charges) or held longer as a suspect. Prosecutors, investigators, and security-service agencies had legal authority to extend administrative detention without consulting a judge. On March 24, authorities applied amendments prolonging the 72-hour administrative detention period to 10 days for individuals suspected of treason, conspiracy, espionage, or other activities aimed at taking over state power. Authorities often held detainees arrested in cases widely seen as politically motivated for longer than 72 hours. If within the first 72 hours of detention authorities determined an individual was a suspect, authorities could hold the individual for up to 20 days without filing formal charges, and for up to 18 months after filing charges. In some cases, however, authorities detained persons beyond 18 months.

The country had no functioning bail system.

The law stipulated detainees were allowed prompt access to a lawyer of their choice or one provided by the state free of charge, although authorities often delayed extending this right to high-profile political prisoners, who faced authorities without the presence of defense lawyers at the initial stages of an investigation or during interrogations.

During the year, authorities increasingly held individuals arrested on politically motivated allegations incommunicado.

Arbitrary Arrest: Authorities detained academics, political leaders, human rights defenders, journalists, opposition leaders and members, civil society activists, demonstrators, and ordinary citizens for reasons widely considered to be politically motivated. Authorities permitted and abetted security officers in taking an "arrest first, ask questions later" approach with no accountability or repercussions for security officers who made wrongful arrests or committed other abuses during or after arrests. Security officers could arrest at their own discretion, refused to identify themselves, and did not need to announce the reason for arrests. After detaining an individual, security officers forcefully took their cell phones, including messages, social media, contacts, and videos and photographs, all of which was often used as a pretext to charge detainees with "extremist" or opposition activities. Communications with other individuals deemed critical of authorities or Russia's war against Ukraine, or others authorities deemed "extremist," often led police to subsequently detain those interlocutors as well. Authorities also checked whether detainees made donations to so-called extremist organizations and in support of political prisoners, their families, prodemocracy efforts, or foreign resident communities.

On April 5, deputy head of the Internal Affairs Ministry's Main Department for Combating Organized Crime and Corruption Mikhail Bedunkevich in a televised interview said that in March, police interrogated at least 700 individuals for engaging in "extremist" activities, of whom 230

were either fined or arrested for up to 30 days. Bedunkevich elaborated that of those 230, at least 155 were convicted of “extremist” activities.

On January 19, the Brest Regional Court sentenced Darya Losik, spouse of political prisoner and *Radio Liberty* consultant Ihar Losik, to two years in prison under “extremist” charges for giving an interview to the Poland-based Belsat TV concerning her husband’s imprisonment. NGOs and independent media reported Darya was arbitrarily arrested in October 2022 and authorities placed their daughter, age four, into the custody of her grandparents. Human rights organizations believed the regime targeted Darya Losik to retaliate further against her husband.

According to independent media reports, police conducted searches and mass detentions across the country during the weeks ahead of March 25 Freedom Day, an unofficial holiday marking the independence of the Belarus People’s Republic in 1918, commemorated by the democratic opposition but rejected by authorities. Police arrested at least 166 persons and convicted most of “spreading extremist materials” and “participating in an unauthorized event,” even though marches or demonstrations were not held.

Pretrial Detention: Lengthy pretrial detention was a significant problem, particularly for those facing politically motivated charges who were regularly held for indeterminate periods with no sense of when their cases would be heard. Observers believed authorities utilized the pretrial detention process to keep political detainees in a state of psychological and emotional uncertainty. They further believed there were several reasons for delays, including political interference and motivations, additional charges being brought against individuals held in pretrial detention and investigations opened, new investigators taking over cases, cases that were complicated because they involved many suspects, and cases that required extensive forensic or other expert examinations and analysis. Generally, the period of pretrial detention was accurately calculated and subtracted from the final length of the conviction and the length of pretrial detention did not exceed the statutory maximum sentence for charged crimes. There were some cases, however, in which this did not occur.

For example, Eduard Babaryka was arrested with his father in 2020 and remained in pretrial detention until he was convicted on July 5 and sentenced to eight years’ imprisonment on charges of tax evasion, inciting social hatred, and facilitating mass riots, which observers deemed politically motivated. The prosecutor told the state press after the trial that although Babaryka was kept in pretrial detention since his 2020 arrest, his time served would only count starting from December 2021, when prosecutors filed additional charges against him.

E. DENIAL OF FAIR PUBLIC TRIAL

The constitution provided for an independent judiciary, but authorities did not respect judicial independence and impartiality. Observers believed corruption, inefficiency, and political interference with judicial decisions were widespread. Courts convicted individuals on false and politically motivated charges brought by prosecutors, and observers believed that senior government leaders and local authorities dictated or predetermined the outcomes of trials.

According to human rights groups, prosecutors and investigators wielded excessive and imbalanced authority because they could extend detention periods without the permission of judges. Defense lawyers were often unable to examine investigation files, attend investigations and interrogations, or examine evidence against defendants until a prosecutor formally brought the case to court. Lawyers found it difficult to challenge evidence because the Prosecutor’s Office controlled all technical expertise. According to many defense attorneys, this power imbalance was especially seen in politically motivated criminal and administrative cases. All communications between defense lawyers and their clients were monitored in pretrial detention.

The law prohibited defense lawyers from working either independently or for private law firms and required them instead to work in Ministry of Justice-approved “legal bureaus.” The state-controlled National Bar Association oversaw operations of legal bureaus in the country.

On March 29, defense lawyers reported receiving a letter from the Ministry of Justice, which ordered heads of bureaus to provide personal data and information on the details of all consultations provided to foreign citizens in the country except for Russian citizens. According to the letter, the foreign citizens would not be informed of the collection and transfer of such information.

According to a 2022 follow-up to a 2021 report by Lawyers for Lawyers, the International Bar Association Human Rights Institute, and the American Bar Association, authorities engaged in tactics that interfered with the independence of lawyers. The 2021 report noted “decisions about the continued practice of lawyers within the legal profession are not made by an independent entity,” such as a bar association, but rather by the Ministry of Justice. There were reports of retaliatory prosecution, convictions, and disbarment of defense lawyers, including disbarment and revocation of licenses. The 2022 addendum noted “most, if not all, of these lawyers represented opposition leaders and protestors or themselves engaged in protests or publicly criticized the Lukashenka government.” For example, on March 20, police detained at least five defense lawyers, including Inesa Alenskaya, Artsyom Semyanou, Ivan Chyzhyk, Yury Kozikau, and Uladzimir Stashkevich, for disseminating “extremist” materials. All but Semyanou were released, and the latter served a 15-day sentence. Subsequently, the Justice Ministry disbarred them.

During the year, the Justice Ministry disbarred dozens of other defense lawyers and arrested a number on various politically motivated charges, including for their purported dissemination of information regarding prosecutors, judges, and other public officials engaged in various politically motivated court cases. For example, on February 2, the Minsk City Court convicted behind closed doors and sentenced to eight years in a high-security prison lawyer and defense counsel Vitaly Brahinetz on charges of participating in an “extremist” organization, calling for sanctions, and other actions harming national security, inciting social hatred, and participating in actions grossly violating public order. Human rights groups recognized six attorneys as political prisoners as of September.

Trial Procedures

The law provided for the right to a fair and public trial, but authorities systematically disregarded this right. Further, trials for those facing politically motivated charges were regularly held behind closed doors. In many politically motivated cases, authorities extended investigations, leaving detainees jailed without knowledge of when their trials would commence.

The law provided for the presumption of innocence. Nevertheless, the lack of judicial independence, political interference from the highest levels of government, the state media’s practice of reporting on high-profile cases as if guilt were already certain, and the widespread limits on defense rights regularly denied defendants the presumption of innocence.

By law, criminal defendants could be held up to 10 or 20 days, depending on the statute charged, without being notified of charges. Authorities followed this law.

The law provided defendants the right to attend proceedings, but defendants were not always present. Some hearings on administrative charges were held via Skype from police precincts or pretrial holding facilities. Except for cases in which individuals were tried in absentia, defendants generally appeared before court in person.

The law provided for access to legal counsel for the defendant and required courts to appoint a lawyer for those who could not afford one. The law provided for the right to choose legal representation freely; however, a presidential decree prohibited NGO members who were lawyers from representing individuals other than members of their own organizations in court. Authorities’ attempts to disbar attorneys who represented political opponents of the government further limited defendants’ choice of counsel. Authorities also required defense attorneys to sign nondisclosure statements that prohibited them from releasing any information regarding the case to the public, media, or defendants’ family members. During the year, at least 25 defense attorneys were

penalized or disbarred after they provided or attempted to provide a sound defense for political prisoners.

In cases of administrative charges, including for participation in unauthorized peaceful protests, resisting law enforcement officers, and hooliganism, judges often did not inform arrested individuals of their right to defense counsel, prevented defendants from hiring an attorney, and dismissed counsels' requests for additional witnesses testifying at trials.

By law, defendants had to have adequate time to prepare a defense. Facilities, however, were not adequate, and in most cases meetings with lawyers were denied, restricted, or were not confidential.

Although by law defendants could ask for their trials to be conducted in Belarusian, many judges and prosecutors were not fluent in this language, rejected motions for interpreters, and proceeded in Russian, one of the official languages of the country. Interpreters were provided when the defendant spoke neither Belarusian nor Russian.

The law allowed defendants to confront witnesses and present evidence on their own behalf, but authorities regularly denied these rights. In addition, riot police or other security officers who testified against defendants in these cases did not identify themselves or testified wearing balaclavas due to "concern for their security."

By law, defendants could not be compelled to testify or confess guilt. In many cases, however, authorities reportedly compelled or coerced suspects to testify against themselves or other suspects, including confessing their guilt, in politically motivated cases or those in which authorities did not have compelling evidence. In such cases, authorities reportedly claimed sentences would be more lenient or defendants would receive other benefits if they confessed or testified against themselves. Human rights activists claimed these tactics were coercive and politically motivated. There were also reports of authorities physically coercing suspects into signing confessions and other statements, including pardon requests predicated on admission of guilt. Courts often allowed statements obtained by force and threats of bodily harm during interrogations to be used against defendants.

Authorities coerced political prisoners into signing pardons that included admissions of guilt and payments to the state as "compensation" for their "offenses." Authorities often filmed such "confessions" and publicly showed videos in which the defendants demonstrated physical signs of having been subjected to severe abuse.

Defendants had the right to appeal convictions, and many did so, but appeals courts upheld the verdicts of the lower courts in most cases.

Political Prisoners and Detainees

Local human rights groups collectively maintained what was widely considered a credible and authoritative list of political prisoners in the country. During the year the list, which appeared on human rights group Vyasna's website, contained more than 1,500 names, including leading political opposition figures and their staff.

According to human rights defenders, the government regularly and falsely charged peaceful dissidents, journalists, members of the democratic opposition, and ordinary citizens with violence, "extremism" or "attempted extremism," and other charges without evidence. These charges generally attempted to equate the perpetuation of the regime with national security, arguing that anyone who did not support the regime was a national security threat, in effect criminalizing the political opinions of the opposition and others exercising fundamental freedoms. Authorities described and prosecuted peaceful political opponents, organizations, independent journalists, and the general expression of fundamental freedoms as "extremist" or "terrorist" threats to national security, government officials, or government supporters. The number of individuals on the regime's list of "extremists" increased by more than 1,000 during the year, reaching more than 3,300 by October.

Political prisoners were routinely and deliberately subjected to inhuman prison conditions. High-profile political prisoners were routinely held incommunicado, denied access to their defense lawyer, and denied contact with family members.

For example, independent sources reported that on April 25, Navapolatsk prison authorities transported political prisoner and former presidential candidate Viktor Babaryka to the hospital with injuries so severe that doctors failed to recognize him until they saw his name on admission documents. Babaryka was ultimately diagnosed with a collapsed lung. Prison administrators thereafter reportedly continued to subject him to degrading treatment, holding him incommunicado, placing him in a punishment cell, and denying him letters and parcels. Neither the hospital nor prison administrators informed Babaryka's family of his whereabouts or condition until July 17, when his relatives met with prison officials, who told them Babaryka was in a solitary cell and was banned from calling or visiting with family. Individuals relaying information regarding political prisoners were also subjected to harassment and arbitrary arrests. For example, on May 17, police detained six doctors from the Navapolatsk central city hospital where Babaryka was held after leaks regarding his health appeared in the media.

Authorities targeted political prisoners for additional penalties and extension of sentences based on minor or alleged violations of prison regulations. Former political prisoners (including those charged with "extremist" or destructive behavior) recounted they were immediately discriminated against upon their detention, including identification with a special yellow patch on their prison uniform, which signaled to guards to scrutinize their behavior for minor, often arbitrary infractions, such as not properly buttoning uniforms. Multiple infractions could result in placement into solitary confinement or an extension of their term.

For example, on January 16, the Investigative Committee reported it had charged political prisoner and former presidential candidate Syarhey Tsikhanouski with insubordination to prison administration's orders. On February 27, authorities added 18 months to Tsikhanouski's 18-year term for "malicious disobedience."

Authorities prevented human rights or humanitarian organizations from visiting political prisoners. Former political detainees said they lacked the same protections as nonpolitical detainees and were punished in detention and often subjected to more severe abuse and poorer conditions than other prisoners. Former political prisoners were unable to exercise some civil and political rights. Others, especially those deemed "extremists," described yearslong probation-like periods due to pending criminal records in which they were effectively confined to house arrest or subjected to other restrictions. According to accounts, this included sometimes daily random visits by authorities and requirements to undergo weekly sessions of "patriotic reeducation," in which they were questioned and forced to watch propaganda videos.

Political prisoners were detained for purportedly committing a number of crimes, including most commonly: incitement of hatred; illegal collection and dissemination of information; defamation; insulting a government official; intentional destruction or damage to property; unlawful acts involving firearms, ammunition, and explosives; malicious hooliganism; money laundering; bribe taking; tax evasion; destruction of official documents; acts of terrorism or attempted acts of terrorism; intentional damage of a vehicle or communication lines; organization and preparation of actions that grossly violate public order, or active participation in them; high treason; unauthorized access to computer information; calls for actions aimed at causing harm to national security; resisting a police officer or other person guarding public order; fraud committed by an organized group or on a large scale; violence or threat of violence against law enforcement and security officials; incitement of hatred; illegal border crossing; participation in a criminal or extremist organization; conspiracy to seize power in an unconstitutional manner; creation of an extremist formation; financing the activities of an extremist group; attempted murder of a police officer; illicit trafficking of narcotic drugs; desecration of state symbols; organization or participation in riots; obstruction of the exercise of electoral rights; justifying Nazism; and abuse of historical and cultural values.

Authorities also attempted to assert without evidence that those in political opposition to the regime, independent journalists, and those active in civic engagement or otherwise exercising

fundamental freedoms were “extremists” and “terrorists” or supportive of fascism. The government refused to acknowledge the existence of political prisoners and asserted all detainees had committed criminal or civil offenses, despite evidence provided by human rights groups and activists indicating the political nature of their arrests, detentions, and convictions under the government-controlled judiciary.

Amnesty: In December 2022, Lukashenka signed into law an amnesty bill that state media reported would commute sentences or grant clemency to more than 8,000 persons, but which human rights organizations said completely excluded political prisoners. According to the Internal Affairs Ministry, at least 4,545 persons would be granted relief from court-ordered sentences and punitive measures, including prison, and approximately 4,000 others would see their terms reduced by a year. While the ministry did not release any information on final results of the amnesty, which took approximately six months to implement, during the year, it did not extensively apply to those convicted of “extremist” or “terrorist” activities, excluding hundreds of political prisoners falsely convicted of such crimes. Along with these designations, the amnesty excluded other crimes most often applied to political prisoners, including participating or organizing mass riots; establishing or participating in an extremist formation; incitement of racial, national, religious, or other social hatred or discord; preparing or waging war; terrorist acts; applying violence against police; or insulting and slandering the president, public servants, or officials.

On February 18, a Minsk district court convicted in absentia the country’s former Ambassador to Argentina and head of the democratic opposition’s office in Brussels, Uladzimir Astapenka, on charges of attempting to seize state property on a large scale by abusing state powers and sentenced him to five years in prison and a fine of 18,500 rubles (\$6,000). According to the prosecutors, Astapenka was subject to amnesty, and his sentence was reduced by one year.

Some individuals were pardoned fully during the year. There were reports that political prisoners were cajoled into admitting their guilt and formally requesting pardons directly to Lukashenka, but these steps did not guarantee conditional pardons, since authorities pointed to other arbitrary reasons to bar their release during the pardon process. As part of the pardon process, political prisoners were sometimes encouraged to obtain a guarantor for their release. Under the law, the guarantor could be fined if the pardoned individual did not comply with the conditions of release. On April 16, independent media reported that authorities pardoned nine defendants in the criminal case against popular independent news portal *Tut.by*, shut down in 2021 and declared an “extremist” group, who were detained in May 2021 and charged with facilitating tax evasion. The nine defendants filed petitions for pardon in December 2022.

On February 6, Lukashenka signed a decree to consider applications of exiled citizens charged with offences, effectively forming a commission to allow political exiles a means to return. The decree stated that citizens who had committed administrative offenses or “protest-related crimes” in 2020 but were afraid to return due to their possible prosecution could send applications to the commission through December 31. Those applying would be obligated “to repent for their activities, compensate damages, abide by the constitution and legislation, respect state symbols and national traditions, and consciously and actively fulfill their civic duty.” The commission, whose members included the prosecutor general, the foreign minister and other ministers, members of parliament, state media propagandists, and political analysts, would vote on the application, and if it were accepted, the citizen could return within three months.

F. TRANSNATIONAL REPRESSION

Authorities engaged in acts of transnational repression to intimidate or exact reprisal against individuals outside of the country, including exiled democratic opposition leaders, civil society activists, human rights defenders, trade unionists, lawyers, students, journalists, and others who fled repression in the country. In particular, the regime carried out kidnappings and forced returns; opened politically motivated investigations against prodemocracy activists, members of the democratic opposition, and their family members; held trials in absentia; regularly abused Interpol

notices; and frequently harassed exiles, subjecting them to surveillance and threatening them with violence.

On January 18, the Minsk City Court convicted in absentia Yanina Sazanovich, Dzmitry Navosha, Daniil Bahdanovich, Valerya Zaniamonskaya, and Volha Vysotskaya – who reportedly administered the Telegram channel Black Book of Belarus from exile. The five were charged with inciting social hatred and illegally handling personally identifiable information of law enforcement officers, prosecutors, judges, and other public officials. The court sentenced each to 12 years in prison.

On March 6, the Minsk City Court convicted in absentia democratic leader Svyatlana Tsikhanouskaya, deputy head of the United Transitional Cabinet Pavel Latushka, Coordination Council leaders Volha Kavalkova and Syarhey Dyleuski, and Tsikhanouskaya's presidential campaign team leader, Maria Maroz, on multiple criminal accounts, including conspiring to take over state powers in an unconstitutional manner; creating and leading an "extremist" group; calling for action, including sanctions, to harm national security; and inciting social hatred. Latushka, sentenced to 18 years, was also convicted of abuse of powers and corruption. The court sentenced Tsikhanouskaya to 15 years in prison and a fine of 29,600 rubles (\$11,000). All five defendants' property and financial assets in the country were also confiscated. They lived in Lithuania and Poland at the time of their convictions.

Extraterritorial Killing, Kidnapping, Forced Returns, or Other Violence or Threats of Violence: Authorities were credibly alleged to have kidnapped persons or used violence or threats of violence against individuals in other countries, including to force their return to the country, for purposes of politically motivated reprisal.

Authorities continued to harass opposition blogger Raman Pratasevich, who was arrested following authorities' May 2021 forced diversion of a Ryanair flight. On May 3, the Minsk Regional Court sentenced Pratasevich to eight years in prison for seizing state powers, acts of "terrorism," insulting the president, disseminating knowingly false information, and other politically motivated charges. Lukashenka pardoned Pratasevich on May 22, and he was subsequently released from house arrest. Sofia Sapega, arrested with Pratasevich, was pardoned by Lukashenka on June 7.

Threats, Harassment, Surveillance, and Coercion: Belarusians outside the country reported instances of harassment, surveillance, and intimidation from individuals suspected of affiliation with the Lukashenka regime. Human rights defenders also reported individuals inside the country were harassed or arrested after their family members fled the country due to fear of repression or joined one of the Belarusian battalions fighting alongside the Ukrainian armed forces. For example, on March 21, riot police visited the home of the father of Dzyanis Urbanovich, an opposition activist and soldier fighting in Ukraine, and forced him to say on camera that his son should leave the Ukrainian armed forces and return home "to serve his time in prison but at least be at home." Political exiles and others who fled the regime's repression reported receiving threats believed to be from authorities. In July deputy head of the Tsikhanouskaya-led United Transitional Cabinet Pavel Latushka told independent media he was receiving death threats for his investigations into the deportation of children from Russia-occupied Ukrainian territories into Belarus.

Authorities repeatedly damaged or destroyed exiled activists' property as a method of retaliation. On July 13, authorities published a video of the ransacked apartment of Dzianis Dudzinski, a former state television journalist who fled the country after the 2020 protests, featuring broken furniture and an opposition white-red-white flag and the Ukrainian flag being tossed into the toilet.

There were reports that authorities pressured relatives of opposition supporters who had fled the country in order to punish or coerce the person who had fled. For example, on February 14, Syarhey Vaitsekhovich, an exiled former employee of the Minsk railroad, member of the independent trade union, and administrator of a Telegram channel of the railway workers' community, said authorities arrested his brother Artsyom, age 15, on trumped-up charges on January 17, conducted multiple searches at his home, and told his parents that if Vaitsekhovich stopped posting on social media, they would release his brother. He linked the blackmail with his

dissemination of information regarding Russian military equipment transfers by rail across the country in 2022 and 2023. As of year's end, Artsyom remained in detention.

Misuse of International Law Enforcement Tools: There were credible reports that authorities attempted to misuse international law enforcement tools for politically motivated reprisals against Belarusians located outside the country. Human rights groups registered detentions based on Interpol notices in some European countries of Belarusian opposition figures and human rights defenders. These individuals were released after additional checks and verifications.

Efforts to Control Mobility: There were reports that the government attempted to control mobility to exact reprisal against citizens abroad by revoking their identity documents and denying them consular services at embassies abroad. This was reportedly aimed at jeopardizing the legal status of these individuals, restricting their movement, provoking their detention in the country where they were located, or forcing them to return to Belarus where they would likely face repression.

On September 4, Lukashenka signed a decree annulling the authority of the country's diplomatic missions to issue, extend, and change passports for all Belarusians abroad. Under the decree, passport services were available only at local departments for citizenship and migration of the Internal Affairs Ministry and the Foreign Ministry in the country. By a separate law signed on the same day, Lukashenka required citizens' physical presence or a power of attorney personally endorsed in Belarus for any transactions involving real estate or vehicles as well inheriting property in the country. After issuing these laws, authorities told exiles to return to Belarus for such services. Some representatives of the diaspora community – most notably political exiles – said they would not return due to fear of politically motivated detentions, torture in prison facilities, and the lack of rule of law to protect them from human rights abuses.

Bilateral Pressure: There were credible reports that Belarusian authorities attempted to exert bilateral pressure on countries, including Lithuania, to take adverse action against Belarusians who fled the country to avoid human rights abuses, politically motivated arrests, and punishment by authorities.

G. PROPERTY SEIZURE AND RESTITUTION

Authorities harassed and pressured opposition leaders and activists through property seizures and confiscation. For example, on July 26, authorities auctioned off an apartment owned by Sergei Tsikhanouski and Svyatlana Tsikhanouskaya, the latter living in exile in Lithuania, as compensation for damages Tsikhanouski allegedly caused to the state.

There were no laws providing for restitution or compensation for immovable private property confiscated during World War II or the Soviet period. In 2019, the government reported that in the previous 11 years it had not received any requests or claims from individuals, NGOs, or any other public organization, either Jewish or foreign, seeking compensation or restitution of any property.

The Department of State's *Justice for Uncompensated Survivors Today (JUST) Act Report* to Congress, released publicly in July 2020, can be found on the Department's website: <https://www.state.gov/reports/just-act-report-to-congress/>.

H. ARBITRARY OR UNLAWFUL INTERFERENCE WITH PRIVACY, FAMILY, HOME, OR CORRESPONDENCE

The law prohibited such actions, but the government routinely did not respect these prohibitions. Authorities used a wide variety of illegal surveillance methods and other forms of unlawful violations of privacy to control dissent and free speech, and to monitor opposition groups, activists, journalists, and ordinary citizens. This included facial recognition, wiretapping, video surveillance, and a network of informers, which deprived persons of privacy.

The law required a warrant before or immediately after conducting a search. The KGB had authority to enter any building at any time, as long as it applied for a warrant within 24 hours after the entry. The regime's full control over the judiciary, however, made the warrant process a formality.

While security officers generally were able to obtain warrants even in politically motivated cases, there were reports authorities entered properties without judicial or other appropriate authorization. After the 2020 presidential election and continuing through 2023, observers reported frequent instances of plainclothes officers forcing entry into private homes or businesses. These officers often refused to show identification or a warrant, or claimed it was sufficient for them to state their affiliation with a government agency and proceed with the entry. Authorities carried out surveillance online.

Under a 2022 decree, all telecom operators and owners of internet resources were required to use the "electronic interaction information system" to communicate with the State Security Service and KGB. There were reports authorities accessed, collected, or used private communications or personal data arbitrarily or unlawfully or without appropriate legal authority. For example, after the 2020 presidential election and afterwards, security officials often threatened detained individuals with violence if they did not unlock their cell phones for review. Officials also threatened individuals at detention facilities with harsher sentences if they did not unlock their confiscated cell phones or laptops. Security officials reportedly treated more harshly individuals with photographs or social media accounts that officials regarded as pro-opposition or that showed security forces committing abuses. Human rights groups also reported multiple cases of political prisoners, serving sentences at probation facilities, being searched and their cell phones checked for subscriptions to alleged "extremist" Messenger chats and other banned online resources.

While the law prohibited authorities from intercepting telephone and other communications without a prosecutor's order, authorities routinely monitored residences, telephones, and computers. Political opposition and civil society activists claimed authorities regularly monitored their conversations and activities. The government collected and obtained personally identifiable information on independent journalists and democratic activists during raids and from confiscated computer equipment.

The law allowed the KGB, the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the special security services, financial intelligence personnel, and certain border guard detachments to use wiretaps. Wiretaps required the permission of a prosecutor, but the lack of prosecutorial independence rendered this requirement meaningless. The Ministry of Communications had authority to terminate the telephone service of persons who violated telephone contracts, which prohibited the use of telephone services for purposes contrary to state interests and public order.

Authorities used internet and social media controls, blocking or filtering of websites and social media platforms, spyware, data analytics, and other forms of internet control and surveillance against a wide swath of the population. According to the 2023 *Freedom on the Net Report* published by the NGO Freedom House, internet freedom declined following the 2020 presidential election with intensified repression against online journalists, activists, and internet users, whom the regime designated as "extremist" or "terrorist." The government employed systematic, sophisticated surveillance techniques to monitor its citizens and control online communications at its discretion and without independent authorization or oversight.

A decree regulating "interaction between telecommunication operators, telecommunication service providers, owners of internet resources, and agencies engaged in operational and search activities" mandated that online resources such as email providers, instant messengers, online stores, and taxi and car-sharing services store user data and provide authorities with remote access to the data. The Operational Analytical Center, which reported directly to Lukashenko, had the authority to obtain direct round-the-clock access to national and subnational databases and information systems of internet resources for the purpose of operational and search activities. All websites designated by these agencies were required to install a system that gave them such access. According to human rights experts, law enforcement and intelligence agencies received and compared

telecommunications data with data from online services, practices that could not be challenged in court due to their covert nature. In addition, website owners and communication providers were required to keep information regarding all services provided to users for at least one year.

After the 2020 election, security officials increased efforts to monitor and infiltrate encrypted Messenger chat groups. According to multiple reports, dozens of political prisoners were implicated based on screen shots from the online messaging platform Telegram chats or from internet protocol addresses acquired when they opened spoofed unsecure links authorities sent to encrypted chats.

The government utilized the Russian-developed System of Operative Investigative Measures, which provided authorities with direct, automated access to communications data from landline telephone networks, mobile service providers, and internet service providers. The country employed a centralized system of video monitoring cameras. Authorities sought surveillance and hacking tools from several countries and developed domestic capacity that linked closed-circuit television cameras in the country and other Commonwealth of Independent States countries and used facial recognition technology.

State television reportedly obtained state surveillance footage and wiretap transcripts from state security services and used it to produce progovernment exposes against the opposition.

Authorities maintained informant networks at state enterprises to identify which workers intended to strike or were agitating for political change, according to political activists.

Family members were reportedly punished for offenses allegedly committed by their relatives. For example, on August 24, the Minsk City Court sentenced to three and one-half years in prison Artsyom Lyabedzka, the son of political dissident and member of democratic leader Tsikhanouskaya's United Transition Cabinet Anatoly Lyabedzka. Police detained Artsyom in March and charged him with financing "extremist" activities by transferring donations to organizations declared as "extremist groups" by authorities.

In cases of politically motivated detentions, some detainees were stripped of parental rights of their children or threatened with removal of children from their custody to punish dissent or for other political purposes. For example, upon political prisoner Tatsiana Pytsko's June 6 arrest, her daughter, age one, was placed at a shelter and later transferred to her grandmother's custody. On November 22, the Supreme Court upheld an appeal filed by Pytsko and changed her conviction from a three-year imprisonment to a three-year suspended sentence for collaborating with the "extremist" Polish-based Belsat TV. Pytsko was subsequently released on November 24 from prison and regained parental rights for her daughter.

I. CONFLICT-RELATED ABUSES

Belarus continued to facilitate and support Russia's invasion of Ukraine by allowing Russia nearly unrestricted use of its territory, airspace, and military facilities, providing major strategic advantage and logistical support. Belarus also allowed Russia to station missile launchers, airplanes, and other munitions to attack Ukrainian targets from Belarusian territory. Throughout the year, Belarus provided medical, material, and logistical support to Russian troops. Human rights organizations asserted these actions made Belarus complicit in Russia's human rights abuses in Ukraine (see Ukraine's 2022 and 2023 *Country Report on Human Rights Practices* for specific abuses).

According to the Yale Humanitarian Research Lab, the Lukashenka regime participated in the systematic transfer of thousands of children from Russia-occupied regions of Ukraine to so-called recreation camps in Belarus. According to the regime's public statements, more than 2,400 children between the ages of six and 17 had been transported from the Donetsk, Kherson, Zaporizhzhia, and Luhansk regions of Ukraine to camps in Belarus since Russia's further invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. The report concluded that these operations were coordinated at the highest levels of the Belarusian and Russian governments and facilitated by each country's security forces and ultranationalist militant groups.

Credible independent human rights organizations claimed Belarus cooperated with Russia, which targeted children for removal and coordinated their transport from occupied regions of Ukraine to Russia and onward to Belarus. The Lukashenka regime housed children in a network of camps in Belarus, where they were subjected to re-education, including military training and pro-Russia nationalist rhetoric that served the political interests of Belarus and Russia. While the regime claimed the children's stays were temporary and that all were returned to their homes in Ukraine, human rights organizations assessed there was insufficient evidence to confirm this. These organizations stated that they were also unable to confirm whether parents and legal guardians had provided free and uncoerced consent, especially as many of the children targeted for forced transfer came from vulnerable populations such as orphans, children with disabilities, adoptees, and children from low-income families. Moreover, human rights organizations argued these actions could contravene accepted protections for children during armed conflict under instruments of international humanitarian law and international human rights law, including the Geneva Convention, to which Russia and Belarus were parties.

Section 2.

Respect for Civil Liberties

A. FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION, INCLUDING FOR MEMBERS OF THE PRESS AND OTHER MEDIA

The constitution provided for freedom of expression, including for members of the press and other media; however, the government did not respect these rights and actively repressed freedom of expression, banned independent media outlets, and arrested journalists. Authorities forced the closure of virtually all independent media outlets and labeled journalist and opposition voices "extremist," giving authorities a legal pretext to detain and prosecute individuals for expressing opposition to the regime or reporting on the regime's abuses. The government passed additional laws in 2021 to make it illegal to report or stream video from unauthorized mass events and expanded authorities' ability to close media outlets. The state press and associated social media propagated views supportive of the president and official policies without giving room for critical voices and actively disparaged the regime's opponents.

Freedom of Expression: Individuals could not criticize government officials or the government publicly or discuss politics or matters of general public interest without fear of reprisal, including prosecution, forced exile, and being subjected to other forms of intimidation and harassment. There were also laws criminalizing libel, "hate speech," and expression of political views, which authorities used to restrict freedom of expression and peaceful assembly.

Individuals were arrested for speaking out against authorities, including Lukashenka, and sentenced to prison terms.

Authorities prohibited displaying certain historical flags and symbols, including the historic white-red-white-striped flag adopted by the democratic opposition, and displaying placards bearing messages deemed threatening to the government or "public order." Although the Ukrainian flag was not banned, individuals displaying the flag were often repressed. Authorities attributed the display of a Ukrainian flag to support for Ukraine in the war, in which authorities supported Russia.

In April, police searched and arrested approximately 45 residents in Dziarzhynsk after local authorities noticed the banned opposition white-red-white and Ukrainian national flags hung along the road near the city. While most of those detained were released after interrogations, police charged several individuals for participating in protests. Anecdotal evidence showed that security

forces uploaded a special application on the detainees' cell phones to detect subscriptions and reposts to prohibited channels and put tracking beacons on detainees' cars to further harass them.

A 2021 law on “preventing the rehabilitation of Nazism” expanded the list of prohibited “Nazi symbols and attributes” to include symbols used to denote support for the opposition. Although the “Pahonia” coat of arms emblem was on a registry of the government’s historic and cultural symbols, the government expressed hostility toward protesters who carried red and white flags or the Pahonia symbol, and security forces detained demonstrators or any individual for doing so, as these symbols were generally identified with the opposition. In October 2022, the Internal Affairs Ministry declared the slogan “Long Live Belarus” and the response to it “Live Long,” accompanied by extending the right arm from the shoulder with a straightened hand, as Nazi symbols and attributes, calling it a “collaborator’s greeting” similar to the Sieg Heil salute. “Long Live Belarus” and “Live Long” were associated with the national revival movement and later opposition and democratic activities, particularly widely used by peaceful protesters in 2020.

Authorities dismissed state employees who expressed political dissent or participated in protests after the 2020 presidential election, including teachers, civil servants, law enforcement officers, athletes, university administrators, and health-care workers.

The law also limited free speech by criminalizing actions such as conveying or giving information that authorities deemed false or derogatory to a foreigner concerning the political, economic, social, military, or international situation of the country. The government prohibited calls to participate in “unsanctioned demonstrations.”

Authorities also prohibited “extremist” information, which they defined as “information materials including printed, audio, visual, videos, placards, posters, banners, and other visuals intended for public usage or distribution that seek the violent change of the constitutional order or the territorial integrity of the country; unconstitutional takeover of state powers; establishment of an illegal armed force; terrorist activities; inciting racial, ethnic, religious, or other societal hatred; organizing mass riots; hooliganism and vandalism based on racial, ethnic, religious, or other societal hatred or discord; political and ideological hatred; promotion of supremacy of a group of residents based on their language, social, racial, ethnic, or religious background; and justification of Nazism, including the promotion, production, distribution, and displays of Nazi symbols.” “Extremist” information also included images of persons declared “extremists” or convicted on charges related to “extremism,” charges often used to incriminate the political opposition, journalists, civil society activists, and ordinary citizens.

Law enforcement officials had permission to use firearms at their discretion when “countering extremism” – viewed by independent observers as an open threat against journalists, protesters, activists, and the regime’s political opponents.

Violence and Harassment: Authorities harassed and detained local journalists routinely. According to the independent Belarusian Association of Journalists, more than 400 journalists had fled the country since 2020 due to repression. Security forces brought false allegations against them and sentenced them to prison terms for doing their jobs. As of September, the Belarusian Association of Journalists reported it had recorded at least 45 cases of harassment against local journalists since the start of the year, which included detentions, imprisonment, unwarranted searches, fines, and prison sentences. On March 17, the Minsk City Court sentenced editor in chief of the popular independent outlet *Tut.by*, Maryna Zolatava, and director of TUT.BY MEDIA, Lyudmila Chekina, to 12 years in prison each. Chekina was also fined 37,000 rubles (\$15,000) and banned from holding managerial positions for five years. Authorities found both guilty of tax evasion, inciting social hatred, and calling for imposing sanctions to damage national security. Three other *Tut.by* journalists, tried with Chekina and Zolatava, left the country and were put on the wanted list. Human rights organizations deemed all charges as politically motivated.

Authorities regularly detained and prosecuted opposition bloggers, journalists, and social media users.

As of year's end, at least 33 media representatives remained in detention under various politically motivated charges, including forming or participation in an "extremist" group, calls to violate public order, tax evasion, and organizing and participating in actions that violate public order. Authorities' harassment and intimidation of journalists often included raiding their offices, searching their homes, confiscating their property, and subsequently detaining and prosecuting them.

Authorities harassed members of the analytical community who regularly contributed articles or commentary to independent media on political and economic matters. On March 17, the Minsk City Court sentenced Valerya Kastsyuhova, political scientist, analyst, and editor of the publication *Belarusian Annual Report*, and Tatsiana Kuzina, an independent expert on public administration, to 10 years in prison each for conspiring to seize state power, calling for sanctions, and inciting social hatred in response to their reporting on political developments in the country. Authorities also continued to harass journalists during their politically motivated prison sentences.

Censorship or Content Restrictions for Members of the Press and Other Media, Including Online Media: Authorities severely limited access to information, closed independent outlets, and penalized any independent journalist who published information critical of the government. The government had shut down virtually all independent media outlets and severely limited operations of the regional media in the country. By law, the government could close a publication – printed or online – after two warnings in one year for violating a range of restrictions on the press. Regulations also gave authorities arbitrary power to prohibit or censor reporting. The Ministry of Information could, by law, suspend periodicals or newspapers for three months without a court ruling.

On October 1, authorities updated the media law to grant the Ministry of Information authority to ban foreign media. The ministry could impose bans based on information from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs regarding foreign states' prohibition of Belarus-registered media activities. A ban would prevent the distribution of content, including through the internet, while journalists would lose their accreditation and be unable to open correspondent offices or branches. News aggregators were also subject to the law, including the possibility of blocking them for disseminating restricted information or hyperlinks. The law also introduced new grounds for canceling media registration, such as involvement in "extremist" or "terrorist" activities.

The threat of government retaliation led the few small independent media outlets still operating within the country to exercise self-censorship and avoid reporting on certain topics, including Russia's war against Ukraine, or criticizing the government. The government tightly and directly controlled the content of state-owned broadcast and print media. Authorities extensively censored the internet.

On April 6, the Minsk City Court sentenced Kanstantsin Zalatykh, director of the newspaper *Belorusy I Rynok*, to six years in prison on charges of inciting social hatred, slandering the president and public servants, and abuse of office. Zalatykh had been in pretrial detention since May 2022. *Belorusy I Rynok* was the country's last remaining printed national newspaper when authorities notified the paper in December 2022 that its license was canceled. At year's end, the publication was still available online.

Authorities repressed individuals found to contribute or subscribe to Telegram channels and other social media accounts that were operated by independent media outlets or that conveyed information counter to the regime. As of September, the Ministry of Internal Affairs declared that more than 1,000 Telegram channels and other social media disseminated "extremist" materials and more than 60 Telegram channels and online chat groups had been recognized as "extremist organizations," including prominent independent media resources *Nasha Niva* and *zerkalo.io*. Authorities warned that subscribing to, downloading materials from, and reposting information from these channels would be punishable under the law. For example, on June 6, the Minsk City Court sentenced Yana Pinchuk to 12 years in prison on charges of administering three opposition Telegram channels, creating a "terrorist" organization and an "extremist" group, calling to cause harm to national security, inciting hostility, and preparing mass riots.

State-controlled media did not provide balanced coverage and overwhelmingly presented authorities' version of events, including falsehoods and disinformation released by the Lukashenka regime. State-owned media dominated the information field and maintained the highest circulation through generous subsidies and preferences. There was no countrywide private television, and broadcast media space was dominated by state-owned and Russian stations. Pro-Lukashenka and pro-Russia viewpoints, including those disseminated by Russia's state-controlled press, dominated the press in the country. During the year, state media and state-sponsored social media actively and routinely propagated the Lukashenka regime's efforts to portray opposition politicians as "enemies of the state," "criminals," "terrorists," or "extremists." Authorities warned, fined, detained, interrogated, and stripped accreditation from members of the independent domestic media. Some state media journalists who quit were later detained.

Authorities allowed only nationals of the country where a media outlet was based to be accredited as correspondents. All Belarusian nationals working for major Western outlets were stripped of accreditation in 2020 and had not been reaccredited.

The law prohibited media from disseminating information on behalf of unregistered political parties, trade unions, and NGOs. Authorities eliminated all national and major regional independent media outlets in the country through several rounds of targeted reprisals, forced closures and liquidations, politically motivated prosecutions, website blockages, or other efforts to incapacitate the organizations. Many closed or blocked media operations re-established and continued their operations from outside the country.

The government penalized outlets and individuals who published news items counter to government guidelines. Independent media outlets, including newspapers and internet news websites, faced discriminatory publishing and distribution policies, including limited access to government officials and press briefings and bans on printing paper copies.

Authorities pressured businesses not to advertise in newspapers that criticized the government.

Libel/Slander Laws: Libel and slander were criminal offenses with penalties of up to six years in prison, and authorities acted on these laws, especially to restrict freedom of expression, prohibit expressing opposition to the government, including online, and generally retaliate against journalists and political opponents. The law provided large fines and prison sentences of up to six years for defaming or insulting the president. Penalties for defamation of character made no distinction between private and public persons. A public figure criticized for poor performance while in office could sue both the journalist and the media outlet that disseminated the critical report for defamation.

On March 23, the Minsk City Court convicted Hienadz Mazheyka of inciting social hatred and insulting Lukashenka and sentenced him to three years in prison. Mazheyka was charged in relation to his role as the author of an article in the Russian branch of *Komsomolskaya Pravda* on a 2021 KGB raid during which a KGB officer and an information technology worker were shot. The article included a comment from a friend of the technology worker offering a positive description of his character.

Courts around the country convicted hundreds of individuals recognized as political prisoners on criminal charges for slandering officials and inciting social hatred for their commentary in social media. For example, on August 11, the Minsk City Court convicted pensioner Natallia Piatrovich, age 68, for online commentary on charges of slandering Lukashenka and insulting public servants, inciting social hatred, and participating in an "extremist" group, and sentenced her to six years in prison. Police detained her at home in December 2022.

National Security: Authorities frequently cited national security and "extremism" or "terrorism" grounds to arrest or punish critics of the government or deter criticism of government policies or officials. National security and "extremism" and "terrorism" charges were widely used to incriminate members of the political opposition, journalists, and ordinary citizens.

Internet Freedom

Authorities censored online content and monitored private online communications without appropriate legal authority. The regime's total control of the country's legislature, law enforcement, and judicial systems allowed authorities to monitor internet traffic without accountability or independent review. According to Freedom House's 2023 *Freedom on the Net Report*, authorities blocked political, social, and religious content, as well as the websites of civil society and independent media operating in exile. Laws also restricted online media and limited the transfer of data abroad. Progovernment commentators regularly manipulated online discussions. All internet service providers located inside the country were required to retain information regarding their customers' browsing histories for one year. Companies were also required to preserve identifying data regarding their customers' devices and internet activities for at least five years and to turn over this information at the government's request.

The government also monitored email and social media. All who expressed their views via the internet risked possible legal and personal repercussions, and many regularly practiced self-censorship. The use of virtual private networks alleviated this risk to a degree, but authorities reportedly regularly forced those arbitrarily arrested to unlock their cell phones so they could access their social media and personal email accounts.

Authorities filtered and blocked internet traffic. Telecommunications companies reported that authorities ordered them to restrict mobile internet data on days when large-scale demonstrations were expected or occurred.

Authorities restricted content online. Online news providers had to remove content and publish corrections if ordered to do so by authorities and were required to adhere to a range of government prohibitions on free speech. Authorities could block access to sites that failed to obey government orders, including a single instance of distributing prohibited information, without a prosecutor or court mandate. If blocked, a network publication lost its media registration. Owners of a website or a network publication had one month to appeal government decisions to limit access to their sites or to deny restoring access to them in court. As of September, the Ministry of Information had blocked access to more than 20 additional websites during the year. On June 13, authorities blocked the website of the human rights project Right to Protection, aimed at providing information support to defense attorneys and human rights defenders.

There were also efforts to restrict or block social media outlets online, and authorities punished individuals for expressing their political views online. For example, authorities targeted Telegram users and group chat administrators throughout the year, prosecuting them for allegedly organizing and coordinating protest activity. On March 30, the Homyel Regional Court sentenced Tatsiana Kurylina to four and one-half years' imprisonment for administering a number of Telegram channels, through which she facilitated the organization of protests in 2020. The court also fined her 3,700 rubles (\$1,200) and assessed moral damages of 23,500 rubles (\$7,500), finding her guilty of slandering an official, inciting social hatred, illegally handling personally identifiable information, repeatedly libeling Lukashenka, calling for sanctions damaging national security, and preparing activities grossly violating public order, among other charges. According to independent media reports, although Kurylina left the country after the 2020 protests, fearing prosecution, she returned after receiving false safety promises. She was detained in August 2022.

Owners of internet sites could also be held liable for user comments that carried any prohibited information, and these sites could be blocked. The law mandated the creation of a database of news websites and identification of all commentators by personal data and cell phone numbers. If a news website received two or more formal warnings from authorities, it could be removed from the database and lose its right to distribute information.

By law, the telecommunications monopoly Beltelecom and other organizations authorized by the government had the exclusive right to maintain internet domains.

Authorities attempted to restrict online anonymity. A presidential edict required registration of service providers and internet websites and required the collection of information on those who used public internet. It required service providers to store data on individuals' internet use for one year and provided data to law enforcement agencies upon request. Conviction for violating the edict was punishable by a prison sentence, although no such cases were prosecuted or reported. These potential government prosecution efforts, however, spurred the use of encrypted messenger programs, such as Telegram, that circumvented restrictions.

There were reports of politically motivated cyberattacks. Government webpages and databases were reportedly hacked. State actors regularly used bots or trolls to manipulate social media and Telegram messenger chats discourse.

B. FREEDOMS OF PEACEFUL ASSEMBLY AND ASSOCIATION

The constitution provided for freedom of peaceful assembly, but the government denied this right and employed a variety of measures to prevent and brutally suppress demonstrations, minimize their effect, and punish participants. The law provided for freedom of association, but the government severely restricted it and forcibly closed hundreds of civil society organizations, NGOs, political parties, and all independent labor unions.

Freedom of Peaceful Assembly

By law, only registered political parties, trade unions, and NGOs could request permission to hold a demonstration of more than 1,000 persons. Authorities systematically denied such requests by independent and opposition groups, as well as those of self-organized citizens' groups.

The law penalized the organization of and participation in unauthorized gatherings, the announcement of an intention to hold a mass event before securing official authorization, training protesters, financing public demonstrations, or soliciting foreign assistance "to the detriment" of the country. The law also criminalized public calls to organize or hold unauthorized gatherings, street marches, and other types of demonstrations, encouraging others to participate in mass events, or paying for participation in mass events. Convictions for some violations were punishable by sentences of up to five years' imprisonment. Persons with criminal records for crimes related to violating peace and order, statehood and governance, public security, safety, public morals, and crimes against the state were barred from organizing mass events. Individuals fined or arrested for participating in unauthorized mass events also could not organize mass events for a period of one year from the imposition of the sentence. The mass events law also prohibited collection and use of funds to reimburse fines imposed on violators by authorities. It was illegal to broadcast or provide live coverage of mass events held in violation of the law "for the purpose of their promotion or propaganda." The law included fees for mass events as well, including a system of reimbursements for police, medical, and cleaning services that organizers of mass events had to pay to hold an event.

Police violently detained and jailed opposition members, civil society activists, journalists, and ordinary citizens who attempted to organize or participate in political events, rallies, or protests.

Security forces physically and psychologically abused individuals while breaking up events, while individuals were in detention vehicles, and once protesters were in detention facilities. No investigations were conducted into complaints of human rights abuses by police for extreme use of force.

In many cases, courts sentenced participants in peaceful protests to long prison terms on criminal charges, as authorities often claimed protesters had been violent or threatened public order.

For example, on July 10, a Minsk district court convicted five political prisoners who organized demonstrations after the 2020 elections for participating in activities grossly violating public order

and sentenced each to one year in prison. Participants in demonstrations faced retaliation at state-run places of education or employment. According to a Ministry of Education directive, educational institutions could expel students who engaged in antigovernment or unsanctioned political activity; additionally, the educational institutions had to ensure the proper ideological education of students. School officials, however, often cited poor academic performance or absence from classes as the official reason for expulsions. According to human rights organizations, at least five students were reportedly expelled throughout the year due to their political views.

Freedom of Association

The law and the constitution provided for the freedom of association; however, the government generally allowed only loyal progovernment organizations to exercise this right. Following the 2020 presidential election and the prodemocracy movement that ensued, authorities forcibly closed, banned, or labeled “extremist” the vast majority of NGOs and civil society organizations, and closed all independent labor unions. At year’s end, the Ministry of Internal Affairs listed more than 1,500 “extremist” organizations and groups, including independent media outlets and opposition chat groups, along with more than 3,600 “extremist” individuals, including most political opposition figures in exile. The KGB list of terrorists included more than 1,100 individuals and groups, of whom over 390 were Belarusians, and four Belarusian organizations, such as the independent media outlet *Nexta*. Other NGOs and civil society organizations ceased operations due to persistent intimidation and harassment by authorities.

On February 14, Lukashenka approved a law that narrowed the national public associations authorized to engage with the senior government. As of September, authorities disbanded more than 250 civil society and nongovernmental organizations through legal deregistration mechanisms, such as court proceedings.

A separate February 14 law expanded requirements for NGO registration and banned certain activities of international and national public associations operating in the country. For example, international public associations were required to establish offices both in a foreign state and in Belarus, and national public associations were required to have active and open branches in all six regions and Minsk. In addition to prohibitions on “propagating wars and extremist activities,” the law banned public associations from “violently changing the constitutional order, inciting social, national, religious and racial hatred, and organizing terrorist and other illegal activities.” The law mandated public associations to comply with the constitution and other laws. Perceived violation of any of these concepts – many of which were commonly used to bring politically motivated charges against individuals – could lead to the organization’s immediate closure by a court.

All NGOs, political parties, and trade unions had to receive Ministry of Justice approval to be registered. A government commission reviewed all registration applications and based its decisions largely on political and ideological compatibility with official government views and practices.

Actual registration procedures required applicants to provide the names of founders along with a physical address in a nonresidential building for an office, which observers considered a difficult burden in view of the tight financial circumstances of most associations and NGOs, as well as individual property owners’ concerns that renting space to NGOs would invite government harassment, especially in regional localities. Authorities denied registration to organizations unable to rent or afford office space, those located in residential addresses, or organizations accused of operating illegally. In January 2022, the government amended the criminal code to criminalize activities conducted on behalf of unregistered groups, which were punishable by up to a two-year imprisonment.

On May 19, the law on civil society came into effect, which granted special privileges to a handful of government-affiliated NGOs. The law singled out civil society organizations that had physical offices in all regions and Minsk city, as well as existing registration as a national public association with a minimum of 100,000 adult members, enabling them to officially interact with the government “in special formats.” After the law’s entry into effect, the Justice Ministry named only

five NGOs that met the standards and were able to hold “special forms of interaction” with the government: the Veterans’ Union, the Trade Union Federation, Belarusian Union of Women, Belarusian Youth Union, and the Belaya Rus public association. Special forms of interaction implied election of delegates to the All-Belarusian People’s Assembly (ABPA), a parliamentary body designed to be the highest representative body in the country; holding meetings with the population, labor collectives, dialogue platforms, public receptions, visiting receptions of citizens in order to collect and develop proposals for submission to the discussion of the ABPA; and participation in the implementation of decisions of the ABPA.

The law on public associations prohibited NGOs from keeping funds for local activities at foreign financial institutions. Only registered NGOs could legally accept foreign grants and technical aid and only for a limited set of approved activities. NGOs had to receive approval from the Interdepartmental Commission on Foreign Grant Aid before they could accept funds or register grants that fell outside a list of approved aid categories. Authorities further divided the aid usage into tax-exempt and taxable categories, the latter of which required a registration fee equal to 0.5 percent of the taxable aid. According to the government, penalties existed for the use of unauthorized or undeclared aid by primary or secondary aid beneficiaries and allowed authorities to terminate aid funding.

While the law stipulated authorities could close an NGO after issuing one warning that it had violated the law, in practice the government no longer gave a warning. The law allowed authorities to close an NGO for accepting what they considered illegal forms of foreign assistance and permitted the Ministry of Justice to monitor any NGO activity and review all NGO documents. NGOs also had to submit detailed reports annually to the ministry regarding their activities, office locations, officers, and total number of members.

Authorities harassed, intimidated, and obstructed independent civil society organizations. During the year, authorities confiscated computers and other equipment and damaged private property while breaking into homes of civil society activists, human rights defenders, and individuals associated with political cases.

C. FREEDOM OF RELIGION

See the Department of State’s *International Religious Freedom Report* at <https://www.state.gov/religiousfreedomreport/>.

D. FREEDOM OF MOVEMENT AND THE RIGHT TO LEAVE THE COUNTRY

The law generally provided for freedom of internal movement, foreign travel, emigration, and repatriation, but the government at times restricted the right of citizens, particularly former political prisoners and government officials, to foreign travel. Beginning in the aftermath of the 2020 presidential election, the government imposed restrictions on the ability of citizens to return from abroad without the fear of being prosecuted. This trend increased significantly during the year with new legal restrictions on exit and entry to the country, and measures to revoke citizenship, primarily for exiled opposition figures and activists.

In-country Movement: The law required persons who traveled to areas within 15 miles of the border (aside from authorized crossing points) to obtain an entrance pass.

Foreign Travel: Citizens broadly had the right to leave the country without arbitrary restrictions. The government’s database of persons banned from traveling abroad, however, contained the names of individuals who possessed state secrets, faced criminal prosecution or civil suits, or had outstanding financial obligations. The Ministry of Internal Affairs and security agencies, border and customs services, and financial investigation departments were able to place persons on

“preventive” surveillance lists. Individuals could submit inquiries on the Internal Affairs Ministry’s website on whether they were banned from foreign travel, and for those citizens outside of the country, diplomatic missions provided such information upon request. The Ministry of Internal Affairs was also required to track citizens working abroad, and employment agencies had to report individuals who did not return from abroad as scheduled.

On May 16, the government amended the law on exit and entry into the country, enabling the KGB to ban scores of individuals whose “departure could harm national security interests” from leaving the country for up to six months. Separately, the law established travel bans for those facing administrative trials and fines on charges related to disturbing the order of governance. At the same time, however, the government reserved the right to allow such individuals to leave the country if they needed to testify in criminal proceedings in foreign states, receive medical treatment abroad, or in connection to a severe illness or death of a family member.

The May law also required high-level government and security officials, including mayors and governors as well as heads of ministries and security services, to obtain approval to leave the country from Lukashenka, who could deny their exit in order “to ensure national security interests until the circumstances preventing their travel change.” The same provision applied to military personnel, border officers, internal troops, transport troops, investigators, forensic service members, police, and financial intelligence officers, among other groups.

Exile: The law did not allow forced exile, but authorities continued the practice of forcibly exiling members of the democratic opposition, journalists, civil society activists, and others who dissented, with the tacit or explicit understanding they would be imprisoned if they refused to leave or returned to the country. There were reports that security forces threatened some citizens who dissented against the government with bodily harm, prosecution, and lengthy prison sentences if they did not leave the country. There were reports from former political prisoners that authorities harassed them after they left prison, either explicitly or tacitly to compel them to leave the country.

Most individuals forced to leave the country since the 2020 postelection crackdown remained in forced exile throughout the year, including presidential hopeful and democratic opposition leader Svyatlana Tsikhanouskaya and other democratic opposition leaders, independent journalists, activists, and leaders of human rights and civil society organizations.

Citizenship: The law permitted stripping the citizenship of naturalized citizens age 18 and older for participating in “extremist” activities or inflicting serious damage to the interests of the country, charges often used by authorities in politically motivated cases. Legal amendments adopted on July 11 enabled authorities to revoke the citizenship of citizens in exile who had been convicted in absentia on the grounds of “participation in ‘extremist’ activities or causing grave harm to the interests of the country.” The law also provided for the revocation of citizenship for individuals who joined a foreign army, police, or security service, among other entities of a foreign state. According to Aliaksei Biahun, head of the Internal Affairs Ministry’s Department for Citizenship and Migration, exiled citizens convicted of “extremist” activities in absentia could return to the country and serve their sentences in order to retain their citizenship. This law could effectively disenfranchise political opposition figures abroad as the constitution required Belarusian citizenship and residency in the country for at least 20 years prior to the election in order to run for most political offices. While as of the end of the year there were no reports of any citizens deprived of their citizenship arbitrarily or in a discriminatory manner, many politically active Belarusians in exile did not attempt to return to Belarus due to fear of retaliation and repression.

E. PROTECTION OF REFUGEES

The government provided limited cooperation with the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), International Organization for Migration, and other humanitarian organizations in providing protection and assistance to refugees, returning refugees, or asylum seekers, as well as other persons of concern. Authorities either did not approve or delayed approval, however, of requests made by UNHCR to provide assistance to irregular migrants in the country,

including those located near the country's borders with the EU and those in detention pending their extradition.

Access to Asylum: The law provided for the granting of asylum or refugee status, and the government had a process for determining refugee status and a system for providing protection to refugees. The law provided for protection against refoulement granted to foreigners who were denied refugee status or temporary protection but were unable to return to their countries of origin. The system provided procedural safeguards for seeking protection and review; however, in practice, asylum seekers could arbitrarily be sent to counties without adequate laws or systems for providing protection to refugees.

Normally all foreigners except Russians had the right to apply for asylum. According to the terms of the Union Treaty with Russia, Russian citizens could settle and obtain residence permits in the country.

Abuse of Refugees and Asylum Seekers: Since the height of the irregular migrant crisis that began in May 2021 and continuing throughout the year, there were reports security services and border guards abused migrants and forced them to remain at the border to attempt additional border crossings when they failed to enter the EU.

In January the Protecting Rights at Borders initiative published a report regarding the systematic use of pushbacks of migrants at the EU borders, claiming violations of international law. Among other aspects, the review contained information alleging mass violations of migrants' rights by Belarusian border guards. In 2022, the initiative's local partner human rights NGO interviewed 131 persons in the country, who came Afghanistan, Cameroon, Cuba, Egypt, Eritrea, Iran, Iraq, Liberia, Morocco, Syria, Togo, and Yemen. Among those interviewed, 105 reported experiencing pushbacks as well as intimidation, violence, and illegal practices by the country's border guards. According to the migrants, border guards forcibly pushed them to cross the border illegally. In case of unsuccessful attempts, the migrants were stranded in the forest, forced to survive without shelter, food, water, or access to medical care. Many remained in the forest and experienced daily abuse from the country's border guards, who used violence in an attempt to force them to cross the border. The report also registered several instances of border guards robbing migrants.

In September the initiative released a report covering May-August, which maintained that Belarus and Russia continued to issue visas to foreigners from the Middle East, Africa, and Latin America, who continued to arrive via Turkey and Russia. In May-August, Belarusian border guards subjected at least 321 migrants to violence and abuse, including beatings with hands and batons; denial of food, water, and access to toilets; confiscation and destruction of migrants' belongings and clothing; and forcible pushbacks resulting in serious injuries and hospitalization for some migrants. Border guards, local authorities, and human rights activists also reported multiple deaths and claimed the number of missing persons at the border was on the rise.

Durable Solutions: Naturalization of refugees was possible after seven years of permanent residence, as in the case of other categories of foreign residents. On July 10, state media reported Lukashenko granted expedited citizenship to at least 3,572 Ukrainian refugees (out of a total of 4,436 new citizens originating from 21 countries) since the beginning of 2021.

Temporary Protection: In isolated cases, the government provided temporary protection (for up to one year) to individuals who did not qualify as refugees. There was no publicly available data for the number of temporary protected cases during the year.

F. STATUS AND TREATMENT OF INTERNALLY DISPLACED PERSONS (IDPS)

Not applicable.

G. STATELESS PERSONS

As of June 30, the Ministry of Internal Affairs and UNHCR listed 5,586 stateless persons in the country. According to UNHCR, most of them had either temporary or permanent residence permits.

Permanent-resident stateless persons were treated comparably to citizens in terms of access to employment, except for a limited number of positions in the public sector and law enforcement bodies that were available only to citizens. There were reports stateless persons occasionally faced discrimination in employment, since authorities often encouraged them to settle in rural areas where the range of employment opportunities was limited. According to UNHCR, stateless persons could freely change their region of residence.

There was a path to citizenship for stateless persons. The main requirement was at least seven years' permanent residence. Authorities had a procedure for expedited naturalization but mostly for individuals born or permanently residing in the country prior to the collapse of the Soviet Union, ethnic Belarusians, their spouses, and descendants. If a child was born into a family of stateless persons permanently residing in the country, the child was entitled to citizenship.

The government denied consular services to exiled Belarusian opposition figures, including passports, travel documents, and birth reports, and revoked the citizenship of Belarusians living abroad convicted in absentia on "extremist"-related charges. Many exiled opposition figures had to travel using noncitizen third-country travel documents. On September 4, Lukashenka signed a decree annulling the authority of the country's diplomatic missions to issue, extend, and change passports for Belarusians abroad. Human rights groups assessed this decree could affect thousands of political exiles, effectively rendering them "stateless" or without valid travel documents.

Section 3.

Freedom to Participate in the Political Process

The law nominally provided citizens the ability to choose their government in free and fair periodic elections held by secret ballot and based on universal and equal suffrage. In practice, however, the government consistently and thoroughly denied citizens this ability by failing to conduct elections according to international standards; falsifying election results; jailing or forcibly exiling genuine opposition candidates; banning independent opposition political parties; and detaining, imprisoning, exiling, or threatening those individuals who sought free and fair elections.

After his election in 1994 to a four-year term as the country's first president, Alyaksandr Lukashenka steadily consolidated power in the executive branch to dominate all branches of government, effectively ending any separation of powers among the branches. Flawed referendums in 1996, 2004, and 2022 amended the constitution to broaden his powers and further extend his term in office. Subsequent elections, including the August 2020 presidential election, denied citizens the right to exercise their will in an honest and transparent process, including denying freedoms of expression (including for members of the media), peaceful assembly, association, and the ability to seek, receive, and impart information and campaign.

ELECTIONS AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

Abuses or Irregularities in Recent Elections: National elections were widely reported to not be fair and free of abuses and irregularities. According to independent local observation groups, the 2020 presidential election was marred by numerous abuses, including restrictions on a candidate's ability to be listed on a ballot (including through arbitrarily detaining and harassing opposition candidates and manipulating laws for politically motivated reasons), the use of administrative resources in favor of the incumbent, the absence of impartial election commissions, unequal access

to media, coercion of voters to participate in early voting, nontransparent vote tabulation, and restrictions on independent observers.

Government pressure and retaliation against opposition presidential candidates and campaigns, participants in signature gathering events, and participants in postelection peaceful assemblies continued through the year. This included forced exile, prosecution in absentia, arbitrary arrests and detention, security force violence, lengthy prison sentences, and other forms of intimidation and harassment. For example, on April 6 a Minsk district court convicted political prisoner, 2020 presidential candidate, and leader of the opposition Nasha party Andrey Dzmitryeu on charges of participating in actions grossly violating public order and operations of public transport and sentenced him to a year and one-half in prison. Human rights organizations reported his prison sentence was in response to his participation in peaceful protests following the 2020 presidential election and to prevent him participating in 2024 elections.

Prior to the 2020 presidential election, authorities restricted the ability of challengers to register as candidates, restricted candidates from campaigning, pressured and detained presidential campaign teams, pressured citizens who showed support for opposition candidates, and detained members of the press to limit opposition coverage. The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) rapporteur's *Report under the Moscow Mechanism on Alleged Human Rights Violations* related to the 2020 presidential election detailed a wide range of allegations of electoral irregularities concerning: "1) non-timely invitation of international observers, 2) shortcomings in the appointments of election management bodies on all levels, 3) restrictions of the right to stand (for office), 4) limitations in election dispute resolution, 5) overall disregard for freedom of assembly, 6) unequal playing field for candidates, including non-transparency in campaign financing, 7) non-transparent early voting process, 8) overcrowding of polling stations, 9) missing checks and balances, lack of possibility for verifying the electoral results, and 10) inaccessibility of all steps of the electoral process for observation, inhibiting the effective assessment of the elections." The report stated that, "in view of the evident shortcomings of the presidential elections which did not meet the basic requirements established on the basis of previous election monitoring and the observations by citizens, the presidential election has to be evaluated as falling short of fulfilling the country's international commitments regarding elections. Allegations that the presidential elections were not transparent, free or fair were found confirmed."

On March 4, authorities enforced the amended electoral code to introduce a range of changes in line with the flawed 2022 constitutional referendum. Human rights experts assessed these amendments limited electoral pluralism and political representation. The changes specified new requirements for presidential candidates, including: a minimum age of 40 (increased from 35), a requirement for residence in the country for at least 20 years prior to elections (increased from 10 years), and a bar on holding or having held foreign citizenship, a residence permit, or any other document conferring a benefit from a foreign state. While Lukashenka lifted presidential term limits through a 2004 referendum to enable his own continued presidency, the 2022 amended constitution reintroduced a two-year term limit for an incumbent.

Authorities also amended the electoral code to hold parliamentary and local elections on a single day and lifted the voter turnout threshold for the parliamentary elections. The amended code banned voters from taking photographs or videotaping ballots at polling stations. The amendments also decreed that no polling stations would be established at diplomatic missions, effectively disenfranchising members of the Belarusian diaspora and exiles who were unwilling to return to the country to vote or feared repression if they returned.

Political Parties and Political Participation: On February 14, Lukashenka signed the amended law on political parties, which required reregistration of all political parties and raised the minimum threshold for creating a political party from 1,000 to 5,000 members. The law required a political party to establish offices in every region and Minsk, and stipulated that only citizens older than 18 permanently residing in the country could found or be members of political parties. Parties were banned from receiving financial support from abroad under the new law, which also banned any party the regime deemed to have incited social, national, religious, or racial hatred; propagated wars, "terrorist," "extremist," or other prohibited activities; or those deemed to have harmed the national and civic interests.

The law also required political parties to ensure the constitutional order and civil accord, to participate in state governance, to adhere to internal and external policies of the state, and to ensure the implementation of national security. The government could shut down parties for failure to comply with these requirements, which were not clearly defined.

As of year's end, the government shut down five pro-Lukashenka parties and seven opposition parties. Subsequently, authorities reregistered three pro-Lukashenka parties to operate as official parties and also registered the newly established pro-Lukashenka Belaya Rus party on May 2.

Violating the law on mass events and participating in unauthorized demonstrations could result in fines and arrests of opposition political parties' leaders and political activists. Authorities harassed, intimidated, and imprisoned members of opposition political parties during the year. The government also used its monopoly on broadcast media to disparage the opposition, promote pro-Lukashenka parties, and restrict the ability of opposition political parties to publicize their views. On September 1, police publicly released a video of officers detaining a local resident in Hrodna, who said on camera that he was a member of the founding committee of the opposition Razam party. The video also accused him of disseminating "extremist" materials.

Participation of Women and Members of Marginalized or Vulnerable Groups: No laws limited participation of women or members of minority groups in the political process, but the government's tacit endorsement of traditional Orthodox gender roles often ran counter to women's efforts to attain positions of authority. As of September, of the country's 30-member Council of Ministers, only one was a woman. Since 2020, women increasingly joined the opposition as leaders, served as vocal members of the opposition, and participated in protests more broadly compared with previous elections, although historically marginalized women, especially impoverished rural and older women, remained the most politically disengaged groups. Women opposition activists, journalists, and others who dissented were among those regularly targeted for detention and repression by authorities.

Section 4.

Corruption in Government

While the law provided criminal penalties for corruption by officials, the government did not implement the law effectively.

The World Bank's Worldwide Governance Indicators reflected that corruption was a serious problem in the country. There were no comprehensive reports on corruption, since the government did not allow independent monitoring or auditing, limiting access to any credible information regarding the scale of official corruption. In the past, journalists investigating official corruption were jailed.

Corruption: There were reports that individuals connected to Lukashenka received preferential treatment from his regime in the form of monopolies, tax breaks, favorable contracts, and other mechanisms, often codified by presidential decrees signed by Lukashenka himself. In exchange, they reportedly provided funds to Lukashenka and his inner circle, financed Lukashenka's personal projects, and supported the regime publicly.

The absence of independent judicial and law enforcement systems, the lack of separation of powers, and a virtually eradicated independent press made it essentially impossible to gauge the scale of corruption or combat it effectively.

The most corrupt sectors were state administration (including Lukashenka himself) and procurement, the industrial sector, the construction industry, agriculture, health care, and education.

On January 12, the Minsk City Court convicted former Minister of Forestry Vitaly Drozha, detained in April 2022, on charges of accepting bribes and sentenced him to seven and a half years in prison.

According to official sources, most corruption cases involved soliciting and accepting bribes, fraud, embezzlement, and abuse of power, although anecdotal evidence indicated such corruption usually did not occur as part of day-to-day interaction between citizens and minor state officials. Generally, corruption charges were not used for politically motivated purposes.

For additional information concerning corruption in the country, please see the Department of State's *Investment Climate Statement* for the country, and the Department of State's *International Narcotics Control Strategy Report*, which includes information on financial crimes.

Section 5.

Governmental Posture Towards International and Nongovernmental Monitoring and Investigation of Alleged Abuses of Human Rights

The government did not allow the operation of domestic or international human rights organizations in the country to monitor or investigate human rights cases. As of September, authorities disbanded more than 250 civil society and NGOs, and approximately the same number filed applications for shutting down voluntarily. Since the 2020 post-election crackdown on civil society, authorities shuttered more than 1,480 organizations.

Authorities arrested human rights defenders and launched legal proceedings to liquidate NGOs on various politically motivated charges to prevent them from expressing criticism of the government, recording authorities' human rights abuses, and assisting victims. Following the 2020 postelection protests, subsequent decrees of July 2021, and the May law on civil society, the regime severely constrained or completely curtailed the actions of almost all independent NGOs (see section 2.b., Freedom of Association). Because authorities deregistered most independent civil society organizations in the country, hundreds of activists and human rights defenders remained underground, in forced exile, or in detention, including members of prominent human rights and civil society NGOs such as Vyasna, the Belarusian Helsinki Committee, and the Belarusian Association of Journalists.

On August 23, the Internal Affairs Ministry declared Vyasna an "extremist" group for allegedly undermining national sovereignty and public security as well as insulting and discrediting government officials. Authorities did not engage in human rights monitoring with international human rights NGOs or other human rights officials, and international NGO representatives were refused entry to the country.

Authorities routinely ignored local and international groups' recommendations on improving human rights in the country, as well as requests to stop harassing the human rights community.

Retribution against Human Rights Defenders: The regime continued to arrest, imprison, and otherwise harass, intimidate, and detain human rights activists as part of its crackdown against independent civil society organizations and activists. For example, on March 3, a Minsk district court convicted prominent human rights center Vyasna leader and Nobel Peace Prize laureate Ales Byalyatski, deputy Vyasna chair Valyantsin Stephanovich, and leading Vyasna attorney Uladzimir Labkovich – all in detention since July 2021 – on charges of smuggling \$290,000 into the country and financing activities grossly violating public order. They were sentenced to 10, nine, and seven years in prison, respectively. Their colleague Dzmitry Salauyeu, who remained in exile since 2021, was tried in absentia and sentenced to eight years in prison.

On May 11 the Minsk City Court sentenced lawyer Anastasiya Lazarenka to six years' imprisonment for volunteering and assisting detained 2020 protesters and their families and defending political prisoners in court. She was accused of participating in activities grossly

violating public order, illegally handling personally identifiable information, and inciting social hatred.

The United Nations or Other International Bodies: Since the UN Human Rights Council's 2018 appointment of Anais Marin as special rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Belarus, authorities denied her entry to the country. The government continued to speak against "the politicized and senseless" mandate of the rapporteur and refused to recognize the mandate. On March 23, 38 OSCE participating states invoked the Moscow Mechanism "to examine threats to the fulfilment of the provisions of the human dimension posed by human rights violations and abuses in the country," and presented results on May 11. Belarusian authorities refused to cooperate and denounced the effort as "a tactic aimed at pressuring the country and forcing its people to share moral values different from their own."

At the June International Labor Conference, participants voted to invoke Article 33 measures, the highest recourse available in the ILO, against Belarus to press for compliance with ratified conventions for failure to comply with the recommendations of a 2004 Commission of Inquiry regarding International Labor Organization (ILO) Conventions 87 and 98 on Freedom of Association and Collective Bargaining. Conference participants adopted a resolution calling on Belarus to receive an ILO mission to gather information on the implementation of ILO recommendations, including a visit to independent trade union leaders and activists in prison or detention. By year's end, the regime had not taken measures to address the labor rights concerns that prompted the Article 33 invocation.

Government Human Rights Bodies: The country did not have an ombudsman or other national human rights institution. A standing commission on human rights in the lower chamber of the National Assembly was largely nonoperational and ineffective.

Section 6.

Discrimination and Societal Abuses

WOMEN

Rape and Domestic Violence: The law criminalized rape of a person, regardless of gender but did not include separate provisions on marital rape. The penalty for rape with aggravating factors was three to 15 years' imprisonment. According to NGOs, authorities often did not adequately consider spousal rape incidents and did not prosecute such cases unless they involved severe aggravating factors such as death or direct threats to survivors' lives. While sexual assault and rape were significant problems, authorities generally prosecuted cases of nonspousal rape. For example, state media reported on January 25 that a court in Baranavichy convicted a local resident of raping and murdering a woman and sentenced him to 15 years in a high-security prison. The court also ordered him to complete alcohol rehabilitation and pay the victim's sister and daughter 45,000 rubles (\$14,500) in damages.

Domestic violence was a significant problem, and authorities did not take effective measures to prevent it or address its root causes, such as substance abuse, unemployment, and other economic and social causes. In January 2022, the law expanded the definition of "domestic violence" to include former spouses, close relatives, persons who had a common child, and common-law spouses running a household together, causing physical or mental suffering in relation to each other in deliberately unlawful or immoral actions of physical, psychological, or sexual nature. Additionally, it included provisions for assisting aggressors to correct their behavior and for creating a nationwide database of domestic violence cases.

Authorities issued protective orders mandating the separation of survivors and abusers and provided temporary accommodations during the duration of the orders. During the year, the government

operated more than 135 crisis rooms that provided limited shelter and psychological and medical assistance to survivors.

The law established a separate definition of domestic violence and provided for implementation of protective orders, which were from three to 30 days in duration and could be extended for the same period. The law required authorities to provide survivors and abusers with temporary accommodation until the protective orders expired. In addition, the law prescribed a substantial fine or detention for up to 15 days for violating protective orders, battery, intended infliction of pain, and psychological or physical suffering committed against a close family member. In some severe cases, prosecutors ordered investigations of domestic violence without survivors' prior consent.

According to women's rights advocates, protective orders and crisis rooms were ineffective and provided limited protection of the rights of survivors. Efforts to prosecute offenders and ensure legal and other remedies to correct their behavior were also lacking. NGO experts continued to note the lack of state-supported designated shelters and specialists, such as social workers and psychologists who worked with survivors, children, and aggressors.

The ministries of Internal Affairs, Labor and Social Protection, and Health Care, as well as NGOs, continued the national "Home without Violence" campaign, held on April 3-7. The campaign was covered by state media, and police reportedly inspected residences of families with a record of domestic violence or that were in vulnerable conditions and held "preventive" talks with them.

As part of the crackdown against the prodemocracy movement and the forced closures of NGOs and civil society organizations, authorities closed all independent NGOs working on domestic violence.

Discrimination: The law provided for the same legal status and rights for women as for men with regard to religious, personal status, and nationality laws, as well as laws related to labor, property, inheritance, employment, access to credit, and owning or managing businesses or property. Authorities did not enforce all aspects of the law effectively.

Although women had the same legal status as men, they experienced discrimination, in particular ageism, in employment and in access to economic resources, including in access to credit, as well as discrimination in the workplace. The law requiring equal pay for equal work was not regularly enforced, and as of 2020 the country's National Statistics Committee reported that average salaries for women were 26.7 percent less than salaries for men. Although the law granted women the right to three years of maternity leave with assurance of a job upon return, employers often circumvented employment protections by using short-term contracts, then refusing to renew a woman's contract when she became pregnant.

While the Labor and Social Welfare Ministry removed 93 positions from its list of 181 "physically demanding" jobs "in hazardous or dangerous conditions" that women were not permitted to occupy, women were not permitted to work in all the same employment sectors as men. Very few women were in the upper ranks of management or government, and most women were concentrated in the lower-paid public sector. There were no laws that prohibited sexual harassment in the workplace, and without criminal or civil remedies it remained a significant problem. There was no legal prohibition against gender-based discrimination in access to credit.

Reproductive Rights: In prior years, women with disabilities, especially those who were institutionalized, as well as pregnant women whose children were diagnosed with potential disabilities in utero, reported some doctors insisted they terminate their pregnancies. While there were no indications that the practice had changed, no specific cases were highlighted during the year by press or NGOs.

Although comprehensive education on reproductive health or pregnancy was not provided in schools, access to information on contraception was widely available. Government policy did not bar access to contraception, but some groups could oppose it on religious grounds. While there were no legal or cultural barriers to skilled health attendance during pregnancy and childbirth and

skilled postpartum care was widely available, there were fewer professionals with the skills to assist with difficult pregnancies outside of Minsk. Authorities provided access to emergency health care, including emergency contraception for survivors of sexual violence. There was no comprehensive postexposure prophylaxis available as part of clinical management of rape.

SYSTEMIC RACIAL OR ETHNIC VIOLENCE AND DISCRIMINATION

The law on national minorities prohibited restriction of the rights and freedoms of individuals based on their belonging to a national minority and banned forced assimilation. By law, individuals could not be forced to define and indicate their nationality or deny it, and the law provided for equal political, economic, and social rights and freedoms of individuals considered to be national minorities, including the rights to use their native language, to participate in and run for election, to establish mass media and receive and store information in their native language, to profess any religion or participate in religious rituals in their native language, to preserve historic and cultural heritage, and to establish public associations, among other rights. The law banned operations of any public associations of national minorities that were deemed connected to or part of a political organization of a foreign state. While it also prohibited any actions to discriminate on national grounds, including incitement of interethnic hatred, the law was applied arbitrarily, ineffectively, and in some cases on politically motivated grounds. There were no separate laws that provided for the protection of members of racial or ethnic minority groups against violence and discrimination.

Governmental and societal discrimination against Romani, Polish, and Lithuanian minority groups persisted. According to leaders of Romani communities, security and law enforcement agencies continued arbitrarily to detain, investigate, profile, and harass Roma, including by forced fingerprinting, mistreating them in detention, and subjecting them to ethnic insults.

The Romani community continued to experience marginalization, various forms of discrimination, high unemployment, low levels of education, and lack of access to social services. In addition, some members of the Romani community complained that employers often discriminated against them and either refused to employ them or did not provide full-time jobs. The government did not take any action during the year to prevent or eliminate employment discrimination. Employment discrimination occurred across most economic sectors and in both private and public workplaces. Roma generally held citizenship, but many lacked official identity documents and refused to obtain them.

On April 28, the Hrodna Regional Court shut down the Lithuanian public association Himtsine in the village of Peliasa. The association had more than 160 members and represented Lithuanian national traditions, culture, and history. On November 23, the same court shut down another Lithuanian public association, Club Gerveciai, founded in 1994 with approximately 400 members, in the village of Rymdziuny. According to human rights observers, authorities aimed to break connections between Belarusians of ethnic Lithuanian origin and their counterparts in Lithuania to prevent activities of the minority group.

Authorities harassed and jailed members of the independent and unregistered Union of Poles of Belarus. For example, on February 8, the Hrodna Regional Court sentenced behind closed doors political prisoner, journalist, and activist of the union Andrzej Poczobut to eight years in a high-security prison on charges of inciting social hatred and calling for actions to harm national security.

Authorities in the western part of the country harassed the Polish minority, including through destroying sites of burials of Polish Armia Krajowa soldiers, portraying them as a Nazi group and collaborators. On April 12, the Union of Poles reported that a granite memorial stone at the site of the 18 Armia Krajowa soldiers' burial in the village of Varziany was removed.

CHILDREN

Education: Only a few schools provided education in the Belarusian language, one of the two national languages in the country along with the dominant Russian language. The government obstructed some schools operating in minority languages and forced all schools to switch to local languages based on the amended education code enforcing such education in all schools as of September 2022.

Child Abuse: The law stipulated children's rights to education, health care, personal integrity, and protection from exploitation and violence. The law provided for the inviolability of the child's person and protected the child from all types of exploitation, including sexual, physical, and psychological abuse; cruel or abusive treatment, humiliation, and sexual harassment (including by parents, guardians, caregivers, and relatives); involvement in criminal activities; use of alcoholic beverages; use of drugs or other intoxicating substances, and tobacco products; and coercion into commercial sex, begging, vagrancy, participation in gambling, actions related to child pornography, and work that could harm physical, mental, or moral development. In general, these laws were effectively enforced.

Conviction of rape or sexual assault of a person known to be a child was punishable by up to 15 years' imprisonment. Conviction of a person older than 18 for engaging in sexual acts with a person known to be younger than 16 was punishable by up to 10 years' imprisonment.

According to local human rights groups, domestic violence and abuse against children were common, and anecdotal evidence suggested that many parents admitted beating their children. Authorities, recognizing sexual abuse of children continued to be a problem, said they identified families in vulnerable conditions and generally intervened to prevent child abuse linked to domestic violence, providing foster care to children who could not remain with their immediate families while preventive work was underway. Although the government continued to prosecute child abusers, its efforts to address the causes of child abuse were inadequate, and it lacked effective capabilities to detect violence and refer survivors for proper assistance in a timely manner.

Independent experts continued to raise concerns regarding the government's inefficiency in executing certain protective measures absent assistance from international organizations and NGOs. According to the 2020 UNICEF report, *The Situation of Vulnerable Children and Adolescents in Belarus*, one in six children ages 11 to 13 and one in four children ages 14 to 17 in the country reported exposure to physical or psychological violence at home. More than one-half of children in special closed-type educational institutions (residential juvenile detention facilities that included education) and six in 10 boys from penitentiary institutions reported experiencing violence at home prior to their entering these institutions.

Child, Early, and Forced Marriage: The legal minimum age of marriage for both boys and girls was 18, although girls as young as 14 could marry with parental consent. Authorities effectively enforced this law.

Sexual Exploitation of Children: The minimum age for consensual sex was 16. Sex trafficking of children was a problem, and authorities took some steps to address it. The law provided penalties of up to 13 years in prison for producing or distributing pornographic materials depicting a minor. Authorities generally enforced the law. Authorities claimed the law did not require a demonstration of force, fraud, or coercion to constitute a child sex-trafficking offense. Authorities considered child pornography and cyber-related methods such as sexting, grooming, and sextortion to be serious problems.

ANTISEMITISM

The Jewish community estimated approximately 30,000 Jews lived in the country.

There were no reports of violence against or harassment of Jewish persons, or of threats or attacks against community institutions. There were no reports of vandalism against the Jewish community.

Many memorials to victims of the Holocaust, built in Soviet times as well as more recently, did not distinguish Jewish victims from other victims of Nazi atrocities. The Jewish community continued to work with foreign donors and local authorities to erect monuments to commemorate Jewish victims specifically.

Holocaust distortion occurred. For example, the regime focused on the so-called genocide of the “Belarusian people,” rather than victims of the Holocaust in general, or Jewish victims in particular, in order to promote an anti-European narrative for political ends. State-affiliated propagandists, political analysts, and security officials issued social media posts insulting dissidents of Jewish origin, including those who left for Israel or remained in exile, for their protest activity or other connections with the democratic opposition and prodemocracy movement. After the October 7 Hamas terrorist attack against Israel, some regime-affiliated accounts posted derisive caricatures of the Israeli armed response and overt statements in support of Hamas.

For further information on incidents in the country of antisemitism, whether or not those incidents were motivated by religion, and for reporting on the ability of Jews to exercise freedom of religion or belief, please see the Department of State’s *International Religious Freedom Report* at <https://www.state.gov/religiousfreedomreport/>.

TRAFFICKING IN PERSONS

See the Department of State’s *Trafficking in Persons Report* at <https://www.state.gov/trafficking-in-persons-report/>.

ACTS OF VIOLENCE, CRIMINALIZATION, AND OTHER ABUSES BASED ON SEXUAL ORIENTATION, GENDER IDENTITY OR EXPRESSION, OR SEX CHARACTERISTICS

Criminalization: There were no laws that explicitly criminalized consensual same-sex sexual conduct, cross-dressing, or any sexual or gender characteristic-related behaviors. Laws against prostitution, however, were commonly used to target LGBTQI+ persons, especially in a common tactic in which police entrapped men on location-based apps used by men who have sex with men by agreeing to meet and then arresting them for alleged commercial sex. While less common, police also reportedly charged some persons with hooliganism when their clothing and appearance did not match expectations of binary gender.

Violence and Harassment: LGBTQI+ persons continued to experience discrimination, harassment, threats, and violence at the hands of authorities, according to numerous reports from human rights defenders. LGBTQI+ activists were among those who went into exile after facing increased harassment and risk of arrest from the regime during the year. Police arbitrarily raided LGBTQI+ bars, clubs, and meeting places. On October 7, police raided several LGBTQI+ clubs in Minsk, briefly detaining dozens of individuals to check their mobile phones and use of any prohibited substances. While no arrests were reported, several clubs did not reopen after raids.

In some instances, when police detained individuals under suspicion of identifying as LGBTQI+, they forced them to confess to crimes and to state a sexual orientation on camera, later posting the recording online. For example, in August police posted multiple videos in one of the security services’ Telegram channels, in which individuals said they engaged in protests and were “of nontraditional sexual orientation.” The messages allegedly included mention that they “belonged to the LGBTQI+ Telegram chat.” Independent observers questioned the legality and plausibility of these videos and noted that authorities could have abused the persons to force them into making the statements. There were no reports authorities took action to investigate those complicit in violence and abuses against LGBTQI+ persons. Human rights advocates working with LGBTQI+ communities reported cases in which school and local authorities threatened to remove children from families with LGBTQI+ parents, claiming the children were in “vulnerable conditions.”

Discrimination: The law did not prohibit discrimination by state and nonstate actors based on sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, or sex characteristics, and there was no legal recognition of marriage equality or any form of same-sex partnership. In February 2022, the country adopted by referendum a constitutional amendment that specified marriage was “a union between a woman and a man.”

In his March 31 address to the nation and parliament, Lukashenka declared that “being gay is disgusting but those ones in my government are working better than some straight persons... they are not creating problems and we should not ban them; however, there should be no propaganda of nontraditional relations... we need more children, and men do not give birth.” He also accused men of not doing enough to prevent women from “becoming lesbian.”

Societal discrimination against LGBTQI+ activists and stigmatization of LGBTQI+ persons persisted with both the explicit and tacit support of the government, which either failed to investigate crimes or did so without recognizing them as hate crimes, for which there was no law. In June the Prosecutor General’s Office adopted an *Action Plan for the Protection of Children from Sexual Abuse and Exploitation*, providing for a set of administrative penalties and liabilities for promoting “nontraditional sexual relationships, gender reassignment, pedophilia, and childfree lifestyles.” Human rights groups stated that the measures implicated LGBTQI+ individuals as having mental disorders and deliberately portrayed LGBTQI+ persons as a danger to children, which they assessed would increase social stigma and potentially motivate violent acts and hate crimes against LGBTQI+ persons.

Availability of Legal Gender Recognition: The government allowed transgender persons to update their name and gender marker on national identification documents, but these documents retained old identification numbers that included a digit indicating the individual’s sex assigned at birth. The process of changing one’s gender officially required registering with a local state psychological clinic, extensive medical examinations and testing, an evaluation by a 15-member commission, including psychologists and other doctors, as well as officials from the Citizenship and Migration Department of the Internal Affairs Ministry, Justice Ministry, Defense Ministry, and health-care and education entities, among others. An existing marriage was a common impediment to a petitioner’s approval of official gender change, and petitioners with children were almost always denied. Transgender persons reportedly were refused jobs when potential employers noted the “discrepancy” between an applicant’s appearance and the gender marker in the identification number. In 2018, the government began to issue gender-neutral identification numbers; however, numbers issued prior to this date retained gender markers. Transgender persons were issued military identification that generally indicated they had “a severe mental illness.”

Involuntary or Coercive Medical or Psychological Practices: There were reports of psychologists and psychiatrists who attempted “conversion therapy” on a private basis to change a person’s sexual orientation or gender identity or expression. There were no reports of surgeries performed on minors or nonconsenting adult intersex persons.

Restrictions of Freedom of Expression, Association, or Peaceful Assembly: There were no specific laws or other restrictions on individuals speaking or media reporting on LGBTQI+ matters, on the ability of LGBTQI+ individuals to assemble in public or private or to form associations, or on the ability of LGBTQI+ organizations to legally register or convene events; however, LGBTQI+ persons faced the same restrictions on freedoms of expression, association, and assembly as the rest of society.

PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

Persons with disabilities could generally access social services, health services, public buildings, and transportation on an equal basis with others. The government, however, did not enforce such access effectively and uniformly across all regions of the country, and in some locations, failed to provide information and communication in accessible formats. There were minor steps to improve the accessibility to public infrastructure, however. The government expanded access to services for persons with various disabilities, ranging from banking and postal services to understanding product packaging and public transportation schedules.

On January 6, authorities adopted the law on the rights of persons with disabilities and their social integration, which provided for comprehensive mechanisms for ensuring access to social, transport, housing, and industrial infrastructure, and also introduced improved employment mechanisms, including a plan for quotas starting in 2025.

The law discriminated against children and persons with disabilities, limiting their ability to access primary, secondary, and higher education depending on their degree of disability. A person's degree of disability was determined by a commission of experts, but assessments were arbitrarily applied. For example, advocates cited cases of children with Down syndrome who were required to submit to reassessments of their "mental abilities" at predetermined ages and, following such assessments, were in some cases not allowed to continue their education in "integrated" classes. Children with disabilities attended school but completed secondary education at a significantly lower rate than other children and generally attended specialized schools meant only for children with disabilities.

Opportunities for employment and occupational development remained limited for persons with disabilities. A government prohibition against workdays longer than seven hours for persons with disabilities reportedly made companies reluctant to hire them. According to independent estimates, 80 percent of persons with disabilities remained unemployed. While authorities operated some enterprises that accommodated persons with certain disabilities, such as those with hearing or vision disabilities, many persons with disabilities opted to maintain their welfare benefits, since salaries in jobs available to them were low or they had to undergo additional examinations to be approved for employment. Authorities provided minimal welfare benefits for persons with disabilities. Pension calculations were required to consider disability status under the law; however, authorities were not always willing to provide higher pensions warranted by disability status.

According to a 2020 UNICEF study, 40 percent of families of children with disabilities faced poverty, and 60 percent of mothers and 15 percent of fathers of children with disabilities had to limit their job activities due to the need to care for their children. Separately, social norms were not supportive of the inclusion of young persons with disabilities, including those with HIV or mental-health issues, in education and employment with the general population.

The law mandated that transport, residences, and businesses be accessible to persons with disabilities, but few public areas were wheelchair-accessible or accessible for persons with hearing and vision disabilities. Most persons with physical disabilities were unable to leave their places of residence without assistance and stated their residences were not suitable to accommodate persons with physical disabilities. Independent observers reported the government took minor steps to improve accessibility of public infrastructure. For example, newer subway stations in Minsk were equipped with elevators accessible to wheelchair users.

Public transportation was free to persons with disabilities, but the majority of older subway stations in Minsk, as well as the bus system, were not accessible to wheelchair users.

Persons with disabilities, especially those with vision and hearing disabilities, often encountered problems with access to courts and obtaining court interpreters.

Women with disabilities often faced discrimination, including employment discrimination, and claimed they were unable to care for their children and received worse medical services and care compared to the general population, especially in provincial medical institutions. Pregnant women with disabilities faced accessibility barriers at maternity clinics and hospitals. The law did not specifically prohibit discrimination against persons with physical, sensory, intellectual, or mental disabilities, and discrimination was common.

The country's lack of independent living opportunities left many persons with disabilities no choice but to live in state-run institutions where the quality of care was generally low. Instances of harassment and mistreatment were reported, such as cases of physical and psychological abuse, lack of medical care for other non-disability-related conditions, and underfunded facilities and infrastructure. Authorities placed persons with physical and mental disabilities in the same facilities and did not provide either group with specialized care. According to various estimates, more than

15,000 persons with disabilities who lived in “psychoneurological” institutions were deprived of legal rights, and courts designated directors of these institutions as their legal guardians.

Institutionalized individuals with disabilities had no political or civil rights, and courts recognized the directors of these institutions as the legal guardians of these individuals. Institutionalized individuals were not able to provide informed consent to medical treatment affecting their reproductive health, including for sterilization, due to mental or other disabilities.

Institutionalized Children: As of January 2021, there were nine institutions for children with disabilities that held at least 1,300 children. Institutions provided basic medical and social care to their clients. Although experts assessed the services as being of better quality than at adult institutions, these institutions had problems with proper diagnostics, education, and social reintegration, as well as public accountability and transparency. On February 1, the Education Ministry enforced regulations prohibiting institutionalized children with the severest mental and behavioral disorders, as well as the most severe forms of hearing loss and deafness, from receiving education at the institutions where they were residing, which human rights groups described as discriminatory.

There was no system for monitoring child abuse in orphanages or other specialized institutions for children with disabilities. Authorities did not report any child abuse incidents in institutions. There were allegations of abuse in foster families; the government opened or continued investigations into some of these cases.

OTHER SOCIETAL VIOLENCE OR DISCRIMINATION

Societal discrimination against persons with HIV or AIDS remained a problem, and the illness carried a heavy social stigma. According to local NGOs working with HIV-positive and AIDS patients and other groups at risk, HIV-infected individuals, especially drug users undergoing or having completed treatment, continued to face discrimination, especially at workplaces and during job interviews.

Section 7.

Worker Rights

A. FREEDOM OF ASSOCIATION AND THE RIGHT TO COLLECTIVE BARGAINING

Although the law nominally provided for the rights of workers, except state security and military personnel, to form and join independent unions and to strike, it placed serious restrictions on the exercise of these rights. The law provided for the right to organize and bargain collectively but did not protect against antiunion discrimination. Workers who claimed they were fired for union activity had no explicit right to reinstatement or to challenge their dismissal in court, according to trade union activists.

The government did not enforce the law protecting freedom of association, collective bargaining, and the right to strike for workers, in part because the government and state enterprises did not respect the legal right of independent freedom of association. The law provided for civil penalties against employers in the form of fines for violations of the freedom of association or collective bargaining. Fines against employers were not commensurate with penalties for other crimes related to civil rights and were rarely applied, especially against state-owned enterprises, the main violators.

On June 23, authorities amended regulations for establishing national and local trade unions, raising the threshold of membership from 50 and 10, respectively, to 500 workers each. Additionally, the Chinese-Belarus industrial park Great Stone was allowed to create local trade unions without abiding by the membership regulation.

As with independent NGOs, the government shut down all independent unions operating in the country in 2022, which had previously united approximately 10,000 workers. The government-controlled Federation of Trade Unions of Belarus remained the largest union federation and claimed more than four million members.

Tight government control over registration requirements and public demonstrations made it difficult for any independent unions to organize or conduct strikes.

The government did not respect collective bargaining. Prohibitive registration requirements, mandating that any new union unaffiliated with the government have a large membership and cooperation from state employers, continued to present significant obstacles to independent union formation. Trade unions could be removed from the register by a decision of the registrar, without any court procedure. The registrar could remove a trade union from the register if, following the issuance of a written warning to the trade union that it was violating legislation or its own statutes, the violations were not corrected within one month. Prior to the closure of independent unions, authorities resisted attempts by workers to leave official unions and join independent unions. Government restrictions on freedom of association made it difficult for independent trade unions to participate in collective bargaining. Authorities required a single labor union position ahead of bargaining, which at state enterprises where independent unions were present required both labor organizations to collaborate in collective bargaining.

The requirements to conduct a legal strike were onerous. For example, strikes could only be held three or more months after dispute resolution between the union and employer failed. The duration of the strike had to be specified in advance. In addition, a minimum number of workers had to continue to work during the strike. Nevertheless, these requirements were largely irrelevant, since the unions that represented almost all workers remained under government control. Government authorities and managers of state-owned enterprises routinely interfered with union activities and hindered workers' efforts to bargain collectively, in some instances arbitrarily suspending collective bargaining agreements. Management and local authorities blocked workers' attempts to organize strikes on many occasions by declaring them illegal.

Some union members who participated in political protests, which authorities generally considered unauthorized mass events, were detained, and a smaller percentage of politically active workers lost their jobs or remained in forced exile.

The government continued to pressure workers and trade union leaders by jailing them, subjecting them to physical violence, firing them, detaining or fining workers who discussed conducting strikes, refusing to renew employment contracts of workers involved in strikes, and applying psychological pressure by threatening workers with the removal of parental rights over their children and stressing the impact lost wages would have on their children and families.

Workers encountered politically related pressure, including for attempting to exercise their freedoms of speech, assembly, and association or expressing their political opinions.

On January 5, the Minsk City Court convicted Vasily Berasneu, Henadz Fyadynich, and Vatslau Areshka, leaders of the independent Radio-Electronics trade union shut down by the government in July 2022, on charges of calling for sanctions, creating an "extremist" group, and inciting social hatred. They were each sentenced to up to nine years in prison.

The law on mass events also seriously limited demonstrations, rallies, and other public action, constraining the right of unions to organize. No foreign assistance could be offered to trade unions for holding seminars, meetings, strikes, pickets, or related activities, or for "propaganda activities" aimed at their own members, without authorities' permission. Workers at state-owned enterprises

were fired, arrested, and in some cases criminally prosecuted for participating in strikes. Authorities attempted to pressure or fire workers who were deemed protest or strike leaders, or became involved in opposition political activities, which hindered the union's ability to conduct regular union activities and disrupted workers' rights to strike and express freely their political opinions.

On February 17, the Homyel Regional Court convicted 10 members of the strike initiative Rabochy Rukh (Workers' Movement), uniting workers from various state-owned enterprises across the country, on charges of high treason, creating an "extremist" group to strike and conduct industrial espionage, and collaborating with foreign intelligence in Lithuania and other countries, among other allegations. The court sentenced them to prison terms of 11 to 15 years.

State employees, who constituted approximately 70 percent of the workforce, could establish contracts with terms of up to five years, but most contracts expired after one year. NGOs alleged this practice gave the government, through state employers, the ability to fire state employees by declining to renew their contracts. Some state employees (including medical professionals and teachers) who protested the government's COVID-19 response or participated in protests against the government's handling of the election in 2020 reportedly were not rehired as of 2023. A government edict provided the possibility for employers to sign open-ended work contracts with an employee only after five years of good conduct and performance by the employee. Longer contracts, however, reportedly also restricted the ability of employees to leave for other jobs. Workers were generally protected during the terms of their contracts.

Opposition political party members and democratic activists had difficulty finding work at both state-affiliated and private employers due to government pressure on these employers.

B. PROHIBITION OF FORCED OR COMPULSORY LABOR

See the Department of State's annual *Trafficking in Persons Report* at <https://www.state.gov/trafficking-in-persons-report/>.

C. PROHIBITION OF CHILD LABOR AND MINIMUM AGE FOR EMPLOYMENT

The law prohibited all of the worst forms of child labor. The minimum age for employment was 16. Children as young as 14 could conclude a labor contract with the written consent of one parent or a legal guardian. The Prosecutor General's Office was responsible for enforcement of the law. Persons younger than 18 were allowed to work in nonhazardous jobs but were not allowed to work overtime, on weekends, or on government holidays. Work could not be harmful to children's health or hinder their education.

The government generally enforced these laws, and penalties for violations were commensurate with those of other serious crimes. The government did not provide data on child labor law violations during the year.

There were no confirmed reports during the year of the worst forms of child labor.

D. DISCRIMINATION (SEE SECTION 6)

E. ACCEPTABLE CONDITIONS OF WORK

Wage and Hour Laws: As of October 1, the national minimum monthly wage exceeded the poverty line.

The law established a standard workweek of 40 hours and provided for at least one 24-hour rest period per week. The law provided for mandatory overtime and nine days of holiday pay and restricted overtime to 10 hours a week, with a maximum of 180 hours of overtime each year.

The State Labor Inspection Department at the Labor and Social Welfare Ministry was responsible for the enforcement of wage and overtime laws.

Occupational Safety and Health: The law established minimum conditions for occupational safety and health (OSH), but employers did not always follow the standards or require workers to wear minimal safety gear.

The State Labor Inspection Department at the Labor and Social Welfare Ministry was responsible for workplace safety and worker health. The state labor inspectorate lacked authority to enforce employer compliance and often ignored violations. Although inspectors could make unannounced inspections and initiate sanctions, the number of inspectors was insufficient to enforce compliance.

The law provided workers the right to remove themselves from situations that endangered health or safety without jeopardizing their employment. According to the State Labor Inspection Department, employees had the right to refuse to perform work if they were not provided with personal protective equipment that directly ensured labor safety. The list of required personal protective equipment was approved by the ministry. In order to refuse to perform assigned work due to a lack of equipment, an employee had to inform the employer or an authorized official of the reasons for refusal in writing.

The most problematic industries included the agricultural, industrial, and construction sectors. The same inspectors who had authority over wage and working hour laws were also responsible for enforcing OSH laws. The State Labor Inspection Department maintained labor hotlines for each region and also provided separate contact details for matters associated with labor inspections, labor protection, and labor violations. The department also maintained a hotline for problems involving the illegal dismissal of workers.

Wage, Hour, and OSH Enforcement: Authorities effectively enforced minimum wage and overtime laws, and penalties for violations were commensurate with those for other similar crimes. The government did not effectively enforce OSH laws. Penalties for violations were not commensurate with those for other similar crimes. Penalties were only sometimes applied against violators, and the number of labor inspectors was widely assumed to be insufficient to enforce compliance, but the number was not made public.

Independent experts reported the informal economy constituted up to 30 percent of the total economy, which had a workforce of 4.1 million persons, according to government data. Persons engaged in the informal economy were often employed in the agricultural, transportation, small-scale retail, and short-term lodging sectors. Labor law did not cover informal workers.