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World Report 2021 - Belarus

An unprecedented wave of mass and largely peaceful protests swept Belarus following the August 9 contested re-election of Aliaksandr Lukashenka, who has been president since 1994. Belarusian security forces arbitrarily detained thousands of people and subjected hundreds to torture and other ill-treatment in an attempt to stifle the protests. However, the abuse only served to increase public outrage. Tens of thousands continued to demonstrate peacefully for fair elections and justice for abuses.

Authorities launched hundreds of politically motivated criminal cases against political opposition members, protesters, and their supporters. In many cases they detained, beat, fined, or deported journalists who covered the protests and stripped them of their accreditation. They temporarily blocked dozens of websites and, during several days, severely restricted access to the internet.

Free and Fair Elections

The presidential elections were marred by arrests of leading opposition candidates, groundless refusals to register certain opposition candidates for the ballot, and allegations of widespread fraud.

In May, the Central Electoral Commission (CEC) refused to register the nomination for Siarhei Tsikhanousky, a popular blogger who at the time was serving a sentence for the administrative offense of organizing an unauthorized protest, on the grounds that he had not signed the registration papers personally. Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, his spouse, advanced her candidacy instead. In mid-June, Tsikhanouskaya received an anonymous call threatening her children’s safety unless she dropped out of the race. Tsikhanouskaya remained in the race but sent her children to a safe country.

On June 18, authorities arrested leading opposition candidate Viktor Babaryka and his son Eduard. Authorities later announced they had charged Babaryka with tax evasion, money laundering, and bribery. At time of writing, Babaryka, who said the charges were fabricated, remained in pretrial detention.

CEC barred from running another key opposition candidate, Valer Tsapkala, on dubious claims that over half of his nomination signatures were invalid.

The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe’s Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (OSCE ODIHR) did not monitor the election due to the lack of a timely invitation from Belarus.

A consortium of Belarusian human rights organizations sought to monitor the vote and reported that election officials did not let them observe ballot counting. The consortium alleged major irregularities in the officially reported vote count. In September, authorities arrested Maria Rabkova of Viasna, a leading human rights organization, as part of a criminal investigation into alleged “mass riots.” Rabkova played an important role in the election monitoring effort.

Governmental Crackdown on Peaceful Protests

Officials and police violently dispersed protests on August 9-12 in Minsk and other large cities, using excessive force and resorting to rubber bullets, stun grenades, and tear gas. Riot police detained almost 7,000 protesters and bystanders in four days, subjecting hundreds to torture and other ill-treatment and holding them in inhuman and degrading conditions. At least four protesters died as a result of police actions.

Former detainees described beatings, prolonged stress positions, electric shocks, and in at least one case, rape. Some had serious injuries, including broken bones, skin wounds, electrical burns, or mild traumatic brain injuries. Detainees said that police, riot police, and special forces picked them up off the streets, in some cases using extreme violence, then beat them in dangerously confined spaces in vehicles where they struggled to breathe. Some detainees alleged riot police officers threatened them with rape, in most cases while they were in transit. At least one man was raped with a truncheon.

At precincts and other detention facilities, police beat detainees and forced them to hold stress positions for hours, then held them for days in overcrowded cells. Police often denied detainees food and water and denied their requests to go to the toilet. Police and guards at detention facilities confiscated detainees’ medications, frequently ignored calls for medical care, and in some cases denied it altogether.

Detainees were denied access to a lawyer. Those taken before a judge said the proceedings lasted only a few minutes and ended with short custodial sentences for administrative offenses. Others were released early. Detainees’ family members struggled, in many cases for days, to find out their relatives’ fate or whereabouts.

On August 14, the deputy internal affairs minister denied that anyone had been beaten or tortured. On August 26, the Prosecutor’s Office announced the creation of an inter-agency commission to gather facts about any criminal acts by law enforcement, both during arrests and in detention facilities. Dozens of former detainees lodged complaints. Although several preliminary inquiries were launched by the authorities, at time of writing they had not opened any criminal cases.

In early September, police again began to arrest large numbers of peaceful protesters, with the Interior Ministry reporting hundreds of arrests every weekend, and during two successive weekends in early November, they arrested more than 2,000.

By mid-November, authorities had detained a total of 25,000 since early August.

Many of the detainees were women. As women were at the forefront of the protests, authorities used misogynistic tactics against women in particular to undermine their participation in protests, such as threatening them with loss of custody of their children and labeling them “aggressive” and “unfeminine.”

Arrest and Harassment of Opposition Members and Supporters

Starting in early summer, authorities launched more than 500 criminal cases against potential presidential candidates, their campaigns’ team members, and peaceful protesters on false charges ranging from mass rioting to hooliganism. Authorities also launched criminal cases against businessmen and staff of companies that supported certain opposition presidential candidates and victims of police violence during the protests, including on charges of tax evasion and fraud. By November 15, at least 118 people remained in pretrial detention on these politically motivated charges.

Authorities arrested two members of the presidium of the opposition’s Coordination Council, Maryia Kalesnikava and Maksim Znak, and Illia Salei, Kalesnikava’s lawyer, and charged all three with “inciting actions aimed at harming [Belarus’s] national security.” Salei was released on bail in October. Tsikhanouskaya herself and the rest of the presidium’s members were forced to leave the country under threats of personal safety or criminal prosecution.

Freedom of Expression and Attacks on Journalists

The Belarusian Association of Journalists (BAJ) documented more than 500 incidents of harassment, detention, fines and temporary arrests of journalists from January through mid-November 2020. BelSAT, a Poland-based broadcaster long targeted by Belarusian authorities, estimates it has already paid over US\$100,000 in the first nine months of 2020, surpassing 2019’s total fines by June, mostly for reporting without accreditation.

Authorities targeted journalists who covered and livestreamed protests, detaining and charging them with participating in unauthorized mass events and illegal distribution of media products.

During June protests over the arrest of Babaryka, police in Hantsevichi detained and beat journalists Aliaksandr Pazniak and Siarhei Bahrou. In July, police in Minsk detained RFE/RL correspondent Anton Trafimovich and broke his nose.

In June, authorities arrested RFE/RL consultant and blogger Ihar Losik, on charges of “organizing group actions disrupting the public order”. If convicted, he faces up to three years in prison. Seven other popular Youtube bloggers and moderators of Telegram channels were arrested on similar charges in late June and early July and, like Losik, remain in pretrial detention at time of writing.

Persecution of journalists escalated after the election. BAJ reported 54 instances of police brutality against journalists from August through the end of September.

On August 9, *Nasha Niva* journalist Natalia Lubnevskaya was hospitalized with a rubber bullet leg wound in Minsk. When the newspaper’s editorial office tried to claim insurance compensation, authorities informed them that they were liable for “untimely reporting of a work-related injury,” although such charges were not brought. On the same day, *NRC* journalist Emilie van Outeren was wounded by stun grenade fragments.

Also on August 9, police detained Witold Dobrowolski and Kacper Sienicki, freelance journalists from Poland, in central Minsk. The journalists endured repeated beatings and threats during three days in detention.

Police violently detained *TUT.by* portal’s reporter Nikita Bystryk on August 10 while he was filming the protests and beat him, causing kidney damage and rib fractures. After issuing four warnings to *TUT.by* for its protest coverage in August and September, the Information Ministry suspended its registration for three months and filed a lawsuit to revoke it altogether.

On August 10, police in Minsk detained and beat Maxim Solopov, a journalist with a prominent Russian-language portal Meduza. His whereabouts were unknown for over a day, until the Russian ambassador to Belarus intervened and secured his release. On the same day, riot police detained another Russian reporter, Nikita Telizhenko from *Znak.com*, who then alleged he was brutally beaten at the detention facility.

At the end of August, a governmental commission stripped at least 19 journalists working for foreign outlets, including Reuters, Associated Press, and the BBC, of their Foreign Ministry accreditation.

Authorities also brought criminal defamation charges against journalists covering the protests. In September, police detained *Nasha Niva* editor-in-chief, Yavor Martsinovich, and interrogated him for publishing an interview with a former detainee who claimed that a top Interior Ministry official had beaten him in custody. Police searched Martsinovich’s apartment and seized his data-carrying devices. He was released on bail.

Freedom of Information

From August 9 to August 12, internet access in Belarus was severely restricted for 61 hours, leaving access only to 2G networks, permitting text messages and voice calls. Government officials blamed foreign cyber-attacks for the disruptions, but independent experts and an independent monitoring group have attributed them to government interference. Periodic internet access disruptions continued throughout August and September, in particular during weekend protest marches.

Authorities also blocked websites that covered the presidential election, subsequent nationwide protests, and police brutality. In August, Belarus blocked over 70 international and independent news websites, reportedly in response to their coverage of the August protests. In September, websites of three charities that raised funds to help victims of police violence were also blocked. The government also appeared to be blocking services that facilitate circumvention of online censorship such as virtual private networks (VPNs), used by millions in Belarus to access the blocked websites.

Death Penalty

Belarus remains the only country in Europe to carry out the death penalty. In the past year, Belarus is known to have executed one person, Aliaksandr Asipovich, who was sentenced to death in January 2019, and executed by firing squad on December 9, 2019.

There are currently four people on death row: Viktor Paulau, Viktor Syarhel, Stanislaw Kosteu, and Ilya Kosteu. The Supreme Court denied their appeals and they all are at risk of imminent execution.

In June, the Supreme Court vacated the death sentence of Viktor Skrundzik in light of evidence of a coerced confession and remanded the case to the Minsk regional court. Hearings began in September, but authorities suspended the hearings in October, citing the COVID-19 pandemic.

Covid-19

Since March, Belarus recorded over 70,000 cases and 632 deaths. At time of writing, Belarus has 1,208 reported cases per 100,000 people.

Throughout the pandemic, President Lukashenka dismissed the seriousness of Covid-19. Authorities did not introduce any lockdown measures despite high levels of community transmission. In November, authorities in Minsk and several other cities required mask-wearing in public.

Authorities attempted to silence medical professionals who spoke up about the danger of the pandemic. After Dr. Sergei Lazar gave an interview critical of the government’s slow response, the government fired him from his position as chief of emergency medicine at Vitebsk hospital.

Key International Actors

The annual report by the United Nations special rapporteur on Belarus, Anaïs Marin, concluded that there were no significant improvements in the human rights situation. Belarus continued to refuse to recognize her mandate and failed to cooperate with her investigations. A thematic report by the special rapporteur documented serious concerns with the administration of justice in Belarus.

The European Union and the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) condemned Belarus for handing down five new death sentences and carrying out at least one execution. Marin also condemned Belarus for prohibiting officials from releasing the date of the execution or burial location of those executed to their families.

The EU did not recognize the purported outcome of the presidential election, calling the election unfree and unfair, and imposed sanctions on 55 Belarusian officials, including Lukashenka and his elder son who is his national security advisor, involved in the post-election crackdown. The UN, the OSCE, and the Council of Europe (CoE) condemned Belarusian authorities for the violent response to protests. Many countries throughout Europe, including Germany, the Baltic States, Czechia, Poland, Slovakia, and the UK, declared the vote illegitimate and no longer recognize Lukashenka as president. The US also refused to recognize Lukashenka as president and condemned violence against protesters, detentions of opposition supporters, and internet shutdowns.

In September, 17 OSCE participating states led by the UK launched an independent expert investigation into torture and repression in Belarus. The independent expert, Professor Wolfgang Benedek, issued his report on November 5 and found “massive and systemic” human rights violations before and in the aftermath of the presidential election. Benedek called on Belarus to hold new elections, free all prisoners held for political reasons, and hold those responsible for torture and other abuses accountable.

Also in September, the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) held an urgent debate on Belarus and adopted a resolution that requests the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNHCHR) to closely monitor the situation in Belarus in the context of the 2020 presidential elections and provide updates in 2020 and 2021. Marin and other UN human rights experts urged Belarus to stop torturing protesters and to free Kalesnikava, who remains in jail at time of writing. In November, they also criticized Belarus for persecuting women human rights defenders in the context of the mass protests.

Also in September, the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) hailed the Women in White movement as key to advancing democracy Belarus.

In August, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania banned President Lukashenka and 29 other Belarusian officials from entering their countries due to the violent response to the protests. Later, this list was expanded to include a total of 128 officials. The UK and Canada also introduced visa bans and froze the assets of Lukashenka and several other top officials on human rights grounds. The US administration added eight Belarusian officials to its list of sanctioned Belarusian officials.

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