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The State of the World's Human Rights; Belarus 2023

Background

Belarus's international isolation deepened, and its EU neighbours tightened border controls after Belarus agreed to host the Russian private military company Wagner and deploy Russian tactical nuclear weapons on its territory.

Some 350,000 people were estimated to have left Belarus since the crackdown on dissent in 2020, leading to workforce shortages. Authorities attempted to force many to return, including by halting passport renewals at Belarussian consulates abroad.

Freedom of expression

Freedom of expression remained severely restricted. In May, amendments to the criminal code made it even easier for authorities to mount criminal prosecutions for “crimes of an anti-state orientation” and introduced criminal liability for “discrediting” the armed forces and other government forces including paramilitaries.

Books and other printed products continued to be outlawed for featuring “extremist content” and dozens of people were arrested every month for subscribing to “extremist” Telegram messenger channels.

In January, Darya Losik was sentenced to two years' imprisonment for “assisting extremist activity” because of an interview about her husband, prisoner of conscience Ihar Losik, on the Belsat television channel in 2022. She was accused of describing her husband as “a political prisoner” and protesting his innocence.

Belarusian courts continued to sentence individuals for “insulting” officials, “discrediting” state institutions and symbols, or “inciting animosity and enmity”.

In May, leading cultural figure Pavel Belavus was sentenced to 13 years' imprisonment and a fine of BYN 18,500 (USD 5,500) on four criminal charges, including treason and “leading an extremist formation”. Among other things, he was accused of “spreading ideas of Belarusian nationalism aimed at changing the state power”.

Freedom of association

The crackdown on independent civil society organizations, NGOs, professional organizations and ethnic and religious communities intensified. All 12 parties opposed to the government were refused re-registration and dissolved in an attempt to clear the field for elections in 2024.

Arbitrary charges of “extremism” were used to close civil society organizations, such as the human rights centre Viasna which in August was deemed an “extremist formation”.

Individuals were arrested for “financing extremist activities or organizations”. Kiryl Klimau was sentenced to four years' imprisonment for sending six donations of USD 10 to charities supporting the victims of political repression.

Freedom of religion and belief

From October, as part of a wide-ranging crackdown on dissent, all religious organizations were required to undergo re-registration or face closure.

Repression continued against Catholic priests. Starting on 31 May, Uladzislau Beladzed was arrested three consecutive times, each for 15 days, for “spreading extremist materials”. During a search of the Catholic cathedral in the capital Minsk, where he was serving, security forces reportedly beat several priests.

Authorities continued to persecute the New Life protestant church. In June, their church building was demolished. In August, two online publications from 2020 condemning violence against peaceful protesters were labelled “extremist” and two pastors were arrested. In October, the church was “liquidated” by a court decision because of “extremist activities”.

Freedom of peaceful assembly

The right to freedom of peaceful assembly remained severely restricted. Three years after the 2020 protests, the authorities continued to track down for unfounded prosecution and imprisonment both peaceful participants and those who supported them, including with donations.

Unfair trials

The authorities continued to abuse the justice system to crack down on all dissent, including political opponents, human rights defenders and lawyers. In March, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, Pavel Latushka, Maria Maroz, Volha Kavalkova and Siarhei Dyleuski were sentenced in their absence under trumped-up charges to between 12 and 18 years’ imprisonment. The practice of closed hearings remained widespread.

The persecution of lawyers defending victims of politically motivated prosecution continued, with a human rights group reporting that at least 10 lawyers were imprisoned and more than 100 disbarred or refused extension of their licence in retaliation for performing their professional duties.

Torture and other ill-treatment

Torture and other ill-treatment remained widespread and endemic with perpetrators enjoying impunity. Individuals convicted under politically motivated charges faced harsh treatment and inhumane conditions, including denial of adequate healthcare, contact with family members and outdoor exercise. For months at a time there was no information about the whereabouts and condition of Syarhei Tsikhanouski, Maryia Kalesnikava, Ihar Losik, Maksim Znak, Mikalai Statkevich, Viktor Babaryka and other imprisoned high-profile activists, journalists and politicians.

In July, imprisoned artist Ales Pushkin died, reportedly from an untreated perforated ulcer, in the city of Hrodna. He had been serving a five-year sentence imposed after unfounded charges.

Human rights defenders

The authorities continued to prevent human rights defenders from carrying out their work, including through arbitrary detention.

In March, members of prominent human rights organization Viasna, Ales Bialiatski, Valiantsin Stefanovic and Uladzimir Labkovich, were sentenced to 10, nine and seven years’ imprisonment

respectively, on false charges.¹

Nasta Loika was sentenced on trumped-up charges to seven years' imprisonment in a closed trial in June. Her name was added to the list of individuals involved in "terrorist activities".

Refugees' and migrants' rights

Belarusian authorities continued to lure refugees and migrants to Belarus with a false promise of easy passage into the EU, then violently forced them across EU borders where they also faced pushbacks by Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia. Refugees and migrants at the border often faced torture and other ill-treatment by Belarusian authorities.

Death penalty

Death sentences continued, but no executions were reported.

New provisions in the criminal code, adopted in May, extended the application of the death penalty to treason by "officials in responsible positions", state officials and military officers.

Right to a healthy environment

According to the WHO, fine particulate air pollution in Belarus, mainly from vehicle emissions, was three times greater than the organization's recommended safe limit and was responsible for 18% of deaths from stroke and ischaemic heart disease. The country's climate policies were incompatible with its obligations under the Paris Agreement.
