

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

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Freedom in the World 2021 Belarus

NOT FREE

11

/100

<u>Political Rights</u>	2 /40
<u>Civil Liberties</u>	9 /60

LAST YEAR'S SCORE & STATUS

19 /100 **Not Free**

Global freedom statuses are calculated on a weighted scale. [See the methodology.](#)



Overview

Belarus is an authoritarian state in which elections are openly rigged and civil liberties are severely restricted. After permitting limited displays of

dissent as part of a drive to pursue better relations with the European Union (EU) and the United States, the government in 2020 cracked down on a massive antigovernment protest movement, sparked by a fraudulent presidential election, and severely limited fundamental civil liberties.

Key Developments in 2020

- The government claimed that the incumbent president Alyaksandr Lukashenka won the August presidential election with 80 percent of the vote, though the results were widely denounced as fraudulent. The campaign and election period featured an unfair candidate registration process, the detention of candidates, widespread internet disruptions on election day, and the violent crackdown on peaceful protesters demanding their right to a fair vote.
- A prodemocracy movement led largely by presidential candidates and opposition movement leaders Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya and Veronika Tsepkalo emerged in the run-up to the election and grew massively in numbers after the fraudulent poll. Armed riot police and plainclothes officers used disproportionate, sometimes deadly force to break up the mass demonstrations, and detained over 32,000 people. Reports of beatings, torture, and other human rights abuses of people in detention have since emerged, and security forces beat, arrested, fined, and in some cases shot Belarusian and foreign journalists covering events.
- After the election, authorities imprisoned the founders of a would-be new party and prosecuted the members of the opposition Coordination Council, which united a broad spectrum of civic and political leaders calling for dialogue and peaceful negotiations with the government to resolve the post-election crisis. By the fall, scores of activists and opposition leaders, including Tsikhanouskaya and Tsepkalo, were expelled or had fled the country.
- As the COVID-19 pandemic spread across the country, President Alyaksandr Lukashenka dismissed concerns about the virus as “psychosis” and refused to implement mitigation measures.

Political Rights

A. Electoral Process

A1 0-4 pts

Was the current head of government or other chief national authority elected through free and fair elections?

0 / 4

The president is elected for five-year terms, and there are no term limits. President Alyaksandr Lukashenka was first elected in 1994, in the country's only democratic election. The campaign period was heavily controlled by authorities, who permitted only 15 of 55 applicants to register as candidates. The government arrested two major candidates, Siarhei Tsikhanouski and Viktor Babaryka, and forced another candidate, Valery Tsepkalo, to flee the country before voting day. Scores of activists were similarly arrested or fled the country. Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya and Veronika Tsepkalo, who led the largest opposition rallies in the country since the fall of the Soviet Union, both became popular candidates after their husbands were arrested and forced to flee. They experienced severe pressure from authorities and eventually went into exile after the election. Authorities failed to send an invitation to the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) on time, and the elections took place without an independent monitoring mission.

The government claimed that Lukashenka won the poll with 80 percent of the vote, though this was widely denounced as fraudulent. A parallel vote count using the mobile application "Golos," with data from just under 23 percent of polling stations, revealed that Tsikhanouskaya likely received 13 times more votes than were reported. Protests after the announcement of the results were met with disproportionate police force, including the use of live ammunition, and mass, arbitrary detentions, among other abuses. Documentation by human rights organizations showed that by the end of the year, 169 people were being held as political prisoners and the

government had opened more than 900 criminal cases, all related to the election period.

In September, amid ongoing massive protests and growing calls for a repeat election, Lukashenka inaugurated himself in a secret, unannounced ceremony. Democratic states worldwide have refused to recognize Lukashenka's legitimacy.

A2 0-4 pts

Were the current national legislative representatives elected through free and fair elections?

0 / 4

Legislative elections in Belarus are tightly restricted. The 110 members of the Chamber of Representatives, the lower house of the National Assembly, are elected by popular vote to four-year terms from single-mandate constituencies. The upper chamber, the Council of the Republic, consists of 64 members serving four-year terms: regional councils elect 56 and the president appoints 8.

A parliamentary election was held in November 2019, nearly a year ahead of schedule. Candidates loyal to President Lukashenka won every seat in the lower house, while independent candidates won none. OSCE election monitors reported some ballot boxes were stuffed, and that observers were often prohibited from observing ballot boxes or papers.

A3 0-4 pts

Are the electoral laws and framework fair, and are they implemented impartially by the relevant election management bodies?

0 / 4

The legal framework for elections fails to meet democratic standards, and authorities have dismissed OSCE recommendations to improve it. Electoral commission members of all levels are politically aligned with and dependent on the government, and independent observers have no access to ballot-counting processes. Out of the 1,989 members of local electoral commissions formed for the presidential election, authorities

allowed only two representatives of independent political parties to register, dismissing thousands of other independent applications.

B. Political Pluralism and Participation

B1 0-4 pts

Do the people have the right to organize in different political parties or other competitive political groupings of their choice, and is the system free of undue obstacles to the rise and fall of these competing parties or groupings?	0 / 4
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Involvement in political activism can result in a loss of employment, expulsion from educational institutions, smear campaigns in the media, fines, and the confiscation of property. Political parties face formidable challenges when seeking official registration.

After the 2020 election, an unprecedented grassroots political movement emerged, seeking to resolve the postelection conflict and hold a repeat poll. The regime has deliberately tried to undermine these initiatives. In August, Maryia Kalesnikava, who campaigned with Tsikhanouskaya, and Babaryka, announced the creation of a new political party called “Together.” One week later, Kalesnikava was kidnapped and later incarcerated, effectively ending the initiative. That same month, Tsikhanouskaya and other activists, including the winner of the 2015 Nobel Prize in Literature, Sviatlana Aleksiyevich, formed the Coordination Council, a civil society group that sought a peaceful resolution to the postelection violence and a rerun of the presidential poll. The government responded to the group’s creation by arresting and prosecuting several of its leaders, claiming that they were attempting to seize power illegally and that they were a national security threat.

Score Change: The score declined from 1 to 0 because the government intensified its efforts to shut independent organizations out of the political

process, including by imprisoning the founders of a would-be new party and by prosecuting the members of the opposition Coordination Council.

B2 0-4 pts

Is there a realistic opportunity for the opposition to increase its support or gain power through elections?

0 / 4

There is effectively no opportunity for independent candidates to gain power through elections, and Belarus has never experienced a democratic transfer of power. During the 2020 presidential election, vast numbers of Belarusians responded enthusiastically to the participation of opposition candidates. This interest manifested itself at the early stages of campaign and, in spite of regime's attempts to eliminate challengers, developed into a broad civil resistance movement. However, Lukashenka's regime has proven unyielding to the popular demand for political change.

B3 0-4 pts

Are the people's political choices free from domination by forces that are external to the political sphere, or by political forces that employ extrapolitical means?

0 / 4

Private citizens and political candidates are limited in their opportunities to express their views and make political choices. Meaningful participation in politics is generally not possible. The police and military used severe, sometimes fatal violence, and arrested and detained over 32,000 people to crack down on the peaceful prodemocracy protests in August 2020, ensuring that Lukashenka would maintain his power.

Score Change: The score declined from 1 to 0 because the military and police used violence and intimidation to suppress mass protests against the incumbent president's fraudulent reelection and have played a central role in perpetuating his rule.

B4 0-4 pts

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Do various segments of the population (including ethnic, racial, religious, gender, LGBT+, and other relevant groups) have full political rights and electoral opportunities?

1 / 4

No registered party represents the specific interests of ethnic or religious minority groups. Women formally enjoy equal political rights and make up 40 percent of legislators elected in November 2019. However, women are underrepresented in leadership positions. Women's advocacy groups have diverging positions on promoting the political rights of women, with some such groups taking the position that there is no need for gender equality initiatives in Belarus. There has been some visible activism by women's groups seeking to raise awareness of gender-based violence, but the government has largely refrained from addressing their concerns.

C. Functioning of Government

C1 0-4 pts

Do the freely elected head of government and national legislative representatives determine the policies of the government?

0 / 4

Though Lukashenka claimed victory in the 2020 presidential elections, the legitimacy of his office is disputed both domestically and internationally. The constitution vests power in the president, stating that presidential decrees have higher legal force than legislation. Lukashenka considers himself the head of all branches of government, including the parliament, which always supports his policies and rarely initiates legislation on its own.

C2 0-4 pts

Are safeguards against official corruption strong and effective?

1 / 4

The state controls at least 70 percent of the economy, and graft is encouraged by a lack of transparency and accountability in government. There are no independent bodies to investigate corruption cases, and

graft trials are typically closed. Presidential clemency has been issued occasionally to free convicted corrupt officials, some of whom Lukashenka has returned to positions of authority.

C3 0-4 pts

Does the government operate with openness and transparency?

0 / 4

The government largely fails to adhere to legal requirements providing for access to information. In recent years, authorities have moved to make some basic information about government operations available online. However, the COVID-19 pandemic further revealed the government's inability to provide transparent information to the public. President Lukashenka frequently provided conflicting and misleading information and guidance about the dangers of the coronavirus and ways to reduce its spread. Evidence from the United Nations (UN) suggested that the government's reported COVID-19 case numbers and mortality rate were vastly inaccurate.

Similarly, the regime has deliberately kept silent about important matters, such as talks with Russia about economic and other issues.

Score Change: The score declined from 1 to 0 because the government systematically concealed or provided misleading information about essential matters of public interest, including the COVID-19 pandemic and relations with Russia.

Civil Liberties

D. Freedom of Expression and Belief

D1 0-4 pts

Are there free and independent media?

0 / 4

The government exercises unrestricted control over mainstream media. The 2008 media law secures a state monopoly over information about political, social, and economic affairs. Libel is both a civil and criminal offense, and the criminal code contains provisions protecting the “honor and dignity” of high-ranking officials. The government owns the only internet service provider and controls the internet through legal and technical means. The official definition of mass media includes websites and blogs, placing them under the Information Ministry’s supervision. Most independent journalists operate under the assumption that they are under surveillance by the Committee for State Security (KGB). Journalists are subject to fines, detention, and criminal prosecution for their work. The government has used antiextremism legislation to curtail media activity.

In 2020, security forces beat, arrested, fined, and in some cases shot Belarusian and foreign journalists in hundreds of documented cases. Before and especially after the presidential election, authorities systemically disrupted the work of independent domestic and international media, detaining 477 journalists and prosecuting 9 with criminal charges. On voting day and for three days after the presidential election during the height of the mass prodemocracy protests, the government shut down the internet in almost the entire country, limiting the ability of reporters to provide accurate information to the public.

D2 0-4 pts

Are individuals free to practice and express their religious faith or nonbelief in public and private?

1 / 4

Despite constitutional guarantees of religious equality, government decrees and registration requirements maintain restrictions on religious activity. Legal amendments in 2002 provided for government censorship of religious publications and barred foreigners from leading religious groups. The amendments also placed strict limitations on religious groups active in Belarus for less than 20 years. In 2003, the government signed a concordat with the Belarusian Orthodox Church, which is controlled by the Russian Orthodox Church, giving it a privileged position.

After the 2020 elections, Lukashenka attempted to weaken the Catholic Church's influence, which had denounced state violence against peaceful prodemocracy protesters. In December, the government denied Tadeusz Kondrusiewicz, a Belarusian citizen and Archbishop of Minsk–Mohilev, reentry to the country. He was allowed to return only after negotiations with the Vatican and intense international pressure.

D3 0-4 pts

Is there academic freedom, and is the educational system free from extensive political indoctrination?

0 / 4

Academic freedom remains subject to intense state ideological pressures, and academic personnel face harassment and dismissal if they use a liberal curriculum or are suspected of disloyalty. Students and professors who join opposition protests face threat of dismissal and revocation of degrees.

The government pressures schoolchildren to join the pro-Lukashenka group Belarusian Republican Union of Youth (BRSU). The government has announced plans to tighten control over private schools, which noticed significant rise in demand after the 2020 election; many public school teachers were linked to the falsification of voting results.

Student activity at universities rose sharply in 2020, as many were involved in the August 2020 prodemocracy protests. Authorities responded with unprovoked brutality and repression, as plainclothes security forces attacked peaceful student protests within and outside of University campuses. Lukashenka replaced at least eight deans at different universities.

D4 0-4 pts

Are individuals free to express their personal views on political or other sensitive topics without fear of surveillance or retribution?

1 / 4

The use of wiretapping and other surveillance by state security agencies limits the right to free private discussion. Private citizens often avoid discussing sensitive issues over the phone or via internet communication platforms, for fear that state security agents are monitoring conversations.

During and after the 2020 election period and prodemocracy protests, authorities threatened, harassed, and arrested protesters, presidential candidates, professionals in the cultural sphere, academics, theater troupes, athletes, medical professionals, public figures, private individuals, and others who spoke out against Lukashenka and the postelection violence. Police routinely coerced, threatened, and tortured detained individuals, forcing them to open their mobile devices in search of photos, videos, and correspondence that confirmed their participation in the prodemocracy protests. Authorities also monitored social media activity of people who were arrested to find evidence of their participation in the protests and potentially increase the criminal charges they would face. The private company Synesis, which was sanctioned by the European Union (EU), reportedly helped authorities identify and arrest demonstrators by providing video surveillance technology with facial recognition.

E. Associational and Organizational Rights

E1 0-4 pts

Is there freedom of assembly?	0 / 4
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The government restricts freedom of assembly. Protests require permission from local authorities, who often arbitrarily deny it.

In the summer of 2020, unprecedented prodemocracy protests, demonstrations, and campaign rallies for Tsikhanouskaya occurred across the country—in the form of street chains, marches, and block parties with concerts and performances—assembling hundreds of

thousands of people. Police and military forces only partially succeeded in blocking people from congregating before voting day on August 9. But in the weeks that followed, the government deployed military equipment and armed riot police, who attacked and arrested people brutally and indiscriminately, at times opening fire with live ammunition, killing several. More than 32,000 people were arrested and later tried, jailed, or fined. Numerous instances of cruel treatment, beatings, and torture of protesters were recorded, with total impunity for the security forces involved.

Score Change: The score declined from 1 to 0 because security forces employed serious violence, torture, mass arrests, and thousands of arbitrary detentions as part of their crackdown on a large and sustained antigovernment protest movement.

E2 0-4 pts

Is there freedom for nongovernmental organizations, particularly those that are engaged in human rights– and governance-related work?	1 / 4
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Freedom of association is severely restricted. Registration of groups remains selective, and regulations ban foreign assistance to entities and individuals deemed to promote foreign meddling in internal affairs. Few human rights groups continue to operate because of resource shortages and pressure from the authorities, and staff and supporters risk prosecution and fines for their activism. Activists involved in the 2020 prodemocracy movement have been arrested by the thousands, and many more have fled the country.

Participation in unregistered or liquidated organizations, which had been criminalized in 2005, was decriminalized in 2018. Instead, the Criminal Code introduced the prospect of large fines, which obscures civil liberties infringements from the eyes of human rights watchdogs and democratic governments.

E3 0-4 pts

	0 / 4
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Is there freedom for trade unions and similar professional or labor organizations?	
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Independent labor unions face harassment, and their leaders are frequently fired and prosecuted for engaging in peaceful protests. No independent unions have been registered since 1999, when Lukashenka issued a decree setting extremely restrictive registration requirements.

Independent unions were prominent in the prodemocracy movement in the summer of 2020, striking to protest the fraudulent presidential election and police violence toward peaceful demonstrators. The state increasingly targeted and pressured workers to prevent them from going on strike. Union leaders and rank-and-file members were arrested, fined, dismissed from their posts, sent to psychiatric institutions, and forced into exile.

Score Change: The score declined from 1 to 0 because union leaders and rank-and-file members faced fines, dismissal, and detention for striking or threatening to strike as part of the postelection protest movement.

F. Rule of Law

F1 0-4 pts

Is there an independent judiciary?	0 / 4
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Courts are entirely subservient to President Lukashenka, who appoints Supreme Court justices with the approval of the rubber-stamp parliament.

F2 0-4 pts

Does due process prevail in civil and criminal matters?	0 / 4
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The right to a fair trial is not respected and often flatly dismissed in cases with political overtones. In a departure from international norms, the power to extend pretrial detention lies with a prosecutor rather than a judge. The absence of independent oversight allows police to routinely

and massively violate legal procedures. The government regularly attacks attorneys, who often are the only connection between imprisoned activists and their families and society.

During and after the presidential campaign of 2020, arbitrary arrests, police brutality and torture, and the denial of due process rights continued with impunity. Lawyers were often denied the right to meet with their defendants. Several lawyers defending political prisoners from the prodemocracy protests were disbarred or arrested.

Score Change: The score declined from 1 to 0 because the authorities systematically denied basic due process rights to detainees during election-related crackdowns, with even the lawyers for some detained protesters facing arrest and disbarment.

F3 0-4 pts

Is there protection from the illegitimate use of physical force and freedom from war and insurgencies?	0 / 4
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Law enforcement agencies have broad powers to employ physical force against suspects, who have little opportunity for recourse if they are abused. Human rights groups continue to document instances of beatings, torture, and intimidation during detention. During and after the presidential election period, detained peaceful prodemocracy protesters experienced cruel and dehumanizing treatment during their arrests, while being transported to detention centers, and when incarcerated.

F4 0-4 pts

Do laws, policies, and practices guarantee equal treatment of various segments of the population?	1 / 4
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Authorities have sought to increase the dominance of the Russian language. Official Usage of Belarusian remains rare. The UN Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) recognizes Belarusian as “vulnerable.” Since Lukashenka became president, the share of first graders who study in Belarusian fell from 40 to under 10 percent in 2019.

Women are prohibited from entering 181 different occupations, and societal norms in much of the country hold that women should be mothers or housewives. However, Tsikhanouskaya's mass support in the prodemocracy movement has become a slight counter to long-standing gender roles.

LGBT+ people face widespread societal discrimination, and law enforcement authorities are reluctant to investigate and prosecute attacks against them.

G. Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights

G1 0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy freedom of movement, including the ability to change their place of residence, employment, or education?

1 / 4

Opposition activists are occasionally detained at the border for lengthy searches. Passports are used as a primary identity document in Belarus, and authorities are known to harass people living in a different location than indicated by domestic stamps in their passport.

On numerous occasions, authorities forced the expulsion of politically active Belarusians in 2020. Prominent prodemocracy figure Tsikhanouskaya, Archbishop of the Belarusian Catholic Church Kondrusiewicz, and other public figures were forced to leave the country in August. Maryia Kalesnikava, who campaigned with Tsikhanouskaya, refused to leave Belarus and was later kidnapped and had her passport torn apart. In September, she was arrested and tried in a criminal case for threatening national security. In December 2020, authorities prohibited Belarusians from leaving the country at land border crossings, except with Russia, ostensibly to prevent the spread of COVID-19; the policy was likely enforced to prevent political dissidents from fleeing.

Score Change: The score declined from 2 to 1 because numerous civic and opposition activists and their supporters fled or were forced out of the country, and border officials imposed restrictions on their reentry.

G2 0-4 pts

Are individuals able to exercise the right to own property and establish private businesses without undue interference from state or nonstate actors?	1 / 4
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Limits on economic freedom have eased in recent years, allowing for greater property ownership and small business operations. However, state interference still affects the economy and profitable business owners are never secure from arbitrary government pressure and harassment. Many businesspeople that became involved in the postelection prodemocracy efforts, often to support victims of human rights abuses or to incentivize policemen to resign from law enforcement, were criminally persecuted on groundless claims. Other businesses and their owners who supported candidates other than Lukashenka have been arrested under false pretense. Multiple businesses relocated their employees to neighboring countries fearing that they would be harassed or prosecuted by the state.

Score Change: The score declined from 2 to 1 because authorities interfered with businesses and arrested owners in their efforts to put down the year's prodemocracy protest movement.

G3 0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy personal social freedoms, including choice of marriage partner and size of family, protection from domestic violence, and control over appearance?	2 / 4
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Domestic violence is a pervasive problem in Belarus, and police register about 150,000 incidents per year. In 2018, Lukashenka blocked a draft law on the prevention of domestic violence jointly developed by the law enforcement agencies and civil society representatives. He called attitudes against the corporal punishment of children “nonsense from the

West” and insisted that “good” punishment of children could be useful to them.

The constitution explicitly bans same-sex marriage. The Belarusian government led an effort in 2016 to block LGBT+ rights from being part of a UN international initiative focused on urban areas.

G4 0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy equality of opportunity and freedom from economic exploitation?

1 / 4

Mandatory unpaid national workdays, postgraduate employment allocation, compulsory labor for inmates in state rehabilitation facilities, and restrictions on leaving employment in certain industries have led labor activists to conclude that all Belarusian citizens experience forced labor at some stage of their life. Many women become victims of the international sex trade.

In 2018, based on a presidential decree, the government effectively revived a plan to tax the unemployed by mandating full payment for housing and utility services starting in 2019. An attempt to impose the tax in 2017 was met with mass protests that were brutally suppressed.



On Belarus

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Country Facts

Global Freedom Score

11/100 Not Free

Internet Freedom Score

38/100

Not Free

Other Years

2020

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