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# country report

Belarus Office



## The Human Rights Situation in Belarus on the Eve of the “Single Voting Day”

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Just days after the breaking news of **Alexei Navalny's** death made global headlines, Belarusian independent media reported another tragedy that is similar in character but will likely cause much less attention. The political prisoner **Ihar Lednik** died in a hospital in Minsk after he had been incarcerated despite a known heart condition. He had been accused of “slandering Lukashenka” in a publication that demanded the dissolution of the Union State with Russia. This underlines yet again that the **repressive system in today's Belarus** is not less brutal than in Putin's Russia. Since 2020, at least five political prisoners have died in Belarus, four of them within the last nine months. Since last spring, at least six political prisoners, among them the most prominent leaders of the 2020 democratic protest, have “disappeared”. Former inmates and relatives describe the conditions in the penal colonies as “creeping death” and the UN sees signs of “crimes against humanity”. Since the repressions aim to secure Lukashenka's **rule beyond “elections”**, this report is to give an overview of the human rights situation in Belarus on the eve of the “single voting day” on February 25, 2024.

### The “single voting day”

When the Lukashenka regime announced a “single voting day” for the parliamentary and local “elections” on November 20, 2023, it officially kicked off a political process which will last for more than a year. February 25 marks the beginning of this period which will not be concluded before the 2025 presidential “elections”. After the unprecedented pro-democratic protests in autumn 2020 almost toppled the system, Lukashenka wants to make sure that nothing escapes his control this time.

One element is the design of the process. On the “single voting day”, 110 members of the Chamber of Representatives and 12,514 deputies in 1,284 local councils will be chosen – mostly meaning that pre-selected candidates will be confirmed. For the first time, the ballots will not feature even a single opposition candidate. The electoral commissions are staffed with anonymous loyalists and no OSCE-observers are allowed.

Later in spring, a maximum of 1200 delegates will be appointed to the new highest constitutional

body – the so-called All-Belarusian People's Assembly (ABPA). After this, Lukashenka will have time at least up to July 20, 2025 to stage his “re-election” or to appoint somebody else as a president, provided that he will feel in control as chairman of the ABPA and pull the strings from behind the scene.

The second key element is to control society by tightening the repressions even further. Over the past years, there have been a lot of [reports](#) by [Belarusian](#) and [international organizations](#) about the [horrific human rights situation](#) in [Belarus](#). Now, Lukashenka's security apparatus is doubling down on its “efforts”. The goal seems to be as broad as to stamp out not just political structures – as was done by banning all democratic political parties – but any signs of self-organization or self-government in society. The regime has stepped up its efforts to foment an atmosphere of fear and anxiety. Along with focused, personalized measures it is turning to mechanisms that victimize large swathes of the population at once. Simultaneously, the repressions are getting more widespread, moving from the capital to the regions and even beyond the national borders.

Lukashenka's retaliation against Belarusians abroad is becoming increasingly systematized e.g. by depriving the diaspora of consular services. This process also leads to the "legalistic" criminalization of the exiled opposition by the regime and to the intoxication of contacts between the activists (or even just family members) remaining in the country and the pro-democracy diaspora.

## Key tendencies in 2023 and 2024

### Political prisoners

In 2023, Belarusian courts issued at least 4,466 rulings in administrative trials, of which fines were imposed in 1,822 cases and terms of administrative imprisonment were ordered in 2,005 of them. In January 2024 alone, HUMAN RIGHTS CENTER VIASNA received information about at least **560 cases of repression**, including 310 detentions and 349 administrative (390 in December 2023) proceedings on political grounds. That means that over the past month, every day at least 10 persons were detained **on political grounds**.

At the end of 2023, VIASNA was aware of [4,248 persons](#) sentenced to various types of punishment on politically motivated charges, including 910 women. 1,603 of them were convicted last year. As of January 31, 2024, there were **1,429 political prisoners** in Belarus. But since the "classification" of prisoners as "political" depends on the capacities of human rights organisations evaluating each case in accordance with a specific methodology, and some prisoners ask not to be classified as "political" to avoid the additional hardship, the actual number might be **three times higher**. In total, VIASNA knows about more than 4,500 convictions in politically motivated criminal cases.

According to first-hand witnesses or family members, most political prisoners are kept under particularly **harsh conditions**, often amounting to torture. According to an estimate by the [UN Human Rights Council](#), the violations could even amount to crimes against humanity. The wide [collection of accounts](#) of former political

prisoners who have experienced psychological pressure, physical violence, as well as humiliation, and insults from police officers demonstrate clearly that the issue is not restricted to isolated incidents, but rather a widespread phenomenon.

The latest death of the political prisoner [Ihad Lednik](#) on February 20<sup>th</sup>, 2024 is thus just the tip of the iceberg. At least five political prisoners have reportedly **died in prison** as a result of torture or failure to provide sufficient medical care – four of over the last nine months.

An alarming "trend" of 2023 was that some of the most "prominent" political prisoners **disappeared without a trace**. Their names include [Maria Kalesnikava](#) (no news since February 15, 2023), [Mikalai Statkevich](#) (since February 10, 2023), [Siarhei Tsikhanouski](#) (since March 9, 2023), [Ihar Losik](#) (since February 20, 2023), [Viktar Babaryka](#) (since April 25, 2023), noble peace price laureate [Ales Bialiatski](#), and other political prisoners. Neither their relatives nor lawyers were allowed to make contact and since Kalesnikava and Babaryka had been hospitalized before, many wonder whether they are even still alive.

Within the prison system, political prisoners are regularly subjected to enhanced measures of supervision, and to restrictions not provided for by law. As of January 2024, VIASNA knows the names of 100 political prisoners, who were [framed](#) by the prison administration for '*violation of the prison routine*.' Of these, 67 political prisoners have had their prison security upped. It is not even an uncommon practice that sentences of imprisonment are extended for (alleged) accusations of '*malicious disobedience to the prison administration*'. In 2023, this happened to no less than 29 political prisoners, to six of them even twice.

Some political prisoners serve sentences that would amount to more than "life imprisonment" in most Western countries. Others serve shorter sentences and over 1,500 people have either been released or saw changes in their "measure of restraint".

### Charges of extremism and terrorism

Over the past year, there was a pronounced increase in criminal cases on charges of “*creating, leading and participating in **extremist groups**”, together with “facilitating and financing extremist activities”*. At the end of 2023, the list of “extremist groups” included 169 entities, 62 of which had been added in 2023.

The “**extremist**” list of individual people, which was launched by Lukashenka’s Ministry of Interior on March 23, 2022, grew by 1,391 individuals during 2023, making it a total of 3,654 at the end of the year. In January 2024, another 86 cases were added to the list. At the same time, individuals are still routinely prosecuted in criminal cases for their participation in the 2020 protests or supporting them in online comments.

A category that goes even further is terrorism. Before 2020, the KGB’s list of people involved in **terrorist activities** mainly included citizens of Afghanistan, Syria, Somalia and North Korea – based on lists of the UN Security Council. Since 2020, more and more Belarusian nationals have been added so that at the end of 2023, 397 out of 1,156 “terrorists” were Belarusians.

In 2023, the authorities continued the practice of also designating media products, symbols, paraphernalia, publications and books (including some works by Belarusian classical writers) as “**extremist materials**”. In total, in 2023, Belarusian courts issued 888 decisions designating materials as “extremist” – about 20 per cent more than the year before. In January 2024 alone, another 107 such decisions were made.

Such a categorization by the authorities means that it is **extremely dangerous** for the people of Belarus to read free media at all, to support NGOs branded as extremist or even political prisoners. Those who do so nevertheless run considerable personal risks. To be in contact with “terrorists” – read: pro-democracy politicians – is the sure way to a criminal trial and thus to prison. It is important to keep this in mind when judging why free media in exile are losing their audience

in the country or why there are no more street protests.

### New “legal” standards

Within the Lukashenka system, the **courts** have long assumed a function as an **instrument of repression**. On March 25, 2023, **changes to the Criminal Code** came into force, providing for the possibility of applying the death penalty – Belarus is the last country in Europe that officially retains capital punishment – against government officials and military personnel convicted of “high treason” (Part 2, Article 356 of the Criminal Code). The main goal of the document is to instil an atmosphere of fear since the term “treason” opens a wide range for interpretation and almost arbitrary application.

### Poisoning ties with Belarusians abroad

In order to disrupt horizontal relations and solidarity within Belarusian society and cut connections between the exiled opposition and activists in Belarus, the regime carries out both widespread and targeted actions. In 2023, the authorities continued to persecute individuals for alleged “**financing of extremist activities**”, i.e. for donations to solidarity funds or to Belarusian volunteers in Ukraine. Apart from fines, people are regularly required to pay enormous amounts of “reparations” to the regime for such donations. Criminal charges can also be filed post factum in cases when a recipient organization was not even classified as “extremist” at the time of a donation. To date, [VIASNA knows of at least 58 people convicted for “financing an extremist group”](#). In most cases, this relates to donations to military associations in Ukraine, like the Kalinouski regiment. The prison sentences issued against them amount to a total of 185 years.

The most dramatic case was the persecution of over [229 people on suspicion of receiving or providing aid](#) to (former) political prisoners and their families, via the humanitarian project **INeedHelpBy**. The project had only just been recognized as “extremist” when the charges were filed. Belarusian human rights defenders state that the number 229 only reflects the cases

known to them while the actual number could reach up to 700 people.

On September 7, 2023, Lukashenka's decree came into force in Belarus, according to which his diplomatic missions will **no longer issue passports** to Belarusians permanently residing abroad. The decree also establishes a new procedure for issuing documents and performing notarial acts in foreign institutions of Belarus. It will now be possible to formalize property transactions and carry out certain administrative procedures in Belarus only in person or on the basis of a power of attorney executed on the territory of Belarus. In a longer perspective this can lead to the mass expropriation of Belarusians in political exile. Many of them are already convicted in absentia or criminal proceedings are pending against them. According to [VIASNA](#), at least 207 people were detained in 2023 after checks at the Belarusian border, including that with Russia. Almost all of them were sentenced to administrative arrests or fined for charges such as reposting news from independent media, "petty hooliganism" or for "picketing" with national symbols. At least 18 of detainees were convicted under criminal articles, 12 of which were sentenced to prison.

### **Additional pressure on the democratic forces**

In January 2024, special [in absentia] criminal proceedings were initiated against 20 individuals referred to as **'Tsikhanouskaya analysts'** by Lukashenka's Investigative Committee. These individuals include experts, scientists, and public figures associated with democratic initiatives. The prosecution [alleges](#) that they joined a "conspiracy" to seize state power in the Republic of Belarus through unconstitutional means.

Another incident that was directly connected to the **democratic forces** in exile was the regime blocking access to youtube on [New Year's Eve – for just 10 minutes](#). The point was to cut Belarusians from watching Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya's New Year's address. While this step eventually drew additional attention to the clip, members of the **Coordination Council** (CC) and their relatives in Belarus were less "fortunate". A new criminal case against the CC

members was initiated on November 20, 2023 under six articles of the Criminal Code. Between November 28 and December 3, 2023, more than 130 searches were carried out in their homes or registered places of residence and 145 orders were issued to seize property of suspects.

### **Purges in the education sector**

In recent months, particular pressure has been put on the educational sector. At a high-level meeting in mid-October, Lukashenka demanded from university rectors and civil servants that the country's educational institutions be fully purged of employees who expressed sympathies with the 2020 protests. Just days ago, Lukashenka demanded the creation of a [working group to check the education system](#) and "shake up universities" by September 1. The regime's goal is to orient the educational content stronger towards military and patriotic education and to take more effective measures to prevent talented graduates from leaving for foreign universities. Apart from a general brain-drain, Lukashenka specifically claimed that such people would later return with a "reversed mindset". Rumours spread by television propagandists that the European Humanities University in Vilnius might be declared extremist and the sacking of school principals in Western Belarus where a particularly high number of graduates go to study at Polish universities points in the same direction.

Another measure proposed by education minister Andrey Ivanets, is to expand the practice of mandatory work assignments. Right now, graduates of Belarusian universities who studied for free are obliged to work at an allocated job for two years with an option to buy their way out. This option could be dropped, and the mandatory service extended to other groups.

### **The Russian factor**

Experts often point out that the Russians consider Belarus a ["testing ground"](#) for political repressions. Methods that "worked well" in Belarus are later applied in Russia. Although Lukashenka's repressions are "homemade", there has been a recent effort by both systems to synchronize their lists of "extremists". So far,

oppositional Belarusians still had a chance to flee the country through Russia since law enforcement there was not actively looking for them. A joint [mechanism](#) might change that and lead to a further blockade of social media in Belarus or even discrimination for religious groups (e.g. Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia).

The most relevant "Russian factor" however is the alarming progress of **Russification**. Over the past twelve months, this has been visible on an important symbolic level by steps like the abolition of *Latinka*, the transcription of the Belarusian language with the Latin alphabet or the redefinition of former heroes like Kastus Kalinouski as "anti-Belarusian figures". Even a joint history textbook was announced that would likely convey Russian imperial narratives.

Although the Russification is actively supported by some Belarusian pro-Russia activists, there is no doubt that this process is overall driven top-down. There are strong effects of this in the economy and business sphere where a lot of companies are redirecting towards the Russian market, often being directly incorporated in the war machinery. But a particularly vulnerable field is the **area of culture**. High officials demand the creation of a "common cultural space of Belarus and Russia". The creation of a joint "information space" was already agreed upon at the [recent Supreme State Council summit](#) at the end of January 2024. A three-year plan presented there foresees a large block of humanitarian, cultural and social issues. A joint media company of the Union State is to be headquartered in Moscow.

On a day-to-day basis there are plenty examples of **Russification in the cultural and educational space** – which strongly defines the country's identity and serves as a basis for sovereignty and mental resilience. A comprehensive report about "[Russification in the cultural sphere of Belarus 2022-2023](#)" was put forward by PEN Belarus. Their examples include exhibitions, concerts, the film industry, literature, and projects of cultural memory. With the introduction of a "Register of organisers of cultural and entertainment events", every planned concert and its participants have to be checked by ideologists and law enforcement

agencies for loyalty to the regime; only a few performers pass such a check. The music venues of Belarus now mainly host concerts of ideologically verified Russian musicians.

From a Russian point of view, this is much more than "cultural diplomacy". Since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, [Russian authorities have been investing record amounts of money in propaganda](#). According to the data presented in the draft budget law for the next three years, in 2023 the cost of maintaining state media amounted to 122.1 billion rubles. This exceeds the budgets of several medium-sized Russian regions.

## Conclusions

Whereas in former decades, the intensity of repressions by the Belarusian regime have followed a certain cyclicity, since 2020, they have now only grown in scale. Lukashenka has made it clear that [he intends to punish everyone who dared to revolt against him four years ago and his security services follow suit](#). The Belarusian regime's primary domestic policy instrument thus remains repression in the broadest sense – control, prohibition, restriction, surveillance, coercion, intimidation, punishment, etc. – and the latest trends point towards a geographic expansion into the regions and beyond the national borders.

On the one hand, the regime demonstrates that it now depends on brute force to "defend" itself from its own people. Since 2020, the authorities not only mistrust political groups but (civil) society as a whole. From their point of view, anyone with experience and ambitions for self-organization is "[potentially dangerous](#)".

On the other hand, the dynamics of repression seem to have taken on a life of their own when various security organs seem to be competing about who can deliver the highest "headcount". This report cited some figures from human rights organizations, but it is important to keep in mind that most of these numbers represent very conservative estimates. **There is much more repression in Belarus than these numbers (can) show.**



Unfortunately, the onset of the important election period – which the democratic forces in exile rather consider a “*special operation to secure power*” – suggests that this level of repressions is likely to continue at least until spring 2025. Recent mass police raids – the cases of the Coordination Council and “Tsikhanouskaya’s analysts”, intimidation of former election observers, raids against former political prisoners and their relatives – even show that the “elections” are an occasion for the regime to intensify (collective) repression even further.

For the country, it is a tragedy that goes beyond the human suffering. The choked environment that discourages initiative and innovation substantially curbs the potentials of civil society and business development. The brain drain bleeds the country out and the Russification of culture, language and education actively undermines the national resilience of Belarusian society towards its invasive neighbour to the East.

For the democratic forces, the situation presents a predicament. Their abilities to directly influence

or coerce the regime are very limited. On the one hand there is very broad consensus that the release of political prisoners should be an urgent priority in their work. On the other hand, different political groups disagree whether they should negotiate with the regime and thus “re-legitimise” it. Alas, the authorities themselves don’t demonstrate any willingness to engage in a meaningful dialogue over prisoners’ release anyway. To Lukashenka, punishing those who tried to topple him is a matter of personal revenge. Sadly, the death of Navalny in Russia might “encourage” the security forces to raise the level of violence even further.

For the West, this raises several questions: Are we really doing all we can to support the victims of repressions and work towards the release of political prisoners? The death of Navalny rightly sparked global outrage. The death and disappearances of political prisoners in Belarus also deserve a convincing reaction. The people of Belarus will measure the credibility of the West, our political system and our “European” values not only by our words but by our deeds.

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