

## AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PUBLIC STATEMENT

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# BELARUS: NO END IN SIGHT FOR THE HUMAN RIGHTS CRISIS

## INTRODUCTION

The suppression of human rights in Belarus has a long history but reached its unprecedented peak in the last five years. After the disputed presidential elections of August 2020, the incumbent Aliaksandr Lukashenka claimed victory amidst allegations of fraud and widely reported electoral irregularities. Peaceful protests erupted that the Belarusian authorities brutally suppressed using unlawful force, detaining tens of thousands of demonstrators and subjecting many of them to torture and other ill-treatment.<sup>1</sup> The human rights situation has since been further deteriorating and the authorities have deployed every tool at their disposal to stifle and punish dissent not only inside Belarus but beyond its borders to those in exile.

The repression has escalated further in the run up to the upcoming presidential elections scheduled for 26 January 2025. As the people of Belarus are expected to come and cast their votes at the polling stations, they will do so in an atmosphere of fear, deprived of their right to freedom of expression, and conscious of the dire consequences for those who express that they want to have a free choice in choosing the country's leadership.

## ONGOING HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS

In their brutal crackdown on all dissent that followed the mass peaceful protests of 2020, the authorities cast their nets very widely, and targeted groups as diverse as medics<sup>2</sup>, students and teachers<sup>3</sup>, trade union activists<sup>4</sup>, older people<sup>5</sup>, women<sup>6</sup>, cultural figures<sup>7</sup>, children<sup>8</sup>, athletes<sup>9</sup> and many others.

As of early 2025, the repression has not abated. The authorities have continued to target journalists, political opposition figures, independent lawyers, human rights defenders and any persons who might have taken part in the protests in 2020 or expressed their disagreement with official narrative on the events of 2020 or the on-going full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia. This is a clear violation of the rights to freedom of expression and to peaceful assembly. According to Human Rights Centre Viasna, in five years since the spring 2020, more than 50,000 individuals were detained with 6,550 persons convicted on politically motivated criminal charges, and 3,697 of them given custodial sentences.<sup>10</sup>

Those imprisoned on political grounds face much harsher treatment than other people in prison, which in many cases amounts to torture or other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment ('other ill-treatment'). At least seven

<sup>1</sup> Amnesty International, Belarus: "You are not human beings". State-sponsored impunity and unprecedented police violence against peaceful protesters (Index: EUR 49/3567/2021), 27 January 2021, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/eur49/3567/2021/en>

<sup>2</sup> Amnesty International, Belarus, crackdown on medics: "Do you want one of your children to disappear?", January 2021, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/belarus-crackdown-on-medics.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Amnesty International, Belarus: "We baptize you in the name of saint Alyaksandr Lukashenka", January 2021, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/crackdown-on-students-in-belarus.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> Amnesty International, Belarus, Solidarity Action: Independent trade unions in the line of fire", January 2025, [https://www.amnesty.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/trade\\_unions\\_web-1.pdf](https://www.amnesty.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/trade_unions_web-1.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> Amnesty International, Belarus, crackdown on older people: "I am living through another era of terror", January 2021 [https://www.amnesty.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/crackdown-on-older-people-in-belarus\\_print.pdf](https://www.amnesty.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/crackdown-on-older-people-in-belarus_print.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> Amnesty International, Belarus: "Women on the front line", January 2021 [https://www.amnesty.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/belarus\\_women-on-the-front-line\\_web-1.pdf](https://www.amnesty.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/belarus_women-on-the-front-line_web-1.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> Amnesty International, Belarus, prosecuted artists in Belarus: "We knew that our turn would come soon enough", January 2021, [https://www.amnesty.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/solidarity-action-cultural-figures\\_web-1-3.pdf](https://www.amnesty.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/solidarity-action-cultural-figures_web-1-3.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> Amnesty International, Belarus, crackdown on children, January 2021, [https://www.amnesty.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/belarus-crackdown-on-children\\_web.pdf](https://www.amnesty.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/belarus-crackdown-on-children_web.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> Amnesty International, Belarus, crackdown on athletes, January 2021, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/EUR4945182021ENGLISH.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> Viasna, "Ситуация с правами человека в Беларуси в 2024 году", 15 January 2025, <https://spring96.org/ru/news/117167>

people have died while in detention since 2020, five of them during 2024. All had prior serious health conditions that were well known to the authorities. Amnesty International is deeply concerned that these deaths were avoidable and are the result of the conditions of detention and inadequate medical care. The most prominent voices who were vocal in their criticism against Aliaksandr Lukashenka are subjected to incommunicado detention that may constitute the crime of enforced disappearance under international law.

The abuse of extremism-related legislation has expanded to suppress dissent and free expression. Public expression of views deemed critical of the authorities has been criminalized under so called anti-extremism legislation. As of late 2024, the list of “extremist” materials in Belarus had grown to 6,565 items. This includes social media accounts, websites of independent media and human rights organizations, and literature critical of the authorities, all arbitrarily added to the list, making their dissemination a criminal offence. Numerous activists, journalists, clergy and civil society leaders have also been arbitrarily included in the list of persons “involved in extremist activities”. Individuals who in any way support organizations labelled as extremist or connected to persons included in the list, even by subscribing to an outlet with independent information, face severe penalties including hefty fines.

Human rights defenders have been particularly targeted with at least 93 arbitrarily detained since 2020.<sup>11</sup> Numerous human rights defenders have had to leave Belarus to avoid persecution and imprisonment. All independent human rights and numerous other non-governmental organizations have been effectively dismantled, with many activists facing fabricated charges.

As similar fate has faced independent media and journalists. They have had to either close down or operate from abroad. At least 45 media workers are imprisoned at the time of writing.

Repressions at home forced numerous Belarusians to flee the country. Even that, however, did not stop the authorities from targeting them. Dozens have been arrested upon return to the country, and in 2021, the authorities even forced an overflying civilian airplane to land to detain two dissidents travelling on board.

A presidential decree of 2023 prohibited Belarusian consular services abroad from issuing passports to Belarusian nationals, issuing other official documents and powers of attorney, etc. This is effectively forcing those in exile to come back to Belarus where they face persecution.

The list of the human rights violations and abuses committed by Belarusian authorities with complete impunity is very long and constitutes little else but a campaign of widespread and systematic persecution to suppress dissent, silence opposing voices and create an information vacuum within Belarus, where only state-controlled narratives are allowed.

## **INTERNATIONAL RESPONSE**

The international community must stand together with the people of Belarus and be united in addressing the ongoing repression.

Governments and intergovernmental organizations should step up international efforts to expedite the release of those detained and imprisoned on politically motivated charges and to support them and their families in the meantime. All public channels should be used to increase the visibility of these individuals and denounce the authorities’ crackdown on their family members and supporters.

Continued international scrutiny is important, not only to facilitate the release of individuals, but also to improve their prison conditions (e.g., to call for access to medical treatment, lawyers and family members and for visits by independent international monitors and humanitarian workers).

The materials produced by independent media on the human rights situation in Belarus should be broadly disseminated and made accessible to people in Belarus, without the risk of reprisals.

Financial and other support for civil society organizations operating within and outside of Belarus should increase and be sustainable.

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<sup>11</sup> The Observatory, “*Suppression of the Right to Defend Human Rights in Belarus: Policy and Legislative Changes in 2021-2023*”, June 2023, <https://www.omct.org/site-resources/files/Suppression-of-the-Right-to-Defend-Human-Rights-in-Belarus-2021-2023-The-Observatory-Report-ENG.pdf>

Governments of countries with significant numbers of exiled Belarusians should ensure that they do not end up in a legal limbo or be forced to return, when their identification and travel documents issued by Belarus expire.

The International community must do all within its power to ensure justice and accountability for the human rights violations committed in Belarus. All those responsible for human rights abuses must be brought to justice, including through the principle of universal jurisdiction.