

Belarus 2024 Human Rights Report

Executive Summary

There were no significant changes in the human rights situation in Belarus during the year.

Significant human rights issues included credible reports of: torture or cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment; involuntary or coercive medical or psychological practices; arbitrary arrest or detention; transnational repression against individuals in another country; witting cooperation with another country to carry out acts of transnational repression; serious abuses in a conflict related to Belarus' complicity in Russia's war against Ukraine; serious restrictions on freedom of expression and media freedom, including violence or threats of violence against journalists, unjustified arrests or prosecutions of journalists, censorship, and serious restrictions on the internet; trafficking in persons, including forced labor; prohibiting independent trade unions and systematic restrictions on workers' freedom of association; and violence or threats against labor activists or union members.

The government did not take credible steps or actions to identify and punish officials who committed human rights abuses.

Section 1. Life

a. Extrajudicial Killings

There were no reports the government or its agents committed arbitrary or unlawful killings during the year.

b. Coercion in Population Control

In prior years, women with disabilities, especially those who were institutionalized, as well as pregnant women whose children were diagnosed with potential disabilities in utero, reported some doctors insisted they terminate their pregnancies. While there were no indications that the practice had changed, no specific cases were highlighted during the year by press or nongovernmental organizations (NGOs).

c. War Crimes, Crimes against Humanity, and Evidence of Acts that May Constitute Genocide, or Conflict-Related Abuses

Belarus continued to facilitate and support Russia's war against Ukraine by allowing Russia nearly unrestricted use of its territory, airspace, and military facilities, providing a major strategic advantage and logistical support. Belarus also allowed Russia to station missile launchers, airplanes, and other munitions to attack Ukrainian targets from Belarusian territory. Throughout

the year, Belarus provided medical, material, and logistical support to Russian troops. Human rights organizations asserted these actions made Belarus complicit in Russia's human rights abuses in Ukraine (see Ukraine's *Country Report on Human Rights Practices* for 2022 and 2023 and the Ukraine-Russian Occupied Areas report for 2024, for specific abuses). In 2022, the Secretary of State determined that Russia's forces in Ukraine had committed war crimes including the deliberate targeting of civilians.

On October 4, Freedom House published a report detailing the direct participation of the regime headed by President Alyaksandr Lukashenka in the systematic transfer of thousands of children from Russia-occupied regions of Ukraine to so-called recreation camps in Belarus. According to the regime's public statements, more than 2,400 children between ages six and 17 were transported from the Donetsk, Kherson, Zaporizhzhia, and Luhansk regions of Ukraine to camps in Belarus since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. The Freedom House report concluded these operations were coordinated at the highest levels of the Belarusian and Russian governments and that the structures of the Union State of Russia and Belarus played a critical role in financing and organizing the displacement, indoctrination, re-education, and militarization of Ukrainian children. The report also asserted the systematic transfer of the Ukrainian children, facilitated by Russian and Belarusian security forces and ultranationalist militant groups as well as government-organized entities, played an essential role in the Belarusian regime's implementation of the

Russian policy of indoctrination and re-education.

While the regime claimed the children's stays were temporary and that all were returned to their homes in Ukraine, human rights organizations assessed there was insufficient evidence to confirm this. These organizations stated that they were also unable to confirm whether parents and legal guardians provided free and uncoerced consent, especially as many of the children targeted for forced transfer came from marginalized populations such as orphans, children with disabilities, adoptees, and children from low-income families.

The United States imposed sanctions on Alexey Talai and other persons in Belarus involved in the forcible transfer or deportation of Ukraine's children to camps promoting indoctrination of children in Russia, Belarus, and Russia-occupied Crimea as an effort to promote accountability for the atrocities and other abuses inflicted on the people of Ukraine.

Section 2. Liberty

a. Freedom of the Press

The constitution provided for freedom of expression, including for members of the press and other media; however, the government did not respect these rights and actively repressed freedom of expression, banned independent media outlets, and arrested journalists. There were virtually

no independent media outlets and authorities labeled journalist and opposition voices “extremist,” giving authorities a legal pretext to detain and prosecute individuals for expressing opposition to the regime or reporting on the regime’s abuses. It was illegal to report or stream video from unauthorized mass events. The state press and associated social media propagated views supportive of the president and official policies without giving room for critical voices and actively disparaged the regime’s opponents.

Individuals could not criticize government officials or the government publicly or discuss politics or matters of general public interest without fear of reprisal, including prosecution, forced exile, and being subjected to other forms of intimidation and harassment. There were also laws criminalizing libel, “hate speech” and expression of political views, which authorities used to restrict freedom of expression.

Individuals were arrested for speaking out against authorities, including Lukashenka, and sentenced to prison terms.

Authorities prohibited displaying certain historical flags and symbols, including the historic white-red-white-striped flag adopted by the democratic movement, and displaying placards bearing messages deemed threatening to the government or “public order.” Although the Ukrainian flag was not banned, individuals displaying the flag were often repressed. Authorities attributed the display of a Ukrainian flag to support for Ukraine

in the war, in which authorities supported Russia.

The law on “preventing the rehabilitation of Nazism” included symbols used to denote support for the opposition as “Nazi symbols and attributes.”

Although the “Pahonia” coat of arms emblem was on a registry of the government’s historic and cultural symbols, the government expressed hostility toward protesters who carried red and white flags or the Pahonia symbol, and security forces detained demonstrators or any individual for doing so, as these symbols were generally identified with the opposition. The slogan “Long Live Belarus” and the response to it, “Live Long,” accompanied by extending the right arm from the shoulder with a straightened hand, were considered by the Ministry of Internal Affairs as Nazi symbols and attributes, calling it a “collaborator’s greeting” similar to the Sieg Heil salute. “Long Live Belarus” and “Live Long” were associated with the national revival movement and later opposition and democratic activities, particularly widely used by peaceful protesters in 2020.

Authorities dismissed state employees who expressed political dissent or participated in protests after the 2020 presidential election, including teachers, civil servants, law enforcement officers, athletes, university administrators, and health-care workers.

The law also limited free speech by criminalizing actions such as conveying or giving information that authorities deemed false or derogatory to a foreigner concerning the political, economic, social, military, or international

situation of the country. The government prohibited calls to participate in “unsanctioned demonstrations.”

Authorities also prohibited “extremist” information, which they defined as “information materials including printed, audio, visual, videos, placards, posters, banners, and other visuals intended for public usage or distribution that seek the violent change of the constitutional order or the territorial integrity of the country; unconstitutional takeover of state powers; establishment of an illegal armed force; terrorist activities; inciting racial, ethnic, religious, or other societal hatred; organizing mass riots; hooliganism and vandalism based on racial, ethnic, religious, or other societal hatred or discord; political and ideological hatred; promotion of supremacy of a group of residents based on their language, social, racial, ethnic, or religious background; and justification of Nazism, including the promotion, production, distribution, and displays of Nazi symbols.” “Extremist” information also included images of persons declared “extremists” or convicted on charges related to “extremism,” charges often used to incriminate the political opposition, journalists, civil society activists, and ordinary citizens.

Law enforcement officials had permission to use firearms at their discretion when “countering extremism,” permission viewed by independent observers as an open threat against journalists, protesters, activists, and the regime’s political opponents.

Libel and slander were criminal offenses with penalties of up to six years in prison, and authorities acted on these laws, especially to restrict freedom of expression, prohibit expressing opposition to the government, including online, and generally retaliate against journalists and political opponents. The law provided large fines and prison sentences of up to six years for defaming or insulting the president. Penalties for defamation of character made no distinction between private and public persons. A public figure criticized for poor performance while in office could sue both the journalist and the media outlet that disseminated the critical report for defamation.

On April 5, the Stolin Regional Court convicted behind closed doors local freelance journalist and blogger Alyaksandr Ihnatsyuk of libeling Lukashenka, organizing protests in Stolin and Minsk, and extortion, and sentenced him to six years in prison and a fine of 8,000 rubles (\$2,500).

Courts around the country convicted hundreds of individuals on criminal charges for slandering officials and inciting social hatred for their commentary in social media. For example, on May 20, the Brest Regional Court convicted retiree Barys Vitko, age 69, on charges stemming from his online commentary. The charges included slandering and insulting Lukashenka and public servants, including a judge, inciting social hatred, and calling for sanctions to damage the national security and sentenced him to seven years and a fine of 12,000 rubles (\$3,700). Vitko was previously convicted of slandering a judge and sentenced to two years of probation in

January 2023 before police rearrested him in May.

Authorities frequently cited national security and “extremism” or “terrorism” grounds to arrest or punish critics of the government or deter criticism of government policies or officials. National security and “extremism” and “terrorism” charges were widely used to incriminate members of the political opposition, journalists, and ordinary citizens.

Physical Attacks, Imprisonment, and Pressure

Authorities harassed and detained local journalists routinely. According to the independent Belarusian Association of Journalists, more than 400 journalists fled the country since 2020 due to repression. Security forces brought false allegations against them and sentenced them to prison terms for doing their jobs. As of September, the Belarusian Association of Journalists reported it recorded at least 40 cases of harassment against local journalists since the start of the year, which included detentions, imprisonment, unwarranted searches, fines, and prison sentences. On June 3, the Brest regional court sentenced local independent journalist Alena Tsimashchuk to five years in prison and a 46,000-ruble fine (\$14,400) for discrediting the country, inciting social hatred, and participating in an “extremist” organization. Human rights organizations deemed all charges politically motivated.

Authorities regularly detained and prosecuted opposition bloggers,

journalists, and social media users.

As of October, at least 33 media representatives were in detention under various politically motivated charges, including forming or participating in an “extremist” group, calls to violate public order, tax evasion, and organizing and participating in actions that violate public order. Authorities’ harassment and intimidation of journalists often included searching their homes, confiscating their property, and subsequently detaining and prosecuting them.

Authorities harassed members of the analytical community who regularly contributed articles or commentary to independent media on political and economic matters, including prosecuting them in absentia.

Censorship by Governments, Military, Intelligence, or Police Forces, Criminal Groups, or Armed Extremist or Rebel Groups

Authorities severely limited access to information, closed independent outlets, and penalized any independent journalist who published information critical of the government. The government shut down virtually all independent media outlets and severely limited operations of the regional media in the country. By law, the government could close a publication – printed or online – after two warnings in one year for violating a range of restrictions on the press. Regulations also gave authorities arbitrary power to prohibit or censor reporting. The Ministry of Information

could, by law, suspend periodicals or newspapers for three months without a court ruling.

The Ministry of Information had authority to ban foreign media. The ministry could impose bans based on information from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs regarding foreign states' prohibition of Belarus-registered media activities. A ban would prevent the distribution of content, including through the internet, while journalists would lose their accreditation and be unable to open correspondent offices or branches. News aggregators were also subject to the law, including the possibility of blocking them for disseminating restricted information or hyperlinks. The law also allowed for canceling media registration on grounds such as involvement in "extremist" or "terrorist" activities.

The threat of government retaliation led the few small independent media outlets still operating within the country to exercise self-censorship and avoid reporting on certain topics, including Russia's war against Ukraine, or criticizing the government. The government tightly and directly controlled the content of state-owned broadcast and print media.

Authorities repressed individuals found to contribute or subscribe to Telegram channels and other social media accounts that were operated by independent media outlets or that conveyed information counter to the regime. As of September, the Ministry of Internal Affairs declared that more than 700 Telegram channels and other social media disseminated

“extremist” materials and more than 50 Telegram channels and online chat groups were “extremist organizations,” including the Belarusian service of the German broadcaster Deutsche Welle. Authorities warned that subscribing to, downloading materials from, and reposting information from these channels was punishable under the law. During the year, authorities arrested dozens of individuals accused of administering Telegram channels, allegedly to incite social hatred, coordinate protest activities, and defame security officers and public servants.

Authorities warned, fined, detained, interrogated, and stripped accreditation from members of the independent domestic media. Some state media journalists who quit were later detained.

Authorities allowed only nationals of the country where a media outlet was based to be accredited as correspondents. All Belarusian nationals working for major Western outlets were stripped of accreditation in 2020 and not reaccredited.

The law prohibited media from disseminating information on behalf of unregistered political parties, trade unions, and NGOs. Authorities eliminated all national and major regional independent media outlets in the country through several rounds of targeted reprisals, forced closures and liquidations, politically motivated prosecutions, website blockages, or other efforts to incapacitate the organizations. Many closed or blocked media operations re-established and continued their operations from outside the

country.

The government penalized outlets and individuals who published news items counter to government guidelines. Independent media outlets, including newspapers and internet news websites, faced discriminatory publishing and distribution policies, including limited access to government officials and press briefings and bans on printing paper copies.

Authorities pressured businesses not to advertise in newspapers that criticized the government.

Authorities extensively censored online content and monitored private online communications. The regime's total control of the country's legislature, law enforcement, and judicial systems allowed authorities to monitor internet traffic without accountability or independent review.

According to Freedom House's 2024 *Freedom on the Net Report*, authorities blocked social media and communication platforms, political, social, and religious content, as well as the websites of civil society and independent media operating in exile, deliberately disrupted information and communications technology networks, and manipulated online discussions. Laws also restricted online media and limited the transfer of data abroad. Progovernment commentators regularly manipulated online discussions. All domestic internet service providers were required to retain information regarding their customers' browsing histories for one year. Companies were also required to preserve identifying data regarding their customers' devices

and internet activities for at least five years and to turn over this information at the government's request.

On April 4, Andrei Paulyuchenka, head of the Operations and Analytical Center under Lukashenka, annulled the Belarusian domains of any internet sites hosting resources declared "extremist" materials. Such an annulled domain name would be added to a special list and become "unavailable for registration during the period of the corresponding product being listed as an 'extremist' material."

The government also monitored email and social media. All who expressed their views via the internet risked legal and personal repercussions, and many regularly practiced self-censorship. The use of virtual private networks alleviated this risk to a degree, but authorities reportedly regularly forced those arbitrarily arrested to unlock their cell phones so they could access their social media and personal email accounts.

Authorities filtered and blocked internet traffic. Telecommunications companies reported authorities ordered them to restrict mobile internet data on days when large-scale demonstrations were expected or occurred.

Authorities restricted content online. Online news providers had to remove content and publish corrections if ordered to do so by authorities and were required to adhere to a range of government prohibitions on free speech. Authorities could block access to sites that failed to obey government

orders, including a single instance of distributing prohibited information, without a prosecutor's or court's mandate. If blocked, a network publication lost its media registration. Owners of a website or a network publication had one month to appeal government decisions to limit access to their sites or to deny restoring access to them in court. As of September, the Ministry of Information blocked access to more than 30 additional websites during the year.

There were also efforts to restrict or block social media outlets online, and authorities punished individuals for expressing their political views online. For example, authorities targeted Telegram users and group chat administrators throughout the year, prosecuting them for allegedly organizing and coordinating protest activity.

Owners of internet sites could also be held liable for user comments that carried any prohibited information, and these sites could be blocked. The law mandated the creation of a database of news websites and identification of all commentators by personal data and cell phone numbers. If a news website received two or more formal warnings from authorities, it could be removed from the database and lose its right to distribute information.

By law, the telecommunications monopoly Beltelecom and other organizations authorized by the government had the exclusive right to maintain internet domains.

Authorities attempted to restrict online anonymity. A presidential edict required registration of service providers and internet websites and required the collection of information on those who used public internet. It required service providers to store data on individuals' internet use for one year and provide data to law enforcement agencies upon request. Violating the edict was punishable by a prison sentence, although no such cases were prosecuted or reported. These potential government prosecution efforts, however, spurred the use of encrypted messenger programs, such as Telegram, that circumvented restrictions.

State actors regularly used bots or trolls to manipulate social media and Telegram messenger chats discourse.

b. Worker Rights

Freedom of Association and Collective Bargaining

Although the law nominally provided for the rights of workers, except state security and military personnel, to form and join independent unions and to strike, it placed serious restrictions on the exercise of these rights. The law provided for the right to organize and bargain collectively but did not prohibit antiunion discrimination. Workers who claimed they were fired for union activity had no explicit right to reinstatement or to challenge their dismissal in court, according to trade union activists.

The government did not enforce the law protecting freedom of association, collective bargaining, and the right to strike for workers, in part because the government and state enterprises did not respect the legal right of independent freedom of association. The law provided for civil penalties against employers in the form of fines for violations of the freedom of association or collective bargaining. Fines against employers were less than penalties for other crimes related to civil rights and were rarely applied, especially against state-owned enterprises, the main violators. Given the absence of independent unions, there were no reports of government enforcement of laws respecting their establishment or operation.

The threshold of membership to establish national and local trade unions was 500 workers each. The Chinese-Belarus industrial park Great Stone was allowed to create local trade unions without abiding by the membership regulation.

As with independent NGOs, the government shut down all independent unions operating in the country in 2022, which had previously united approximately 10,000 workers. The government-controlled Federation of Trade Unions of Belarus remained the largest union federation and claimed more than four million members.

Tight government control over registration requirements and public demonstrations made it difficult for any independent unions to organize or conduct strikes.

The government did not respect collective bargaining. Prohibitive registration requirements, mandating that any new union unaffiliated with the government have a large membership and cooperation from state employers, continued to present significant obstacles to independent union formation. Trade unions could be removed from the register by a decision of the registrar, without any court procedure. The registrar could remove a trade union from the register if, following the issuance of a written warning to the trade union that it was violating legislation or its own statutes, the violations were not corrected within one month.

The requirements to conduct a legal strike were onerous. For example, strikes could only be held three or more months after dispute resolution between the union and employer failed. The duration of the strike had to be specified in advance. In addition, a minimum number of workers had to continue to work during the strike. Nevertheless, these requirements were largely irrelevant, since the unions that represented almost all workers remained under government control. Government authorities and managers of state-owned enterprises routinely interfered with union activities and hindered workers' efforts to bargain collectively, in some instances arbitrarily suspending collective bargaining agreements. Management and local authorities blocked workers' attempts to organize strikes on many occasions by declaring them illegal.

Some union members who participated in political protests, which

authorities generally considered unauthorized mass events, were detained, and a smaller percentage of politically active workers lost their jobs or remained in forced exile.

The government continued to pressure workers and trade union leaders by jailing them, subjecting them to physical violence, firing them, detaining or fining workers who discussed conducting strikes, refusing to renew employment contracts of workers involved in strikes, and applying psychological pressure by threatening workers with the removal of parental rights over their children and stressing the impact lost wages would have on their children and families.

Workers encountered politically motivated pressure, including for attempting to exercise their freedoms of speech, assembly, and association or expressing their political opinions.

For example, on April 8, the Vitsebsk Regional Court sentenced political prisoner Volha Brytsikava, one of the leaders of the independent trade union at the state-run refinery Naftan in Navapolatsk, to three years in jail for inciting social hatred. On August 21, the same court commenced new hearings against her on charges of calling for sanctions, inciting social hatred, and engaging in “extremist” activities and sentenced her to another three years in jail on October 15.

The law on mass events also seriously limited demonstrations, rallies, and

other public action, constraining the right of unions to organize. No foreign assistance could be offered to trade unions for holding seminars, meetings, strikes, pickets, or related activities, or for “propaganda activities” aimed at their own members, without authorities’ permission. Workers at state-owned enterprises were fired, arrested, and in some cases criminally prosecuted for participating in strikes. Authorities attempted to pressure or fire workers who were deemed protest or strike leaders, or became involved in opposition political activities, which hindered the union’s ability to conduct regular union activities and disrupted workers’ rights to strike and express freely their political opinions.

State employees, who constituted approximately 70 percent of the workforce, could establish contracts with terms of up to five years, but most contracts expired after one year. NGOs alleged this practice gave the government, through state employers, the ability to fire state employees by declining to renew their contracts. Some state employees, including medical professionals and teachers, who protested the government’s COVID-19 response or participated in protests against the government’s handling of the election in 2020 reportedly were not rehired as of 2024. A government edict provided the possibility for employers to sign open-ended work contracts with an employee only after five years of good conduct and performance by the employee. Longer contracts, however, reportedly also restricted the ability of employees to leave for other jobs. Workers were generally protected during the terms of their contracts.

Opposition political party members and democratic activists had difficulty finding work at both state-affiliated and private employers due to government pressure on these employers.

Forced or Compulsory Labor

See the Department of State's annual *Trafficking in Persons Report* at <https://www.state.gov/trafficking-in-persons-report/>.

Acceptable Work Conditions

Wage and Hour Laws

The law provided for a minimum wage for any or all sectors. As of October 1, the national minimum monthly wage exceeded the poverty line.

The law established a standard workweek of 40 hours and provided for at least one 24-hour rest period per week. The law provided for mandatory overtime and restricted overtime to 10 hours a week, with a maximum of 180 hours of overtime each year.

On March 21, authorities adopted a decree on overtime work and work on days off at industrial enterprises “to ensure the stable operation of industrial organizations,” granting employers the right, in agreement with trade unions and the consent of employees, to increase the limit of overtime and work on days off if there was a justified production and economic necessity. According to independent labor rights experts, the practice could

potentially lead to the weakening of labor protections and legalizing the maximum exploitation of human resources for the political and national security purposes of the state authorities.

Violations of wage, hour, or overtime laws were common in construction, industrial production, agriculture, and housing maintenance services.

Occupational Safety and Health

Occupational safety and health (OSH) standards were generally appropriate for the main industries.

The government did not proactively identify unsafe conditions and generally only responded to workers' OSH complaints.

The law provided workers the right to remove themselves from situations that endangered health or safety without jeopardizing their employment. According to the State Labor Inspection Department, employees had the right to refuse to perform work if they were not provided with personal protective equipment that directly ensured labor safety. The list of required personal protective equipment was approved by the ministry. To refuse to perform assigned work due to a lack of equipment, an employee had to inform the employer or an authorized official of the reasons for refusal in writing.

The most problematic industries included the agricultural, industrial, and

construction sectors. The State Labor Inspection Department maintained labor hotlines for each region and provided separate contact details for matters associated with labor inspections, labor protection, and labor violations. The department also maintained a hotline for problems involving the illegal dismissal of workers.

Wage, Hour, and OSH Enforcement

Authorities effectively enforced minimum wage and overtime laws, and penalties for violations were commensurate with those for other similar crimes and were sometimes applied against violators. The government did not effectively enforce OSH laws. Penalties for violations were less than those for other similar crimes. Penalties were only sometimes applied against violators. The State Labor Inspection Department at the Labor and Social Welfare Ministry was responsible enforcing wage, hour, and OSH laws. The number of labor inspectors was widely assumed to be insufficient to enforce compliance, but the number was not made public. Inspectors had the authority to make unannounced inspections and initiate sanctions. The state labor inspectorate lacked authority to enforce employer compliance and often ignored violations. The government did not act to prevent violations, particularly against vulnerable groups.

Independent experts reported the informal economy constituted up to 30 percent of the total economy, which had a workforce of 4.1 million persons, according to government data. Persons engaged in the informal economy

were often employed in the agricultural, transportation, small-scale retail, and short-term lodging sectors. Labor law did not cover informal workers.

c. Disappearance and Abduction

Disappearance

There were no reports of enforced disappearances by or on behalf of government authorities.

Prolonged Detention without Charges

The law prohibited arbitrary detention and provided for the right of any persons to challenge the lawfulness of their arrest or detention in court, but authorities routinely ignored these requirements. Authorities, including plainclothes security officers, routinely arrested and detained thousands of individuals throughout the year for exercising fundamental freedoms, peacefully opposing Lukashenka's dictatorship, or for actively supporting the prodemocracy movement.

By law, police were required to request permission from a prosecutor to detain a person for more than three hours. Nevertheless, persons were regularly detained without judicial authorization well beyond this limit. Detainees had the right to petition the court system regarding the legality of their detention, but authorities consistently suppressed, ignored, and dismissed such appeals. Appeals to challenge detentions were regularly

denied.

Individuals suspected of treason, conspiracy, espionage, or other activities aimed at taking over state power could be held for 10 days. Authorities often held detainees arrested in cases widely seen as politically motivated for longer than 72 hours. If within the first 72 hours of detention authorities determined an individual was a suspect, authorities could hold the individual for up to 20 days without filing formal charges, and for up to 18 months after filing charges. In some cases, however, authorities detained persons beyond 18 months.

The law stipulated detainees were allowed prompt access to a lawyer of their choice or one provided by the state free of charge, although authorities often delayed extending this right to high-profile political prisoners, who faced authorities without the presence of defense lawyers at the initial stages of an investigation or during interrogations.

Authorities often held individuals arrested on politically motivated allegations incommunicado.

Authorities arbitrarily detained academics, political leaders, human rights defenders, journalists, opposition leaders and members, civil society activists, demonstrators, and ordinary citizens for reasons widely considered to be politically motivated. Authorities permitted and abetted security officers in taking an “arrest first, ask questions later” approach with no

accountability or repercussions for security officers who made wrongful arrests or committed other abuses during or after arrests. Security officers could arrest at their own discretion, refuse to identify themselves, and need not announce the reason for arrests. After detaining an individual, security officers forcefully took their cell phones, including messages, social media, contacts, and videos and photographs, all of which was often used as a pretext to charge detainees with “extremist” or opposition activities. Communications with other individuals deemed critical of authorities or Russia’s war against Ukraine, or anything else authorities deemed “extremist,” often led police to subsequently detain those interlocutors as well. Authorities also checked whether detainees made donations to “extremist” organizations or in support of political prisoners, their families, prodemocracy efforts, or foreign resident communities.

On January 23-24, more than 280 family members of political prisoners, former political prisoners, democratic activists, and volunteers were arbitrarily detained and interrogated, and their residences searched. Security officers specifically targeted and harassed those who used the services of and were associated with the independent foreign-based initiatives Dissidentby, INeedHelp, and ByHelp that authorities deemed “extremist” for providing food, medicine, and other assistance for political prisoners and their families in need. ByHelp founders stated authorities used a database of a local grocery retailer’s food delivery service, which was commonly used to deliver products to political prisoners’ families, to

identify families using the assistance services. The majority of those arrested were convicted of using foreign aid to carry out “terrorist,” “extremist,” or other activities prohibited by law and fined up to 1,200 rubles (\$375), in addition to a fine equal to the financial assistance received from the aid groups or served sentences of up to 15 days on other noncriminal charges.

Dozens of others remained in pretrial detention or were released pending trials on charges of participating in an “extremist” organization and financing “extremist” activities.

Lengthy pretrial detention was a significant problem, particularly for those facing politically motivated charges who were regularly held for indeterminate periods with no sense of when their cases would be heard. Observers believed authorities utilized the pretrial detention process to keep political detainees in a state of psychological and emotional uncertainty. They further believed there were several reasons for delays, including political interference, additional investigations opened, new charges brought against individuals held in pretrial detention, new investigators taking over cases, complicated cases involving many suspects, and cases that required extensive forensic or other expert examinations and analysis. Generally, the period of pretrial detention was accurately calculated and subtracted from the final length of the conviction and the length of pretrial detention did not exceed the statutory maximum sentence

for charged crimes. There were some cases, however, in which this did not occur.

For example, Eduard Babaryka was arrested with his father in 2020 and remained in pretrial detention until he was convicted in July 2023 and sentenced to eight years' imprisonment on charges of tax evasion, inciting social hatred, and facilitating mass riots, which observers deemed politically motivated. The prosecutor told the state press after the trial that although Babaryka was kept in pretrial detention since his 2020 arrest, his time served would only count starting from December 2021, when prosecutors filed additional charges against him. On July 9, a court extended his term for two years on charges of maliciously disobeying the prison administration.

d. Violations in Religious Freedom

See the Department of State's annual *International Religious Freedom Report* at <https://www.state.gov/international-religious-freedom-reports/>.

e. Trafficking in Persons

See the Department of State's annual *Trafficking in Persons Report* at <https://www.state.gov/trafficking-in-persons-report/>.

Section 3. Security of the Person

a. Torture and Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or

Punishment

The law prohibited such practices. Nevertheless, the Committee for State Security of the Republic of Belarus (BKGB), riot police, and other security forces, often without identification and wearing street clothes and masks, regularly used excessive force indiscriminately against detainees, peaceful protesters, members of the independent media, and ordinary citizens. Security forces also reportedly abused and mistreated individuals during investigations. As reported by human rights NGOs, police regularly beat and tortured persons during detentions and arrests. Human rights groups also reported abuses in police custody, including severe beatings; psychological humiliation, such as forcing detainees to undress; videotaped forced confessions made public on social media; and other efforts to exhaust detainees mentally and physically.

Reports of torture were prevalent in detention facilities and prisons across the country. In particular, human rights organizations stated overcrowded and unsanitary premises were used as a means of torture at the notorious detention facility and prison located on Akrestsina Lane in Minsk. They argued that the officers and doctors of those two facilities created dehumanizing conditions amounting to torture during the year. Authorities at these facilities were known to place homeless persons with communicable diseases, fleas, bedbugs, and lice in overcrowded cells with political prisoners.

Separately, former inmates and family members of political prisoners reported that administrations of the penal colonies for women No. 4 in Homyel and No. 24 in Zharecha also rigidly enforced restrictions and mistreated political prisoners, isolating and beating them, and not providing medical assistance.

Rape and sexual abuse by security forces were reported. Authorities engaged in medical abuse by intentionally committing persons to institutions for the mentally ill as a form of punishment or coercion. For example, as of October, political prisoner Yury Kavaliou remained in a psychiatric hospital for coercive mental treatment since August 2022. According to a human rights group, Kavaliou explained that the psychiatric hospital was worse than the penitentiary and punishment cell.

Impunity for abuses remained a serious problem in the security forces. As of year's end, there was no indication authorities had investigated or intended to take any action against officers involved in widespread human rights abuses following the 2020 presidential election. Among the myriad unpunished abuses by authorities documented after the 2020 election were severe beatings; psychological humiliation; the use of stress positions; at least one reported case of rape and hundreds of sexual abuse cases; use of electric shock devices; excessive use of tear gas; and up to three days of deprivation of food, drinking water, hygiene products, the use of toilets, sleep, and medical assistance. Conversely, the government prosecuted

former law enforcement and security officers who tried to launch investigations against their colleagues or individuals who advised officials who were dismissed for political reasons or resigned in protest of police violence.

b. Protection of Children

Child Labor

The law prohibited all the worst forms of child labor. The minimum age for employment was 16 for all sectors. Children as young as 14 could conclude a labor contract with the written consent of one parent or a legal guardian. The Prosecutor General's Office was responsible for enforcement of the law. Persons younger than 18 were allowed to work in nonhazardous jobs but were not allowed to work overtime, on weekends, or on government holidays. Work could not be harmful to children's health or hinder their education.

The government generally enforced these laws, and penalties for violations were commensurate with those of other serious crimes. The government did not provide data on child labor law violations during the year.

There was no significant presence of the worst forms of child labor.

Child Marriage

The legal minimum age of marriage was 18, although girls as young as 14 could marry with parental consent. Authorities effectively enforced this law.

c. Protection to Refugees

The government provided limited cooperation with the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), International Organization for Migration, and other humanitarian organizations in providing protection and assistance to refugees, returning refugees, or asylum seekers, as well as other persons of concern. Authorities either did not approve or delayed approval, however, of requests made by UNHCR to assist irregular migrants in the country, including those located near the country's borders with the EU and those in detention pending their extradition.

Provision of First Asylum

The law provided for the granting of asylum or refugee status, and the government had a process for determining refugee status and a system for providing protection to refugees. The law provided for protection against refoulement granted to foreigners who were denied refugee status or temporary protection but were unable to return to their countries of origin. The system provided procedural safeguards for seeking protection and review; however, asylum seekers could arbitrarily be sent to countries

without adequate laws or systems for providing protection to refugees.

All foreigners except Russians had the right to apply for asylum. According to the terms of the Union Treaty with Russia, Russian citizens could settle and obtain residence permits in the country.

Resettlement

Naturalization of refugees was possible after seven years of permanent residence, as in the case of other categories of foreign residents.

d. Acts of Antisemitism and Antisemitic Incitement

The Jewish community estimated approximately 30,000 Jews lived in the country.

There were no reports of violence against or harassment of Jewish persons, or of threats or attacks against community institutions. There were no reports of vandalism against the Jewish community.

Many memorials to victims of the Holocaust, built in Soviet times as well as more recently, did not distinguish Jewish victims from other victims of Nazi atrocities. The Jewish community worked with foreign donors and local authorities to erect monuments to commemorate Jewish victims specifically.

Holocaust distortion occurred. For example, the regime focused on the so-

called genocide of the “Belarusian people,” rather than victims of the Holocaust in general, or Jewish victims in particular, to promote an anti-European narrative for political ends. State-affiliated propagandists, political analysts, and security officials issued social media posts insulting dissidents of Jewish origin, including those who left for Israel or remained in exile, for their protest activity or other connections with the democratic movement and prodemocracy movement.

Authorities, including prominent public figures, made antisemitic remarks. On June 14, while speaking at an anti-corruption and criminal accountability meeting with senior law enforcement, security and other government officials, Lukashenka remarked that in a corruption case associated with former Agriculture Minister Ihar Brylo “half of the three dozen arrested individuals were Jews” and questioned “whether they were privileged to steal and do not think about their future.”

For further information on incidents of antisemitism in the country, whether or not those incidents were motivated by religion, and for reporting on the ability of Jews to exercise freedom of religion or belief, see the Department of State’s annual *International Religious Freedom Report* at <https://www.state.gov/international-religious-freedom-reports/>.

e. Instances of Transnational Repression

Authorities engaged in acts of transnational repression to intimidate or

exact reprisal against individuals outside of the country, including exiled democratic movement leaders, civil society activists, human rights defenders, trade unionists, lawyers, students, journalists, and others who fled repression in the country. In particular, the regime opened politically motivated investigations against prodemocracy activists and members of the democratic movement in exile, as well as against family members of exiles inside the country; held politically motivated trials in absentia; regularly abused Interpol notices; and frequently harassed exiles and their family members still in the country, subjecting them to surveillance and threatening them with violence.

During the year, authorities launched hundreds of politically motivated prosecutions in absentia against individuals who left the country to flee repression.

On March 20, the Investigative Committee reported it had opened criminal cases against more than 100 members of the Belarusian diaspora and so-called people's embassies, which authorities declared "extremist" organizations on February 28, for "seizing power in an unconstitutional way," discrediting the country, and aiming "to isolate Belarusian official diplomatic missions." The committee stated it had searched and put a freeze on assets, including more than 30 real estate properties belonging to those prosecuted in absentia.

The following day, the committee released a statement announcing the

opening of a criminal case against 257 persons who were running for the democratic movement's representative body in exile envisioned to facilitate a democratic transition, the Coordination Council, on charges of conspiring to take over state powers, calling for sanctions, establishing an "extremist" organization, and facilitating "extremist" activities. As in other cases of prosecution in absentia, the committee maintained that authorities would search the premises and freeze assets of the charged individuals to compensate for damages.

Extraterritorial Killing, Kidnapping, or Violence or Threats of Violence

Authorities were credibly alleged to have used violence or threats of violence against individuals in other countries, including to force their return to the country, for purposes of politically motivated reprisal.

During an April 25 meeting, the chairman of the BKGB referred to an alleged plot by Belarusian volunteer fighters in Ukraine to cross into Belarus and "seize a district center." In response to these comments, Lukashenka threatened "the relatives [in the country] of those who are planning to attack the country from abroad," and warned that they should not "put your family members at risk." Lukashenka also noted those abroad "had property [in the country]" implying authorities would seize the property of those charged with political crimes in absentia.

Threats, Harassment, Surveillance, or Coercion

Belarusians outside the country reported instances of harassment, surveillance, and intimidation from individuals suspected of affiliation with the Lukashenka regime. Human rights defenders also reported individuals inside the country were harassed or arrested after their family members fled the country due to fear of repression or joined one of the Belarusian battalions fighting alongside the Ukrainian armed forces.

Political exiles and others who fled the regime's repression reported receiving threats believed to be from authorities. Authorities repeatedly damaged or destroyed exiled activists' property as a method of retaliation. On March 17, authorities published a video of the ransacked apartment of Raman Khalilau, an activist of the anarchist movement, and his mother Gayane Akhtsyian, a former political prisoner. The video, recorded in the city of Polatsk, featured broken furniture and destroyed personal belongings.

There were reports that authorities pressured relatives of opposition supporters who had fled the country to punish or coerce the person who had fled. For example, independent media reported during the year that family members of those who left the country were questioned at border crossings regarding the whereabouts of their family members abroad and were reportedly told to convince them to return to the country.

Misuse of International Law Enforcement Tools

There were credible reports that authorities misused or attempted to misuse international law enforcement tools for politically motivated purposes against specific individuals located outside the country. Human rights groups registered detentions based on Interpol notices in some European countries of Belarusian opposition figures and human rights defenders. These individuals were released after additional checks and verifications. On May 31, the Supreme Court in Belgrade ordered the deportation of activist and journalist Andrei Hnyot, detained upon arrival in Serbia in October 2023 based on an INTERPOL Red Notice, to Belarus, where he was wanted on alleged tax evasion charges. Human rights groups denounced the charges against Hnyot as politically motivated and argued they were in response to his work for the Freedom Association of Athletes SOS BY, an initiative bringing together athletes who opposed the regime's crackdown surrounding the 2020 election and provided support to exiled Belarusian athletes. In July, INTERPOL rescinded the Red Notice, explaining that after review, it found the case politically motivated. On October 31, Hnyot was released and flew to Germany on a humanitarian visa.

Efforts to Control Mobility

There were reports that the government attempted to control mobility to exact reprisal against citizens abroad by revoking their identity documents

and denying them consular services at embassies abroad. This was reportedly aimed at jeopardizing the legal status of these individuals, restricting their movement, provoking their detention in the country where they were located, or forcing them to return to Belarus where they would likely face repression.

In September 2023, Lukashenka signed a decree annulling the authority of the country's diplomatic missions to issue, extend, and change passports for all Belarusians abroad. Under the decree, passport services were available only at local departments for citizenship and migration of the Internal Affairs Ministry and the Foreign Ministry in the country. By a separate law signed on the same day, Lukashenka required citizens' physical presence, or a power of attorney personally endorsed in Belarus, for any transactions involving real estate or vehicles, as well inheriting property in the country. After issuing these laws, authorities told exiles to return to Belarus for such services. Some representatives of the diaspora community – most notably political exiles – said they would not return due to fear of politically motivated detentions, torture in prison facilities, and the lack of rule of law to protect them from human rights abuses. There were multiple reports during the year that authorities did not approve, or retroactively canceled, transactions involving the sale or purchase of real estate, which belonged to political activists in exile, despite a valid power of attorney.

Bilateral Pressure

There were credible reports that Belarusian authorities attempted to exert bilateral pressure on countries to take adverse action against Belarusians who fled the country to avoid human rights abuses, politically motivated arrests, and punishment by authorities. For example, on November 20, state media reported that Vasil Verameychyk, a member of the Belarusian democratic movement and former volunteer fighter for Ukraine, was detained in Vietnam and extradited to Belarus on “terrorism” charges. According to independent sources, Verameychyk was a former officer in the Belarusian army who participated in the 2020 post-election protests and subsequently fled to Ukraine in 2021 to avoid politically motivated charges. After an injury and leaving Ukraine, he lived in Lithuania and then relocated to Vietnam. Human rights advocates reported that Vietnamese authorities arrested him for hooliganism on November 13 and immediately handed him over to Belarusian authorities, who transported him to Belarus through Russia the next day.