# BELARUSIAN DICTATORSHIP: UNENDING DRAMA

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# GENERAL INFORMATION

Located in the center of Europe, Belarus is considered an outlier of the civilized world because President Alexander Lukashenko’s political regime. Sadly, this is not the first time this county finds itself in a tight grip of dictatorship. Belarus actually has the highest ratio in the world of the number of years under dictatorship or foreign invasion to the number of years of its total existence.[[1]](#footnote-1) Lithuania, Poland, the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union, and now, when the freedom and independence seemed so close after the break-up of the USSR, it’s suffering again under Lukashenko’s regime of political abuse and total disrespect for international law and human and civil rights and liberties. Numerous contemporary American and European political analysts deem Lukashenko’s presidency not only as of something humiliating to his people but also dangerous to the outside world. Jeffrey Deutsch, in his article “Lukashenka: Following Saddam Hussein’s footsteps?” identifies numerous similarities between those two political dictatorships and especially emphasizes the fact that, like Saddam, Lukashenko might use a military threat to the Western world as a means to hold onto his presidency forever.[[2]](#footnote-2) Although Lukashenko is a potential threat to Western civilization, he is an actual threat, and a lethal one, to his own nation. Since his election in 1994, Belarusian political history has been marked by a chain of prosecutions of opposition members, police brutality, economic and social degradation, and abuse of power.

# MAP OF BELARUS



<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/graphics/maps/large/bo-map.gif>

Nobody in the West could have imagined that something like that could have happened in Belarus. In 1994, the country was struggling, but it was surviving. But the nostalgia for “the strong hand” made people give their votes to the young corruption-fighting deputy, Lukashenko.

The roots of his habit to solve all problems with force lie in his childhood. He was an extramarital son of an illiterate collective farm worker. In his primitive surroundings, he was mocked and abused. To become popular, he was bold to teachers and tried to entertain everybody. He would frequently climb a tree and yell “cock-a-doodle-do” in jest.

When he grew up, he became affiliated with local hooligans, who taught him what it meant to have a strong hand. Using their lessons, he beat? up to tractor drivers when a director of a collective farm, and beat them up so cruelly that court proceedings were instituted against him. Lukashenka entered Mogilev Pedagogic Institute with the support of his mother-in-law, his former room teacher, and her connections.

His membership in the Communist Party and his ability to play to the situation helped him become a collective farm director and then a deputy in 1990. As a member of the Parliament, Lukashenka started fighting corruption on both the left and the right to show his honesty and willingness to improve the country’s political system. When elected to the presidency, however, he abandoned his former passion and turned to other problems at hand: bringing order to the country with endless repression and total control of his citizens’ actions.[[3]](#footnote-3)

He is also famous for his uneducated speech, which is neither Belarusian nor Russian, but a mixture of both. His most famous quotations include “The Belarusian will live poor, but not for long,” “Nothing was bad in Germany with Adolph Hitler,” and “I would never lead my people into civilized world.”

All the facts gathered here were confirmed with my numerous Belarusian friends and have received their approval to be used as a truthful reflection of Belarusian reality.

## UNLIMITED POWER OF THE PRESIDENCY

In Belarus, all the executive and a significant amount of legislative power is concentrated in the hands of the President. Since his election to a five-year-term in 1994, Alexander Lukashenko has steadily consolidated power in the executive branch through authoritarian means. He used a 1996 referendum to amend the 1994 Constitution in order to broaden his powers and extend his term in the office. The president ignored the then-Constitutional Court’s ruling that the Constitution could not be amended by referendum. As a result, the current political system is based on the 1996 Constitution, which was adopted in an unconstitutional manner. The international community does not recognize the legitimacy of the 1996 Constitution, legislature, or Alexander Lukashenko’s continuation in office beyond the legal expiration in July of 1999.

On September 9, 2001, presidential elections were held in Belarus. Their results were quite predictable, after all Alexander Lukashenko’s promised to win those elections by any means necessary. According to the reports of the observation mission of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), the election administration system was “overtly dependent on the executive branch.” The mission also reports “a campaign of intimidation directed against opposition activists, domestic observation organizations, opposition and independent media, and a smear campaign against international observers.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

The President now dominates all the branches of government. The previous legislature was not elected directly, but was created out of the remnants of the former 13th Supreme Soviet, which Lukashenko disbanded soon after 1996 referendum. The new Constitution limits the legislature to meeting twice per year for no more than a total of 170 days. Presidential decrees made when the legislature is out session have the force of law. The parliamentary elections were held on October 15, 2000, but they failed to meet any international norms and regulations. According to a statement by the US Department of State, “The United States supports the view of our European allies that the October 15 elections in Belarus were not free, fair, or transparent. The assessment mission of both the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and the European Parliamentary Troika concluded that the elections failed to meet the international norms for democratic elections. The United States does not accept the results of the elections and will continue to accept the democratically elected 13th Supreme Soviet, led by Chairman Semyon Sharetsky, as the legitimate parliament of Belarus.”[[5]](#footnote-5) Numerous opposition parties boycotted the elections.

Law enforcement and security authorities, such as the Committee for State Security (KGB) and the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD), answer directly to the President and are fully controlled by him. And civilian authorities do not have any influence on the security forces. As a result of that, some divisions of security forces act against the president’s political enemies with no judicial or legislative oversight and constantly abuse human rights.

The judiciary branch is not independent and is unable to act as a check on the executive branch. Without complete structural reforming, the judiciary cannot be considered independent. The 1996 Constitution further subordinated the judiciary to the executive branch by giving the president the power to appoint six of the twelve members of the Constitutional Court, including the chairman. The Constitutional Court, established to adjudicate serious constitutional issues, is fully dependent on the executive branch and has no means to enforce its decisions. The president also appoints the chairmen of the Supreme Court and the Supreme Economic Court. The same Constitution gives the president authority to appoint and dismiss all district and military judges. There are numerous reports of so-called “telephone justice” (the practice of higher official dictating desirable decisions to the judges in private).[[6]](#footnote-6)

The President controls mass-media and press by the authority given to him by the 1998 amendments to the Press Law, according to which he can ban newspapers without court decision if he finds that it “insults the president or the state authorities.” President Lukashenko is known for abusing his enormous power. The number of political arrests and disappearances increased dramatically during his presidency. Disappearances of famous mass-media figures and former members of the thirteenth Supreme Soviet were obviously connected to their activities in the opposition.

As one can see, Alexander Lukashenko did everything to consolidate all the power in his hands in order to control every aspect of political and social life in Belarus. At this moment, he rules the country almost by himself, establishing his dictatorship through a wide range of authoritarian means – from political arrest and imprisonment to open challenges to the international community. And, in all his actions, he finds significant help and support among internal security authorities and the military.

The April 2010 elections of local representatives once again demonstrated the absence of fair democratic conditions in the country. Yankevich, the leader of the Belarusian People’s Front, criticized Lukashenko’s regime for rigging the results of local election and exercising undue pressure on the voters and abuse of administrative resources by the officials loyal to the regime. “What we saw in Belarus on April 25, is not only impossible to call a free and fair election, but even an election at all,” said Yankevich.[[7]](#footnote-7) The European Exchange Report criticized the local elections in Belarus for “enormous levels of manipulation.”[[8]](#footnote-8)

During the 2015 presidential elections, there was [one televised debate](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hgcDD6zEt4k&feature=youtu.be) with another candidate, but President Alexander Lukashenko did not take part in it. He did not hold rallies, answer questions, or go out of his way to meet voters at all, because the results of his victorious election were predetermined.[[9]](#footnote-9) Finally, Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko won his fifth term with a landslide 83.5% of the vote. None of three other candidates in Sunday's election achieved more than 5%. The turnout was 86.75%. But observers from the OSCE security body said it fell far short of the country's democratic commitments. There were "significant problems" in the counting and tabulation of votes, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe complained. No veteran opposition leaders stood, as they were not allowed to register. A Belarusian human rights group also said the vote fell far short of democratic norms. Aleh Hulak, head of Human Rights Defenders for Free Elections, criticized "mass early voting" and "non-transparent vote-counting."[[10]](#footnote-10)

The 2019 parliamentary elections excluded the last two opposition deputies. Full preliminary results from parliamentary elections in Belarus showed the chamber has no members of the opposition to challenge strongman President Alexander Lukashenko. Results released by the national elections commission showed all the parliament’s 110 seats won by former government functionaries, diplomats, and members of pro-government parties.

Election observers and government opponents questioned the poll’s integrity. Observers from the Organization for Security and Cooperation (OSCE) in Europe said that “fundamental freedoms were disregarded and the integrity of the election process was not adequately safeguarded.” A statement from the OSCE team cited concerns including the exclusion of many opposition candidates, limited opportunity for public campaigning and shortcomings during vote counting. “These elections have demonstrated an overall lack of respect for democratic commitments,” an observer team leader, Margaret Cederfeldt, said in the statement.

The outgoing parliament in the former Soviet republic had two opposition deputies. But they, and many other opposition candidates, were blocked from running again. Belarusian opposition figures said early voting was a particular concern, because the ballot boxes were not guarded. One independent observer reported filming a woman stuffing a box with ballots, but the incident was brushed off by the elections commission head.[[11]](#footnote-11)

Over the years, President Lukashenko built a strong dictatorship with full control of the country. The last elections excluded any opposition from the parliament and showed his unshakable grip over power in Belarus.

# CORRUPTION

Corruption is rampant in Belarus and, according to some experts, is impossible to eliminate. The 2012 Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index ranked Belarus 123 out of 176 surveyed countries. Belarus shares its place with such failing states as Sierra Leone and Mozambique.[[12]](#footnote-12) According to Garri Pogonyaylo, a Belarussian human rights activist, Belarusian officials are incorrigibly corrupt while law enforcement agencies and judiciary system cover for them. There are reports of high-ranking officials having been tried for corruption, but they get away with lenient sentences in most of the cases.[[13]](#footnote-13)

The US Bureau of Diplomatic Security states that Belarusian law enforcement agencies are the part of the problem in most cases due to police ineffectiveness and negligence. The report also indicated that law enforcement is “sometimes used for political purposes.”[[14]](#footnote-14)

Police officers who investigate and actually revolt against corruption in the country are severely prosecuted and persecuted. For example, Oleg Alkaev, who received political asylum in Germany, exposed the mechanisms of the corruption in Belarus on the highest level. As a result, he was targeted by the regime and fled the country.[[15]](#footnote-15)

Corruption is present at all government levels in Belarus: customs, public procurement, and construction are particularly vulnerable sectors. Companies are likely to face discrimination and corruption in public procurement in favor of state-owned enterprises and making informal payments or giving gifts to secure government contracts are common practices when doing business in the country. While petty corruption is relatively limited, high-level corruption occurs with impunity. The [Criminal Code of the Republic of Belarus](http://www.google.dk/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=7&ved=0CGIQFjAG&url=http%3A%2F%2Ftrack.unodc.org%2FLegalLibrary%2FLegalResources%2FBelarus%2FLaws%2FBelarus%2520Old%2520Criminal%2520Code%25201994.pdf&ei=T6BnUpXeIuqB4gT2hYGADQ&usg=AFQjCNGFuh2SA4MxDRV5-Y3aG7vtHsFcjw&bvm=bv.55123115,d.bGE&cad=rja) criminalizes attempted corruption, [extortion](https://www.ganintegrity.com/portal/corruption-dictionary/#Extortion), [active](https://www.ganintegrity.com/portal/corruption-dictionary/#Supply) and [passive bribery](https://www.ganintegrity.com/portal/corruption-dictionary/#Demand), bribery of foreign officials, and [money laundering](https://www.ganintegrity.com/portal/corruption-dictionary/#Money), but anti-corruption regulations are vague and require improvement. In addition, anti-corruption laws have been poorly enforced and officials engage in corruption with impunity. The legal status of facilitation payments is uncertain.[[16]](#footnote-16) According to the IPM Research Center, every third entrepreneur complained about corruption in Belarus in recent years. In 2016, the assessment of the situation improved, but it returned to the previous alarming indicators in 2017. One of the causes of corruption is the high state presence in the economy.[[17]](#footnote-17) In sum, corruption is an integral part of the political and economic landscape of the country.

# POLICE BRUTALITY, DISRESPECT FOR LAW AND HARASSMENT OF OPPOSITION

Numerous reports of police brutality in Belarus – such as torture, beating, inhuman and degrading treatment of detainees and prisoners – are filling various human rights reports. Police and other security authorities feel absolutely invulnerable, receiving full support of their actions from President Lukashenko. In return for that, they severely prosecute his political opponents.

Every antigovernment demonstration is followed by cruel beatings of the participants. Two major opposition rallies, the “Chernobyl Path” and the “March of Freedom,” are brutally suppressed by the regime every year. On April 26, 1996 the “Chernobyl Path” rally was attacked by police who beat dozens of participants using force in order to disperse the demonstrators.[[18]](#footnote-18) The political opposition organized the “March of Freedom,” which was attacked by police, as well, the next year, on March 23, 1997. Many participants were beaten and arrested.[[19]](#footnote-19) Another example was “The March of Freedom” held on October 17, 1999. On the same day, the BBC News agency reported that “Baton-wielding police clashed with 5000 opposition demonstrators…About 50 protesters were arrested.”[[20]](#footnote-20) Other sources reported detainees of 200 or more. It was the largest opposition rally since 1996 and was held to protest President Lukashenko’s push to unify Belarus and Russia and to express concern about the disappearances of opposition members. Many protestors were prosecuted by authorities, while four young activists faced up to five years in prison and fled Belarus.[[21]](#footnote-21)

After that demonstration, human rights centers “Vesna-96” and “Chapter-97” reported numerous beatings and arrests during the demonstration and providing the testimonies of the victims after it. In fact, that was just the beginning. In all consecutive years, the government methodically disrupted opposition rallies using force. Hundreds and thousands of participants of the rallies were beaten and many were detained. President Lukashenko has been showing his brutal face and his will to hold power without any challenges to his people.

In January 2002, Charter 97 issued a report of human rights violations by the regime in December 2001. The report indicated that the policemen used a kind of torture dubbed "the Sparrow," where the victim is hung up upside down by his handcuffed hands, which are held between his legs. Human rights activists said the police used this method of torture to make Anton Yashin and Dmitry Yutskevich testify against Alexander Chigir, the son of Mikhail Chigir, the former prime minister of Belarus and an opposition leader who was a prospective presidential candidate united in a coalition against Lukashenko in 2001.[[22]](#footnote-22)

In general, the government censors mail, taps telephones, and restricts freedom of the press. The KGB controls the media and mail, and there are no signs that the government intends to relax its grip.[[23]](#footnote-23) In October 2011, Lukashenko's government broadened the powers of the omnipotent Belarusian KGB. Under the new law, the KGB is authorized to break into offices homes. The new law also provides two year imprisonment for receiving foreign financing and a sentence of up to three years for calling for anti-governmental protests. Anatoliy Lebedko, leader of the opposition party United Civil Party, commented on the changes: "They want to terrify the society and to show that the monster [Lukashenko] can turn the KGB into anything."[[24]](#footnote-24)

The March of Freedom and Chernobyl Path (Chernobyl Shlyakh), which are held annually, became major opposition rallies. The government uses force to disperse the March of Freedom every year and harasses participants of the Chernobyl Shlyakh. Sadly, this tendency develops in modern Belarus, making the struggle for democracy not only a matter of moral choice but also of personal courage. But as this tendency reveals itself on lower levels in beating and torturing common demonstrators and opposition members, the leaders of the opposition pay their toll with deaths and disappearances.

In the struggle to keep Belarus under control, Lukashenko follows the most cruel and inhuman of all the methods he has learned from his Soviet predecessors, so those who try to fight for democracy in the country should be prepared for the worst. A couple of beatings after participation in opposition rallies or a few days in prison under torture and food deprivation is usually enough to make those who try think twice. But if they remain persistent, they risk following the destiny of Viktor Hanchar, Anatol Krasovsky, or Yury Zkharanka; they all disappeared in 1999, but as anyone who lived under the Soviet regime knows, “unknown whereabouts” most likely means “death.”

Viktar Hanchar, former head of the Central Electoral Committee, was appointed to that office by the 13th Supreme Soviet. It was disbanded by Lukashenko in 1996. He was a leading figure in the Belarusian opposition movement and was imprisoned in March 1999, half a year prior to his disappearance. On March 11, 1999, he was released from jail after serving a 10-day jail sentence on administrative charges and maintaining a hunger strike for five days. Hanchar’s wife told journalists that he was tortured when he was detained in the jail cell. Human Rights Watch interviewed Hanchar, who recounts that the police dressed in camouflage stopped his car and forcibly detained him, breaking his car window in the process. The police first attempted to hang Hanchar up by his handcuffed arms in the police van, and when this failed, they pressed him down on the seat and also hit his ears.

After Hanchar refused to sign a written obligation not to leave Belarus, prison guards put him in a cell, the so-called "stone sack," for two hours to force him to sign the documents, but he never complied. The KGB agents drove him around the city for two hours and then threw him out into the snow near the Minsk Ring Road. From there, he made his way back home, fainting several times; he was only wearing a jacket.[[25]](#footnote-25)

Ex-Minister of Internal Affairs, General Yury Zakharanka, was kidnapped in the evening of May 7, 1999, not far from his house. The witnesses (who begged his name not to be publicized) was not found by investigative bodies, but by the Civic Commission for the Search of Zakharanka. They saw several strangers throw Zakharanka into a car and leave him in unknown location. According to Zakharanka's wife, Volha, he had previously received anonymous threats. She said: "I kept telling him: Yury, he (Lukashenka) will either kill or jail you anyway... But Yury always replied: I will never leave my country and will always keep my head high… Yury was not afraid of him.” cite

Zakharanka’s whereabouts are still unknown and the criminal case on the General's disappearance has never been instituted. In 2001, Zakharanka's family immigrated to Germany. But Zakharanka's mother, Ullana, stayed. She has recently addressed Lukashenka: "Mr. President, I have only one hope and joy in this world – to see my son before I die, at least to glance at him once. Please, release him. Be kind to give such an order. For Jesus Christ's sake!” cite

Four months after Zakharanka was kidnapped, Viktar Hanchar went missing. The scenario repeated itself almost exactly to the previous case. He disappeared on the evening of 16 September in Minsk. Hanchar's wife, Zinaida, told Belarusian media that he was driving home with a friend, Anatol Krasovsky, head of Krasika Publishing House, but failed to appear on time. She called the police and the KGB in Minsk inquiring about her husband but obtained no information on his whereabouts.[[26]](#footnote-26)

Krasovsky's wife went to the site where the men were last seen, near the sauna, and found some traces of broken glass on the street, and some broken car parts, and she and other colleagues believe that glass and debris were from his car. Speculation for the motives for a possible abduction center on the fact that the 13th Supreme Soviet session was supposed to open on September 19, and Hanchar was due to give a speech. Hanchar's current title as acting chairman of the Supreme Soviet makes him the top opposition parliament official after Semyon Sharetski, who fled to exile in Lithuania prior to that tragic event. As acting chair of the parliament, still recognized by Western leaders and the OSCE, he had a leading role in the talks to begin between the opposition and the Lukashenko administration. He also had an appointment with U.S. Ambassador Daniel Speckhard the next day.[[27]](#footnote-27)

The only high-ranking official who testified in the case was ex-head of the Minsk detention center, Aleh Alkayeu. He told Reuters on April 22, 2002 that he was ready to testify in an international court against President Lukashenka, after fleeing to Germany, where he lives, guarded by German police. Alkayeu is in possession of the executioner's logbook, which shows that Interior Ministry officials borrowed an execution pistol twice on the exact days when Yury Zakharanka and Viktar Hanchar and Anatol Krasovsky disappeared in 1999.[[28]](#footnote-28)

In the fall of 2005, President Lukashenko took new measures to protect himself against criticism and opposition activism. Any opposition demonstrations are banned by the government because the demonstrators could express anti-Belarusan (i.e., anti-president) views.

The regime uses the new decree widely in order to silence the opposition. On March 2, 2006, police officers beat and detained the opposition presidential candidate Alyaksandr Kazulin; several journalists were beaten as well.[[29]](#footnote-29) The next episode was the arrest of twenty campaign workers who worked for another opposition candidate, Alyaksandr Milinkevich.[[30]](#footnote-30)

The regime is very preoccupied with the fact that many young people are involved in the opposition. It never registered the Zubr organization and the Young Front (Malady Front), nor smaller groups who opposed the government, whereas the Youth Christian Social Union Young Democrats, which became one of the biggest opposition youth organizations, was dissolved as an organization for its active participation in mass protests prior to the 2004 Parliamentary elections, but it continued its activities as an unregistered organization.[[31]](#footnote-31) The Zubr was a target of the government repression since it was established in 2001 and until it disbanded itself in May 2006. The Young Front who accepted many members of the Zubr is continuing its struggle for democracy in Belarus. The members of the Zubr and the Young Front, as well as other youth opposition organizations, were beaten, jailed, fined, and tortured by the authorities. The KGB, police, and other government agencies use brutal methods of suppression of young activists. Still, many continue to be active in their struggle for democracy and continue to be targeted by the ruthless KGB and Lukashenko’s other henchmen.

In January 2007, in Salihorsk, police detained activists of the Young Front who protested against fraudulent local elections by distributing opposition leaflets and holding banners saying “Down with the elections without alternative.” One of the detained protestors, Ivan Shyla, was sixteen years old, but it did not stop police officers who detained the young activist and pressed criminal charges against him.[[32]](#footnote-32) In August 2007, Tatsytsyana Tishkevich sustained brain injury and required hospitalization as a result of the police brutality during the crackdown on opposition activists on Solidarity Day.[[33]](#footnote-33) In September 2007, OMON (riot police) police officers brutally beat up Young Front activists and subsequently detained them near the Baranovichi District Court where the trial of Yaraslau Grishenya, one of the Young Front activists, was taking place.[[34]](#footnote-34)

In March 2008, about fifty participants in the Day of Freedom opposition actions were detained by Belarusian police. One of the participants, Zmitser Yasevich, a Young Front member, provided the following description of the events:

When we were forced back to the editorial office of the “Vecherniy Minsk,” riot policemen started to encircle little groups of people and make them pass through a so-called “corridor” to buses. I found myself in one of such circles. When the bus was filled with people, it was very crowded there. We were taken to the police department of the Savetski District.

There were about 50 of us, two buses, who were taken to the department. When everybody was taken to a big hall, a person of 30 was beside me. He complained of a stitch in his right side, and he asked to call in an ambulance. An ambulance was called in in only an hour and a half. When it arrived, an officer had a “talk” with doctors, and they told that the man didn’t need hospitalization. Another young man said that his arm had been injured, and possibly broken, but nobody reacted. Only Yaraslau Hryschenya was taken away by an ambulance. The press photographer of the “Nasha Niva” Andrei Lyankevich was left, though he was bloodstained head-to-toe.[[35]](#footnote-35)

In September 2008, mass protests were held in Minsk following the parliamentary elections. More than one thousand people gathered in the central streets of Minsk, claiming widespread fraud and abuse of administrative resources.[[36]](#footnote-36) Since Lukashenko came to power, Belarus has not known political stability and has staged crackdowns on peaceful opposition protests, arbitrary detention of young people, and, in many cases, minor opposition activists, harassment of independent mass media, which is practically extinct in Belarus, and repressions against political leaders opposing Lukashenko’s ruthless regime. 2007 and 2008 were no different in any respect. The 2008 parliamentary elections only worsened the human rights situation by triggering a new wave of repressions.

The youth experience problems not only on campuses[[37]](#footnote-37) but also in secondary general education school[[38]](#footnote-38) if they do not join the government sponsored Belarusian Republican Union of Youth (BRUY or BRSM). The rejection of membership means disloyalty and gives the authorities ways to harass real or potential opponents. Charter 97, a Belarusian opposition organization, reported that practically all sorts of student activities other than expression of “collective love for the dictator” are suppressed at universities in Belarus. For example, in 2011, the repressions in the Minsk State University of Linguistics took on an unprecedented scale. Students who had been known for participation in any civil activities were held back in their academic performance. Students were forced to sign fabricated reprimands and provost demands to avoid committing any violations. For example, students of the Minsk State University of Linguistics were prohibited from a charity campaign, whose goal was to collect toys for orphanages. Students who were distributing information about the charity campaign were threatened with expulsion and told that they would not be able to get any recommendations for employment purposes.[[39]](#footnote-39)

Commenting on the situation, Aleksandr Velitchenko, a student, stated:

My classmates were also summoned to the dean’s office for a conversation. They [the administration] threatened them and asked them why they participated in such Vkontakte.ru (social network) groups as “SHOS,” “Students’ Resistance [Belarus]” or “We Are Tired of This Lukashenko,” and showed them photos from summer silent protest actions and promised to tell their parents about it.[[40]](#footnote-40)

In March 2009, the authorities brutally suppressed the March of Freedom. Hundreds of protestors were beaten and dozens arrested. The police used batons without giving any exception and disregarded the gender and age of the victims. Alexander Milinkevich, one of the leading opposition leaders, said “Beatings of our people in gateways as well as of elderly and women tell us that the authorities are afraid of us.”[[41]](#footnote-41)

Milinkevich is right: the government is afraid of the opposition and the regime uses brutal methods to suppress it. Thus, in March of 2009, the government forces attacked the peaceful rally of the opposition.[[42]](#footnote-42) The government persecutes the opposition everywhere in the country. In Vitebsk, five opponents were put on trial for their participation in the rally.[[43]](#footnote-43)

Another crackdown against peaceful protesters took place in September 2009. Baton-wielding police in Minsk detained more than 20 protesters opposed to joint military exercises with Russia as the country seeks to balance close Kremlin ties with improved European Union relations.[[44]](#footnote-44)

The government persecutes those who attempt to express their opinion in art. Thus, police special forces stormed the performance of a play by an underground theatre group in Belarus in August 2009 and arrested 50 people. The British playwright Tom Stoppard, who supported the Free Theatre for several years, told the Guardian he learned of the raid through a text message sent by one of the theatre's directors, who was detained in the Belarusian capital, Minsk. Stoppard accused the authorities of a "grotesque" attack on civil rights.[[45]](#footnote-45)

The Belarusian authorities target young activists using the KGB as one of the major tools of intimidation and persecution. For example, in September 2009, a young Belarusian LGBTQ activist was summoned to KGB headquarters in Gomel. Svyatoslav Sementsov, aged 25, a co-president of the TEMA Information Center, was told that a criminal case had been started against him under article 193-1 Criminal Code of Belarus for “organizing group activities in the name of non-registered organization.”[[46]](#footnote-46) Another activist in Gomel was persecuted by the police. “Police in the Belarusian city of Gomel have searched the apartment of a youth activist,” RFE/RL's Belarus Service reports. The police presented Andrey Tsyanyuta a search warrant but did not say what they were looking for.[[47]](#footnote-47)

In May 2010, police officers detained and physically abused Aliaksandr Kozulin, a former prisoner of consciousness, and other members of the opposition, including Nikolay Demidenko and Artur Finkevich, leaders of youth opposition movement as well as Aliaksandr Makaev, a businessman. Raisa Mikhailovskaya, a human rights advocate, reported that Kozulin and Makaev were grabbed, thrown into a bus, and beaten up.[[48]](#footnote-48)

On May 27, 2010, OMON (special police force) officers in plain clothes detained activists of “Moladz BNF” (Youth Political Organization) Dmitriy Parmon, Anton Koypish, and many others and beat them up. The arrestees were delivered to the Central Department of Internal Affairs. Dmitriy Parmon was later hospitalized with broken clavicle.[[49]](#footnote-49)

In September 2010, on Solidarity Day, which is celebrated on 16th of each month, Belarusian police detained about twenty of the forty participants, members of Belarusian opposition movements and parties, who demanded that Viktor Gonchar and Anatoliy Krasovskiy, leaders of opposition allegedly kidnapped 11 years ago, be released. Zmiter Dashkevich, leader of the Young Front, Viacheslau Sivchik, and Mikola Demidenko, opposition activists, were among the protesters detained by the police.[[50]](#footnote-50)

In December 2010, riot police brutally beat up Varvara Krasutskaya, one of the human rights activists and member of IDAHO Belarus, during an opposition event in Minsk. The victim sustained serious injuries as a result. Shortly after the attack, Varvara Krasutskaya was approached by KGB officers who attempted to recruit her to be their informant. According to Krasutskaya, KGB officers wanted her to inform the KGB on the plans of the LGBTQ organizations, dates, and places of the actions, as well as lists of the gay activists, including their weak spots, which could be used to pressure them. When she refused to cooperate, the officers showed her photos of her relatives, intimidated her, threatened her with reprisals, and subsequently intimidated her partner, friends, and relatives. The KGB also attempted to recruit Roman Navoev, another gay activist, who gave an interview to the BBC prior to the presidential elections. KGB officers also threatened him with reprisals if he refused to cooperate.[[51]](#footnote-51)

In the aftermath of the December 2010 protests, Belarusian authorities subjected 36 people to criminal proceedings. Four participants in the protests had been sentences to imprisonment. Five presidential candidates – Andrey Sannikov, Nikolay Statkevich, Vitaliy Rymashevskiy, Vladimir Neklyaev, and Ales Mikhalevich – were facing charges. Andrey Sannikov, Nikolay Statkevich, and Ales Mikhalevich were placed in the KGB custody. After Mikhalevich was released, he stated that he was subjected to inhuman treatment and torture during his detention in the KGB Preliminary Detention Center. Arrests of the participants in the December 19 opposition protests continued long after the events. On March 15, 2011, the KGB detained Dmitriy Doronin in Minsk. Prior to the arrest, KGB officers searched the premises and confiscated the hard drive of his personal computer.[[52]](#footnote-52) Thus, Lukashenko’s regime stifled attempts to be challenged by the opposition.

In the morning of January 12, 2011, KGB officers went to the apartment of Viktar Sazonau, an electioneering agent of the presidential candidate Andrei Sannikau and the Chairperson of the Hrodna city branch of the Belarusian Social Democratic Hramada. Their aim was to hold a search at Hramada’s office. At the same time, they also searched the offices of the local branches of the Belarusian Popular Front and the United Civil Party.[[53]](#footnote-53)

On April 11, 2011, an explosion in one of the crowded Minsk subway stations resulted in 12 dead and 149 injured.[[54]](#footnote-54) The incident gave Lukashenko’s regime another reason and justification to strengthen its iron fist and tackle any opposition to the regime. In his interview Lukashenko stated, “I do not exclude that this gift could have been brought to us by outsiders, but we have to look at ourselves as well.”[[55]](#footnote-55) Lukashenko had launched the repression mechanism against practically only independent source of information on Belarus, the Charter-97 website, which was in complete lockdown.

In June 2011, Belarusian authorities detained Ivan Stasyuk, an opposition activist at the Belarusian-Polish border. According to Stasyuk, he was interrogated by KGB officers who threatened him with repercussions not only for him but also members of his family if he did not stop his opposition activities on Internet forums.[[56]](#footnote-56)

In August 2011, law enforcement officers searched the apartment and summerhouse of Ales Belyatskiy, Belarusian human rights advocate, founder of the Viasna Human Rights Center, and the Vice President of International Federation for Human Rights, and subsequently detained him, charging with tax fraud, which the international community has described as "politically motivated" charges and retaliation for his human rights activities.[[57]](#footnote-57) Amnesty International declared Ales Belyatskiy a "prisoner of consciousness" while Heather McGill, an expert for the Amnesty International, commented on the arrest in the following way:

Ales Belyatskiy’s detention is a part of a pattern of the ongoing and longstanding harassment of civil society activists and human rights defenders which has worsened with the crackdown on civil society following the Presidential elections in December 2010. …By refusing to register legitimate NGOs and thus preventing them from functioning openly, the government of Belarus leaves activists such as Ales Belyatskiy with no choice but to use bank accounts in neighboring countries to fund their work.[[58]](#footnote-58)

In October 2011, the police detained Yuriy Karetnikov, an opposition activist and leader of the Praviy Alyans (Right Alliance), a youth non-governmental organization, during the Dziady march.[[59]](#footnote-59) In December 2011, the police detained two activists of the Evropeyskaya Belarus (European Belarus), Vladislav Voronetskiy and Ivan Salokhin, for attempting to place a banner up that said "Freedom to Political Prisoners."[[60]](#footnote-60)

In December 2011, the police detained Vladislav Voronetskiy and Ivan Solokhin, activists of “European Belarus,” for displaying “Freedom to Political Prisoners” banner in Vitebsk and placed them in a detention center where the activists spent a night.[[61]](#footnote-61) In 2011, the Freedom House called Belarus “the second worst place of the most repressive regime” along with Cuba, China and several other countries.[[62]](#footnote-62) On December 30, 2011, Pavel Vinogradov, an activist of the “Speak the Truth” campaign, was summoned to the Moskovskiy District Department of Internal Affairs for “educational and preventive conversation.” After he was released, he stated that the police officers charged him with using offensive language under Article 17.1 of the Administrative Code and detained him for three days. Judging by the behavior of the police officers who initially had absolutely no idea of what to do with Mr. Vinogradov, the summons to the police can be qualified as nothing but harassment. On January 2, 2012, the Moskovskiy District Court in Minsk again sentenced Pavel Vinogradov to seven days in jail.[[63]](#footnote-63)

On January 5, 2012, in Minsk, the police detained Yan Melnikov, an activist of the “For Freedom” movement, who was distributing “Down with Fear” stickers criticizing arbitrary legislation. On January 6, 2012, the Leninskiy District Court in Minsk sentenced Mr. Melnikov to fifteen days of jail time, charging him with violation of Article 17.1 and Article 21.14 of the Administrative Code.[[64]](#footnote-64)

On January 8, 2012, KGB officers detained Nikita Kovalenko, an activist of the “European Belarus,” for displaying portraits of political prisoners and the white-red-white opposition flag in front of the KGB building.[[65]](#footnote-65) In May 2012, in Slonim, police detained Olga Pansevich, an activist of the Belarusian Party of Christian Democracy. Olga Pansevich was delivered to the temporary detention center where police officers subjected her to torture. They forced her to take the “lastochka” (swallow) torture position, threw her on the floor, and kicked her. Subsequently, Ms. Pansevich filed a complaint about the abuse by the police officers with the Prosecutor’s Office, which referred the complaint to the Investigation Committee. However, the letter failed to establish elements of the crime in the actions of the police officers.[[66]](#footnote-66)

On May 19, 2012, the police detained Andrey Molchan after he unfurled the banned national flag in a crowded location in Minsk, not far away from the Pervomayskiy Store, to show his solidarity with political prisoner Sergey Kovalenko. After a while, police officers ran up to him, snatched the flag, pushed him on the ground and beat him up. After that, they threw him inside a police vehicle, where they continued beating him until he lost his senses.[[67]](#footnote-67)

The police also detained Andrey Molchan on July 14, 2012, allegedly for placing the “Down with Death Penalty” sticker under a bridge in Uruchye Mikrorayon. Mr. Molchan stated that police officers brutally beat him up and that he received blows in the head and in the kidneys’ area.[[68]](#footnote-68) On August 30, 2012, the police detained Oleg Shramuk, who created the “We are Tired of Lukashenko” group in “Vkontakte” or VK, a social network service popular in the Russian-speaking community, in protest against falsification of the 2010 presidential elections in Belarus. Mr. Shramuk’s wife Alesya Shramuk stated: “We live in Vitebsk. At about 9 a.m., someone rang our doorbell. I looked through peephole and saw a woman. When I opened the door, special purpose police officers and a man in plain clothes barged in. Shouting, “Where is the owner?” they searched the rooms looking for my husband. Nobody introduced himself to me or gave me the grounds for such intrusion into the apartment.”[[69]](#footnote-69)

On September 5, 2012, police officers detained Egor Vinyatskiy, an activist of the youth wing of the “Speak the Truth” – “Zmena” campaign, in his apartment. The police officers also searched the premises and confiscated some literature.[[70]](#footnote-70) On September 19, 2012, in Molodechno, police detained Igor Lishtvan, who carried the banned white-red-white flag, a symbol of Belarusian opposition, in celebration of the Day of National Symbols not far away from the picket organized by the BRSM, Belarusian Republican Youth Union, a pro-Lukashenko organization.[[71]](#footnote-71) In November 2012, Marek Migalski, a Polish politician and a member of the European Parliament, wrote a letter addressed to Martin Schultz, President of the European Parliament, Radoslaw Sikorski, Polish Foreign Minister, and Ambassador Maira Mora, Head of the EU Delegation in Belarus, asked the European community to interfere with the situation around political prisoners in Belarus, in particular persecution of Dmitriy Dashkevich, the imprisoned leader of the Young Front, who has become victim of physical and psychological violence while serving sentence in a correctional facility.[[72]](#footnote-72)

On November 24, 2013, the police prevented over forty opposition activists, including members of European Belarus, BNF Party and Razam movement, from participating in an anniversary of the military confrontation between the Slutsk troops of Belarusian People’s Republic and the Red Army. The police detained two activists when they laid down flowers and sang the “God All-Mighty” anthem in the Grozovo village. Subsequently, police stopped the bus with the rest of the participants on the way to Slutsk and ordered the participants to go back.[[73]](#footnote-73)

On February 8, 2014, Minsk police detained Viktor Sharshun, a handicapped retiree for exhibiting the white-red-white flag, a symbol of Belarusian opposition banned by the government, in the balcony of his apartment. Without introducing themselves, the police officers ordered Viktor Sharshun to remove the flag, which was hanging on his balcony and which, according to the police officers, was considered an unregistered symbol. Mr. Sharshun refused to remove the flag and tried to close the door. In response, the police officers dragged him out of the apartment and beat him up. Subsequently, they handcuffed him and delivered him to the Central District Department of Internal Affairs in Minsk.[[74]](#footnote-74)

On May 4, 2014, Andrey Tenyuta, a co-chairman of Molodoy Front, disappeared. The police arrested the activist near his apartment building. They refused to provide reasons for his arrest. According to his friend, Stanislav Bulla, an activist of Molodoy Front, the police detained Andrey Tenyuta to prevent him from going to Minsk where the World Hockey Championship was going to take place in May 2014.[[75]](#footnote-75)

According to Dmitriy Dashkevich, co-chairman of Molodoy Front, multiple arrests of opposition activists prior to the World Hockey Championship is the beginning of Lukashenko’s preparation for the upcoming elections. Over 250 opposition activists were detained to prevent them from boycotting the championship or organizing any protests. Dashkevich further commented:

I think that a certain scheme is being developed while the reaction of the society is being monitored. People are grabbed in front of the entrances to their homes. There is no need for any actions, rallies or protests. There are lists just like during Stalin times. The only difference is that back then people were shot according to the lists while today they are arbitrarily thrown into a jail and removed from their lives for a month. Thus, prior to the 2015 elections, people will most likely be detained en masses not for days but for a couple of years.[[76]](#footnote-76)

Leonid Kulakov, an activist of European Belarus, who was arrested on May 7, 2014, vividly described his arrest and conditions, in which he was held in prison:

I was detained at home. It happened at around 4 p.m. on May 7. The doorbell rang. I opened the door. There were two men standing. A blow in the chest propels me inside the apartment. They told me that they had been called because of some disturbance that allegedly took place at 1 p.m. I was at work at that time. They forcibly took me to the police department, made a report stating that I used obscene language, took my belongings and tore my clothes. There was only hot water tap working. There was no cold water. Tubes in the sink were ripped. Due to the fact that plumbing was out of order, the water ran down the walls from the ceiling. The floor was flooded. I spent several days in that cell.[[77]](#footnote-77)

On May 24, 2014, in Nemiga Street in Minsk, special purpose police officers arrested Aleksandr Polyakov, an opposition activist, for displaying the banned white-red-white flag.[[78]](#footnote-78) On July 2, 2014, in Minsk, police detained Oleg Korban, chairman of the Alternativa non-governmental organization, and Vlad Sergeyenko, an opposition activist, a preventive measure and subsequently subjected to administrative arrests under false charges.[[79]](#footnote-79) Following the civil unrest in the neighboring Ukraine in 2013 and 2014, Belarusian legislative introduced a series of amendments, collectively known as “anti-terrorism articles” into the Criminal Code, which will come into effect in early 2015. The new law will toughen the punishment for seizing buildings especially when dangerous methods are used. According to Pavel Sapelko, a human rights advocate, there is a concern that the authorities will most likely use the new laws to crack down on the opposition. This concern is well grounded if viewed in light of the upcoming presidential election in 2015 in Belarus.[[80]](#footnote-80)

On August 11, 2015, Belarusian police detained five young activists: Maksim Pekarsky, Vadim Zheromsky, Viacheslav Kosinerov, Yaroslav Ulyanenkov, and a young man named Pavel. The police officers used excessive force when detaining the activists. Viacheslav Kosinerov sustained fractured jaw as a result and was subsequently hospitalized. The Department of Investigations Committee instigated a criminal case against the activists for drawing a graffiti with political content on a fence next to a building at Olshevskogo Lane. Pavel and Yaroslav Ulyanenkov were later released.[[81]](#footnote-81)

On August 22, 2015, President Lukashenko ordered the release of several political prisoners: Nikolay Dedok, Igor Olinevich, Nikolay Statkevich (former presidential candidate), Evgeniy Vaskovich, Artem Prokopenko, and Yuriy Rubtsov, who were serving lengthy terms. Released political prisoner Yuriy Rubtsov described the conditions of his imprisonments as follows, “In penitentiary institutions, people are treated like animals. They are yelled at. They have to eat in the same place where they relieve themselves.”[[82]](#footnote-82) He also stated that penitentiary administration subjected him to various types of repressions.[[83]](#footnote-83)

Belarusian opposition activists and politicians are unanimous in their opinion about the reasons why the president decided to release the political prisoners. Andrey Sannikov, leader of European Belarus, believes that President Lukashenko made this decision only because of the “catastrophic economic situation in Belarus.” With the 2015 Presidential Elections approaching, President Lukashenko hopes that European Union would ease its sanctions against Belarus and provide monetary and other incentive to the country. His decision is also motivated by the fear of Ukrainian-style protests that could seriously jeopardize his grasp to power.[[84]](#footnote-84)

Dmitry Dashkevich, former political prisoner and leader of Young Front opposition movement, called the release of the prisoners by Lukashenko a “trade” implying that President Lukashenko uses political prisoners as “bargaining chips” to use them in crafting deals with the West, “This is a trade. A few hostages have been released. Others will be imprisoned.”[[85]](#footnote-85) On August 22, 2015, the police detained Maksim Vinyarsky, a coordinator of European Belarus, when he came to welcome Nikolay Statkevich, a political prisoner, who was being released. Vinayrsky was detained for wearing a tee-Shirt that read, “Lukashenko, Go Away.”[[86]](#footnote-86)

Vyacheslav Sivchik, the leader of “Together” opposition movement, who left Belarus after the presidential elections of 2010, escaping by that from the prosecution by President Lukasheko, returned to the country on September 15, 2015. Upon his return, he announced he was going to continue his political activities and would organize new anti-government rallies. He participated in the annual opposition rally on March 25, 2016 and on April 19, 2016 the police beat him up in the hallway of his building and brought him to the Central Department of Internal Affairs in Minsk where he was waiting for his case decision for 14 hours. He was accused of disorderly conduct on the rally and the court ruled that Sivchik would pay a fine of 12,600,000 Belarusian rubles. In his interview to Belapan news agency Sivchik, he said that while the police were beating him, they kept saying they “would not let him take the power.”[[87]](#footnote-87) Ales Makaev, the deputy chairman of “Together” movement, believes that Sivchik’s arrest was the result of the authorities’ fear of the uniting opposition.[[88]](#footnote-88)

On March 25, 2016, more than one thousand protesters gathered in the center of Minsk trying to attract the authorities’ attention to human rights and freedoms violations in the country. Despite that the rally was authorized, dozens of participants were fined 10 to 40 basic units.[[89]](#footnote-89)

 On September 11, 2016, two individuals in Grodno held a picket in commemoration of disappeared politicians. A few minutes later, a plain-clothed police officer intervened and another ten police officers arrived later. They detained the picketers[[90]](#footnote-90).

Belarusian authorities try to reach political opponents who fled the country putting them on the Interpol’s Red Notice list and continue to persecute those who return to Belarus.[[91]](#footnote-91) For example, Ales Mikhalevich, a former presidential candidate who was accused in organized mass riots and tortured in custody, fled Belarus after the 2010 presidential elections.

 Despite the fact that he was granted political asylum in the Czech Republic, Mikhalevich was detained in Warsaw and New York because his name still was in the Interpol database by the request of Belarusian authorities. Upon his return to Belarus on September 8, 2015, Belarusian border guards arrested him right after he crossed the border. Although he was released, the authorities ordered him not to leave Minsk because he remained under investigation.[[92]](#footnote-92)

There are different approaches among human rights organization as to who can be considered a political prisoners in Belarus. For example, Vyasna Human Right Organization put a number at seven, which is laughingly small, because the common accusation of political opponents is going under articles, such as hooliganism, disturbing public order, or resistance to the authorities, with no political context.[[93]](#footnote-93) Also, it should be taken into consideration that human rights monitors have very limited access to such kind of statistics, mainly getting information from Minsk, the capital, while there is practically no information from provincial centers and other remote areas of the country.

From February to March 2017, a new wave of antigovernment protests broke out in major cities across Belarus. It started on February 17, 2017, when three- to five-thousand people gathered on streets on Minsk to protest against a presidential decree to fine unemployed people 360 Belarusian rubles ($180).[[94]](#footnote-94)

On March 24, 2017, on the eve of the annual March of Freedom, police arrested 26 opposition activists who were accused in organizing of civil disturbances.[[95]](#footnote-95) On March 25, 2017, the authorities shut down the internet and suspended public transportation between Minsk and its suburbs. The riot police violently dispersed the March of Freedom participants who came to protest against Lukashenko’s 23-year rule, preventing them from forming crowds and made more than 300 arrests.[[96]](#footnote-96)

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**Detention of the opposition rally participant on March 25, 2018** https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/mar/25/protesters-arrested-in-belarus-during-opposition-rally#img-1

On March 25, 2019 the police prevented hundreds of protesters from participating in the Day of Freedom rally and arrested at least 15 participants, including several prominent opposition leaders.[[97]](#footnote-97)



**Arrest of an opposition political activist on March 25, 2019**

https://www.euronews.com/2019/03/26/belarus-opposition-politicians-detained-at-independence-rallies

The regime cracks down every attempt to protest against its actions. Dominik Istrate reported:

Riot police in Minsk have detained at least 15 opposition activists, including politicians, who were protesting against the removal of crosses at a memorial commemorating Soviet-era oppression. On April 4, bulldozers and excavators started removing wooden crosses from Kurapaty, an area of the outskirts of Minsk, where the NKVD, the then-secret police of the USSR, executed up to a quarter of a million Belarusians during the 1930s and the 1940s.

On the same evening, hundreds of Belarusians attended a prayer meeting denouncing the move, an event at which several politicians and activists were detained. Among those are former political prisoner and co-chair of the Christian Democratic Party Paval Sevyarynets, former leader of the Youth Front movement Zmitser Dashkevich and activist Nina Bahinskaya.[[98]](#footnote-98)

In December 2019, many Belarusians are afraid that Russia would swallow their country, as it did with Crimea and expressed their concern with rallies. Many activists were detained and courts in Belarus sentenced about 20 participants in protest against closer integration with Russia to short jail sentences and fines.[[99]](#footnote-99) The regime used arrests in order to silence voices against Lukashenko’s effort to get reelected. On June 19, 2020, the [authorities arrested Lukashenko's main rival Viktor Babaryko](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-53102353) on suspicion of financial crimes amid increased harassment of opposition figures.[[100]](#footnote-100)

By June 20, 2020, at least 120 people had been arrested across the country during protests. Opposition activists, journalists, and bloggers have also been arrested in recent weeks. On June 20, 2020, Belarus witnessed protests against Lukashenko’s pre-election campaign. Opposition candidates gathered supporters' signatures in Minsk before riot police moved in. Radio Free Europe journalist Alyaksandra Dynko was arrested, as she was reporting live on the protest. Candidates must gather 100,000 signatures of support in order to stand in the election, and June 19 was the last day they could collect the names. But at 7 p.m., the police intervened to prevent further signatures from being gathered and arrested about 10 people, including journalists from various foreign media, AFP reports. The police threatened protesters in the city of Mahilyow with force, while demonstrators were told their gathering was illegal, according to local media, in Homel.[[101]](#footnote-101)



**Special police force detains the protester.** <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-53115921>

According to the Amnesty International,

“Opposition candidates along with their supporters are smeared, targeted and incarcerated under trumped-up charges, with women targeted particularly. One opposition activist was threatened with having her children taken into state custody; another was threatened with gang rape at a police station. Two aspiring politicians, Syarhei Tsikhanouski and Viktar Babaryka, were thrown behind bars, alongside their associates, and face unfounded and politically motivated criminal proceedings. Hundreds of peaceful protesters, including their supporters, have been arbitrarily arrested and heavily fined or held in administrative detention. Syarhei Tsikhanouski, Viktar Babaryka, his son Eduard Babaryka were arrested alongside with him, and dozens of peaceful protesters and activists detained at solidarity rallies are prisoners of conscience, prosecuted solely for the peaceful exercise of their human rights and expression of their political opinions. In Belarus, opposition politicians and supporters are treated as criminals simply for exercising human rights and taking part in the political and elections processes.”[[102]](#footnote-102)

The presidential elections, which were held on August 9, 2020, exposed the brutal nature of the regime again. Poll results gave President Alexander Lukashenko 80% of the vote, but there have been numerous claims of fraud. Violent clashes between police and protesters have broken out since the election was held, and there have been numerous reports of police brutality.[[103]](#footnote-103) Helmeted police fired tear gas, rubber bullets, and stun grenades and used batons to disperse thousands of people in Minsk.[[104]](#footnote-104) One person died. Meanwhile, the major opposition candidate, Svetlana Tikhanovskaya, fled the country.[[105]](#footnote-105)

On August 11, 2020 night alone, the Internal Affairs Ministry spokeswoman Olga Chemodanova said more than 1,000 people were held and a number of police and security forces hurt during unrest in Minsk and other big cities. In Brest, police were targeted by a "group of aggressive citizens;" "firearms were used to protect the lives and health of the employees," she said.[[106]](#footnote-106)



**Police attacking the protesters. August, 2020.** <https://www.foxnews.com/world/belarus->tipping-point-protests-election-result

The Belarus chief prosecutor launched a criminal case against opposition leaders, accusing them of trying to seize power. The indictment from Alexander Konyuk says the "creation and activity of the [opposition] Coordination Council are aimed at seizure of state power, and at harming national security."[[107]](#footnote-107) *The Economist* reported on the situation in the country thus:

They were met with rubber bullets and stun grenades. Thousands have been arrested. Journalists have been hunted down. Ms. Tikhanovskaya herself was detained inside the central election commission where she went to file a complaint, and was apparently coerced to read out a statement renouncing her claim to power. Her husband is incarcerated and her children are in hiding. Her supporters assume that they were threatened. Ms. Tikhanovskaya was forced to go to Lithuania, explaining that: “Children are the most important things in our lives.[[108]](#footnote-108)

Belarus has a reputation for using intimidation and coercion to force confessions from political prisoners. The opposition leader Svetlana Tikhanovskaya raised suspicion when she appeared to read from a script in a video where she requested that supporters refrain from attending anti-government demonstrations. She later said that her family [faced threats](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/aug/11/belarus-opposition-candidate-lithuania-protests-svetlana-tikhanouskaya).[[109]](#footnote-109)

The regime used imprisonment and torture to suppress the opposition. Prison guards worked overtime on those who dared to protest against Mr. Lukashenko’s theft of the presidential election. Prisoners were forced to kneel with their hands behind their backs for hours in overcrowded cells. Men and women were stripped, beaten, and raped with truncheons. “You wanted change, how’s that for change,” went a widely reported refrain. An admirer of Joseph Stalin, Mr. Lukashenko has proved a worthy disciple. The repression was ostentatious: some victims were paraded on state television. By August 19, at least four people had been killed. The aim was both to terrorize citizens and to bind the regime’s officers by having them commit atrocities together, a tactic used by dictators and mafiosi to prevent defections.[[110]](#footnote-110) Tens of thousands of demonstrators were detained by the authorities during the protest rallies.[[111]](#footnote-111) The regime did not give an inch in its effort to suppress the opposition.

Such a suffocating atmosphere in the civil life of Belarus makes it impossible for one to participate in any political or other civil activities that do not completely follow the rulings of Lukashenko, unless one is ready to sacrifice everything in his life and possibly the life itself. Fortunately, such people still exist in Belarus, but they are not numerous. Others might wish to find comfort in religion, trying to escape from the horrors of the Belarusian society. But Lukashenko’s regime made sure they don’t. Any opposition to the regime is looked as a threat to President and his government which leads to harassment and persecution.

The dynamics of the last years shows that the regime successfully suppresses the opposition by using threats, arrests, fines, job dismissals, beatings, imprisonment, and torture. It planted a lot of fear among the population, which allows it to rule the country. Others might wish to find comfort in religion, trying to escape from the horrors of the Belarusian society. But Lukashenko’s regime made sure they don’t. Any opposition to the regime is looked as a threat to President and his government, which leads to harassment and persecution. The dynamics of the last years shows that the regime successfully suppresses the opposition by using threats, arrests, fines, job dismissals, beatings, imprisonment, and torture. It planted a lot of fear among the population, which allows it to rule the country. Despite the ongoing protests, the regime did not back down. It uses the police, the KGB, and other law enforcement agencies and threatens people with the military in order to quell the opposition.[[112]](#footnote-112)



**Arrest of a protestor.** November 2020. https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-54953599

## On March 25, 2021, dozens of protesters were arrested by the police during the Freedom Day celebration. Protesters, some carrying red-and-white opposition flags, marched through the streets while cars honked their horns in solidarity.[[113]](#footnote-113) More than 34,000 people have been arrested in Belarus since August, 2020 and thousands were brutally beaten.[[114]](#footnote-114)

The world was shocked on May 23, 2021 when Ryanair flight 4978 going from Athens to Vilnius was diverted to land in Belarus by a fighter jet following a "security alert," and the prominent dissident Roman Protasevich (Raman Pratasevich in Belarusian) and his girlfriend, Sofia Sapega, were arrested. He was charged with "organizing mass riots and group actions that grossly violate public order," from outside the country, via his Telegram channel.

"No one can feel safe in Europe," according to Franak Viacorka, an adviser to Svetlana Tikhanovksya, one of those opposition figures. Speaking from exile in Lithuania, Viacorka said that even in Vilnius, he had received death threats and was made to feel unsafe. "There are no limits for this regime. I have a special application which sends a signal to my friends and family if something happens to me."[[115]](#footnote-115)



**Roman Protasevich is detained by police in Minsk in 2017.** (Sergei Grits/AP)

Almost immediately after his arrest, a video purporting to show dissident Belarusian journalist Roman Protasevich confessing to organizing “mass riots” was produced by the regime, but it was met with skepticism from scholars, family members, and human rights groups who said that there was little doubt that he was coerced. In the footage, Protasevich, seated against a blank wall in a brightly lit room, said that he was being treated “as correctly as possible” and is not experiencing any health problems. The detained journalist’s demeanor in the video alarmed his father, Dmitry Protasevich, that his son’s nose appeared to have been broken, “because the shape of it is changed,” and that his remarks were out of character. In the video, Protasevich’s face appears to be marked with abrasions and bruises, suggesting that authorities subjected him to “torture or other ill-treatment” before recording the supposed confession, Amnesty International spokesman Alexander Artemyev said. Svetlana Tikhanovskaya said that there was “no doubt” that Protasevich had been tortured and was “under pressure” when the video was filmed. Jennifer Mathers, a senior lecturer in international politics at Aberystwyth University suggested that Protasevich’s supposed confession video “fits a longer historical pattern that goes back to Soviet times of demanding false confessions, especially where there is no real evidence to support a conviction.” She noted that the jailed journalist appears to be speaking from a script in the video and that his statements are “radically different from his pre-detention position.”[[116]](#footnote-116)



**Roman Protasevich in the footage.** https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2021/05/25/belarus-confession-video-forced/

Detained journalist  [Roman Protasevich](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/may/23/belarus-diverts-ryanair-plane-to-arrest-blogger-says-opposition) appeared on Belarusian state television on June 3, 2021, tearfully confessing to his role in antigovernment protests in an interview which the opposition said was made under duress. He admitted to plotting to topple President Alexander Lukashenko by organizing “riots” and recanted earlier criticism of the veteran leader. At the end of the 1.5-hour interview broadcast by Belarusian state-run channel ONT, Protasevich began crying and covered his face with his hands.

His father, Dmitry Protasevich, said that the video was the result of “abuse, torture and threats.” “I know my son very well and I believe that he would never say such things,” he stated. “They broke him and forced him to say what was needed,” he said, adding it pained him to watch the interview. Franak Viacorka called Protasevich a “hostage of the regime.” “We must make all possible to release him and the other 460 political prisoners,” he wrote on Twitter. Ahead of the broadcast, independent rights group Viasna said that Protasevich must have been coerced into speaking by Belarusian security services because he is facing “unfair, but very serious accusations.” “Everything Pratasevich will say was said under duress - at the very least psychological duress,” Viasna head Ales Bialiatski said. “Whatever he is saying now is pure propaganda, under which there is no truthful basis.”[[117]](#footnote-117)

The Belarusian regime hunts for dissidents everywhere. Long absence in the country and foreign citizenship do not diminish the attention and actually threaten the dissidents who escape Lukashenko’s grip by the Belarusian authorities British citizenship and international awards are not enough to make Belarusian dissident Natalia Kaliada and her husband Nicolai Khalezin feel safe after a high-profile death threat. "We will definitely find you ... and we will hang you, side-by-side," the main Belarusian government newspaper, [*Sovietska Belarus*](https://www.sb.by/articles/za-detey-otvetite-otdelno.html?fbclid=IwAR16U5oLc841VTynQMPmYPojSRni4Ecd7pUszlA0AiJcvfSh-IFGWZY4a18), wrote on December 27, 2020. "Death threats were always part of our life … but this is the first time the main columnist of *Sovietska Belarus* is using such language," she stated from London last week, where they have lived for almost 10 years after receiving asylum and UK nationality. Kaliada, a former diplomat, and Khalezin, a journalist, are co-founders of Belarus Free Theatre, which puts on anti-Belarus regime plays around the world.[[118]](#footnote-118)

## The US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken stated:

## The Lukashenka regime now holds more than 1,000 political prisoners.  These Belarusians, from all walks of life, have been arrested and confined simply because they peacefully exercised their rights to freedom of expression and assembly in response to a fraudulent election and the Lukashenka regime’s abuses.  Tens of thousands more innocent Belarusians have also spent time in jail since and in the lead up to the fraudulent presidential election in August 2020.[[119]](#footnote-119)

## In March 2021, for example, the 20-year-old administrator of an opposition Telegram channel, Artyom Boyarsky, appeared in a [video confession](https://t.me/Azarenok_TV/1160) circulated by state propagandists confessing to supposedly disseminating “extremist” content. Boyarsky’s confession, which he is clearly reading under duress, includes the incongruous line: “In life, I am gay.” In another recent case, the security services last month arrested [Nikolai Bredelev](https://prisoners.spring96.org/ru/person/mikalai-bredzeleu), a spokesman for a mobile telecommunications provider, on suspicion of [passing on subscriber data to third parties](https://euroradio.fm/ru/press-sekretar-kompanii-a1-nikolay-bredelev-osuzhden-na-15-sutok-aresta). The authorities have claimed that Bredelev was doing so to aid the efforts of opposition movements. But that was not deemed enough when it came to forcing the 34-year-old to produce a video confession – standard protocol in Belarus. In the confession, Bredelev said, casting his eyes to the ground that he had been in a relationship with another man for the last seven years.

## In April 2022, the authorities in Belarus have conducted a wave of searches and arrests of union activists and independent journalists. At least 16 people have been arrested in Minsk, Grodno, Borisov and other Belarusian cities, according to the Viasna human rights center. Alexander Yaroshuk, the president of the Belarusian Congress of Democratic Trade Unions and another top union leader, Alexander Bukhvostov, were among those arrested. The accusations against them haven’t been made public. Belarusian authorities have declared several unions as “extremist” organizations shortly before the arrests. Siarhei Cherachen, a former presidential candidate, said that security officers dressed in black uniforms broke doors into the union office and kept those who were inside standing against the wall for several hours during the search.

##  “Lukashenko is using repression to try to keep the situation under control as he faces growing discontent over the involvement in the war in Ukraine and a quick drop in living standards due to the sanctions,” Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, the main opposition candidate in the 2020 vote, told The Associated Press in a telephone interview.[[120]](#footnote-120)

## The Belarusian regime used the opportunity of its alliance with Russia and turned back to the democratic world. It crushed the last remnants of the opposition. Despite a barrage of Western sanctions that followed Alexander Lukashenko’s claim of victory in a fraudulent presidential election in 2020, the Kremlin-backed dictator of Belarus continued to brutally — and bizarrely — repress political dissent. Among his regime’s favorite tools: the video of shame, in which citizens are forced to make humiliating “confessions” while stripped to their underpants, wearing Santa hats or draped with their own pro-democracy banners.[[121]](#footnote-121)

The regime struck the opposition with economic hardship. In January 2023, President Lukashenko has signed a law that allows the confiscation of property from citizens and companies for "unfriendly actions against Belarus." [[122]](#footnote-122) It brought the level of repression against the opposition on new high. The regime decided to impoverish the dissent and break its will to continue the struggle for democracy.

In September 2021 two key Belarusian opposition figures, Maria Kolesnikova and Maksim Znak, were [sentenced](https://www.belta.by/incident/view/mariju-kolesnikovu-i-maksima-znaka-priznali-vinovnymi-458521-2021/) to long prison terms after being [convicted](https://t.me/prokuraturabelarus/1291) of attempting to seize power illegally, according to the state prosecutor’s office. Kolesnikova was handed an 11-year jail term while Znak was sentenced to 10 years. Both will serve their sentences in penal camps.[[123]](#footnote-123)

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## The regime brutally suppresses protests. Thousands and thousands of protestors get arrested, beaten, and tortured by the regime forces. Lukashenko does not relent to give up power and uses brutal violence against the opposition.

## PERSECUTION OF INDEPENDENT MASS MEDIA AND FREE SPEECH

Along with opposition, independent mass media is the worst enemy of any dictator, and Alexander Lukashenko understands it too well. Ever since he went to his office, he continues an undying war with any form of free speech in Belarus. The most common methods include court trials, threats to the journalists and Lukashenko’s all-favorite disappearances of prominent activists.

On November 25, 1997, Belarusian President ordered the shutdown of Belarus' largest independent newspaper, *Svaboda*. The newspaper was closed as a result of its opposition to the increasingly authoritarian Lukashenka regime. The newspaper was closed by the Supreme Commercial Court. The court cited two articles critical to Lukashenka's government as the reason for shutting down the publication. One article compared the repressions of 1937 with current events, while the other put the oppositional "shadow" cabinet in favorable light compared with the government. This, concluded the two official warnings prepared by the State Committee on Press on November 19, "can serve to incite discord in the society, as well as between the citizens and the government.”[[127]](#footnote-127)

It was the first major smite upon the independent media. European governments, human rights groups, and press monitoring bodies have sharply criticized Minsk for its actions. One statement, issued jointly by a group of major newspapers in Eastern Europe, noted that "anything is possible after the closing of this tribune of freedom. Therefore we are ready to show solidarity with anyone who is defending freedom of speech in Belarus.”[[128]](#footnote-128) But it was all in vain and Lukashenko continued with his harassments of independent Belarusian media.

But winning the elections didn’t stop President Lukashenko. It only strengthened his confidence in his impunity and led to long chain of persecutions some of which would even seem ridiculous if they were not so horrible, like the case of Ruslan Zgolich, producer of the Belarusian TV, who was severely beaten by police December 7, 2001 in Minsk. The producer was arrested December 5 for the alleged stealing of tapes with unfinished movie "guests" that he himself was producing. Policemen refused the doctors' demand to take the producer to the hospital after ambulance found that Mr. Zgolich had a cranial trauma and a head injury. The producer's head is all covered by bruises and his hands are chained behind his back, lawyer Vera Stramkouskaya told Radio Russia.[[129]](#footnote-129)

The regime deals harshly with any level of opposition. Every year the Belarusian authorities disperse rallies and demonstrations. The March of Freedom, which is held traditionally each year on March 25, is one of the major targets of the regime. In 2006, 2007, and 2008, as well as in previous years, the police and KGB arrested hundreds of protestors during the clashes.

The government also targets critical journalists and their colleagues. In 2008, the RFE/RL reported: Raids on the offices of independent media outlets, journalists' private apartments, and the recent mass arrests of opposition activists in Belarus evoked a harsh reaction by the West – but the criticisms have apparently fallen on deaf ears. Targeted were media outlets or journalists with ties to the outside world, including Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. Investigators also zeroed in on employees of Radio Racja and Belsat, both primarily Polish-funded, and the EU-funded European Radio for Belarus – which have all been denied government accreditation.

In a statement issued on March 27, 2008, U.S. State Department spokesman Sean McCormack condemned the raids, saying "Some 30 independent journalists in 12 cities were detained without legitimate cause." He said this week's incidents show that a "brutal, authoritarian dictatorship that blatantly ignores human rights and fundamental freedoms" is in power in Belarus.

The vast majority of opposition media outlets are not registered and accordingly subjects of persecution. Among the most important are the “Spring” and Charter-97.[[130]](#footnote-130)

In 2008, President Lukashenko signed a new law which even more limited the freedom of speech. This time the Internet became a victim of the regime. According to the law all websites had to be registered, otherwise they will be closed.[[131]](#footnote-131) Before the 2010 presidential elections, Lukashenko increased pressure on independent journalists in Belarus. On March 16, 2010, Belarusian law enforcement officers raided offices and apartments of journalists. During the course of the raid office equipment and home computers were confiscated. Police officers were in plainclothes and refused to provide any document authorizing searches.[[132]](#footnote-132)

In April 2011, Sergey Dorofeyev, one of the TV hosts on the government owned ONT (*Obshchenatsionalnoe Televidenie* - All-National Television) Belarusian TV Channel, was forced to resign after he asked Belarusian officials questions which they did not like during the "Vybor" (Choice) TV program.[[133]](#footnote-133) In August 2011, the Supreme Economic Court mandated the "Narodnaya Volya" newspaper to pay fourteen million rubles (equivalent of 400 minimal wages). Attorney for the newspaper Garri Pogonyaylo stated that it would be useless to appeal the decision of the court and called such fines "economic sanctions" against independent mass media in Belarus.[[134]](#footnote-134)

Commenting on the conditions of freedom of speech in Belarus, Johann Beer, the head of the European Bureau of Reporters without Borders stated:

Of course, the conditions of freedom of speech have been very difficult in Belarus for a long while. We observe widespread censorship, increased pressure on independent press, which is practically not present in the country. However, starting from December 19, 2010, we can speak of extremely cruel repressions, arrests of journalists, bloggers, trials and forced emigration of Natalya Radina, the editor of the Charter 97, a criminal case against Andrei Pochobuta, banning him from leaving the country following the verdict, harassment of the *Nasha Niva* newspaper and the *Narodnaya Volya* newspaper. Thus, we consider the situation to be very difficult for journalists who work in the country.[[135]](#footnote-135)

In January 2012, the Beshenkovichskiy District Court fined Georgiy Stankevich 1.400,000 Rubles (about 163 US Dollars) for distributing the “Kryvinka” newspaper, which he founded and published using his own funds. The judge did not permit Mr. Stankevich to have an attorney present at the hearing.[[136]](#footnote-136) The encroachment on freedom of speech and press has reached unprecedented levels in Belarus with new changes introduced into the Belarusian legislation, which came into effect on January 6, 2012. Under Decree No. 60, all internet resources within the Belarusian internet domain must get state registration. The decree also has introduced mandatory identification of all internet users. For example, owners of internet clubs or internet cafes must demand ID documents from the clients and keep this information for a year. Violators will be found liable under provisions of the Administrative Code.[[137]](#footnote-137)

Lukashenko’s government enjoys total control over the Internet in Belarus. In February 2012, Belarusian authorities managed to delete the “We are tired of Lukashenko” group, which had 617 members, in “Odnoklassniki” (Classmates), a Russian social network service and to block the personal webpage of its moderator Yan Eydinov.[[138]](#footnote-138)

According to Freedom House’s 2016 Freedom of the Press report, Belarus was ranked No. 157 out of 180 countries.[[139]](#footnote-139) The 2016 Reporters without Borders report said that despite Lukashenko’s attempt to erase Belarus’ image as “Europe’s last dictatorship,” nothing has really changed and “journalist cannot get accreditation and are harassed by the judicial authorities. The information ministry has stepped up its control over print media distribution networks and the Internet, and has banned the software used to circumvent online censorship.”[[140]](#footnote-140)

The Lukashenko’s regime uses different methods of undermining the opposition activities. It includes threats, harassments, framing up, beating, imprisonment, etc. For example, the KGB plants narcotics on the dissents and accuse them of drug deals.[[141]](#footnote-141)

The freedom of press is suppressed in the country. The Human Rights Watch reports:

According to the Belarusian Association of Journalists, between January and August, authorities arbitrarily detained 29 journalists, including while covering Freedom Day protests.

In December 2017, a court fined Anatol Bukas, chief editor of Naviny.by*,* 345 Belarusian rubles (roughly US$158) for writing about an unauthorized rally in Minsk. In November, the Justice Ministry issued the outlet a warning for violating mass media legislation. Under Belarusian law, two warnings may lead to an outlet’s closure.

In February, 2018 the police beat Belsat cameraman Andrus Koziel for live-streaming vote counting during local elections and jailed him for one night. In March, a court fined him 735 Belarusian rubles (US$338) for disobeying police.

In February, 201819-year old blogger Stsiapan Sviatlou became a target for police for allegedly posting videos that insulted President Aliaksandr Lukashenka. Police searched Siatlou’s parents’ apartment and seized his laptop and video camera.

Authorities intensified the prosecution of freelance journalists for cooperating with unregistered foreign media, bringing 33 cases against 17 journalists from September through December 2017, and 85 cases against 31 journalists from January through September 2018, an increase over the same period in 2017. All resulted in fines ranging from 490 to 1,225 Belarusian rubles (US$230 to US$575).

In February 2018, Belarusian courts handed down suspended sentences of five years’ imprisonment to Yuri Pavlovets, Dimitri Alimkin, and Sergei Shiptenko, bloggers with the Russian-language websites Regnum, Lenta.ru and EADaily, on bogus charges of inciting extremism and sowing social discord between Russia and Belarus. Yuri Pavlovets and Sergei Shiptenko appealed to the Supreme Court, which upheld the verdict.

In April, 2018 authorities arrested Dzmitri Halko, editor of *Belarussian Partisan* on dubious charges of assaulting police officers in November 2017 in an incident when police interrupted his son’s birthday party. In July, a court sentenced Halko to four years in prison and a fine of 930 Belarusian rubles (US$430). At time of writing, Halko’s appeal was pending.

In June, 2018 authorities began investigating Ales Lipai, head of the independent BelaPAN news agency, on criminal tax evasion charges. Investigative authorities searched Lipai’s apartment and banned him from leaving Belarus pending trial. Following Lipai’s death in August, authorities closed the case.

In August, 2018 authorities launched a criminal probe against several publications for allegedly using passwords for the state news agency, BelTA, without authorization in order to access it for free. The disproportionate response raised concerns that the government was using the issue to punish news outlets. Police searched the offices of BelaPAN and TUT.by, an independent news website, as well as the editorial offices of several other media outlets (including some state-owned) and the homes of several journalists. At least 18 journalists were arrested on charges of “unauthorized access to computer information causing significant harm.” All were released by August 10; criminal proceedings against them continued at time of writing.

After admitting she was aware that her staff was using login data for BeITA's paid subscription, TUT.by's chief editor was charged with negligence, punishable by up to five years in prison.[[142]](#footnote-142)

Miklós Haraszti, the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Belarus, pointed out that the regime keeps suppressing liberties and freedom and the country conditions in the country further deteriorated between April 2017 and April 2018.[[143]](#footnote-143)

Many critics of the regime flee the country and go under the protection of democratic countries. For example, in 2013, Poland refused to extradite a former Belarusian police officer Dmitry Kovsh, who informed his superiors about the falsification of elections results in 2012. He was persecuted by the KGB, who accused him in possessing a large sum of American dollars, fled to Poland and was allowed to stay in the country.[[144]](#footnote-144)

The US State Department states: The constitution provides for freedom of expression, including for the press. The government did not respect these rights and enforced numerous laws to control and censor the public and the media. Moreover, the state press propagated views in support of the president and official policies, without giving room for critical voices.[[145]](#footnote-145)

In 2019, Belarus continued to harass and pressure civil society activists and independent media. Authorities denied access to journalists at government events, arbitrarily prosecuted dozens of journalists, and arrested peaceful environmental protesters. Belarusian media law requires journalists working for media outlets registered outside Belarus to obtain accreditation from the Foreign Ministry and have an official labor contract with the accredited foreign media outlet. Freelancers find it virtually impossible to become accredited. Authorities often arbitrarily denied accreditation to journalists working for foreign media.

In May 2019, the Foreign Ministry refused accreditation to Viktar Parfionenka and Yauhen Skrabets of Poland-based Radio Racyja. The response to Skrabets indicated his accreditation was denied because Radio Racyja had published work by non-accredited journalists. As of January 2019, only five media websites have been granted official registration, according to the Belarusian Association of Journalists (BAJ). Unregistered websites cannot file requests for accreditation with government institutions.

Authorities routinely blocked media access to official events. In April 2019, journalists from TUT.by, BelaPAN agency, newspaper Belarusy I Rynok, and European Radio of Belarus (ERB) were denied accreditation to cover President Aleksandr Lukashenko’s address to the National Assembly, despite both BelaPAN and ERB holding permanent accreditation to cover parliament. In May, authorities blocked journalists from attending a session in the Pershamaiki district administration on the redevelopment of a part of Minsk. In June, officials denied a Brestskaya Gazeta journalist entry to a court building due to “lack of accreditation.” Some independent media and bloggers were denied access to a news conference with the administration of the Brest battery factory project and to a meeting between the head of Brest regional government Anatol Lis and environmental protesters.

According to the Belarusian Association of Journalists, in the first nine months of 2019, authorities brought 39 cases against 18 journalists for “illegal production and distribution of mass media products.” They were fined a total of approximately US$36,600.

In January 2019, border guards at the Minsk airport denied entry to Olga Vallee, Fojo Media Institute program coordinator and a Swedish national, who traveled to Belarus at the invitation of BAJ. BAJ reported that in mid-March 2019, the police in Minsk detained two Russian journalists, Pavel Nikulin and Jan Potarsky, before their lecture at the Belarusian Press Club. Both were released three hours later without charge, but police seized their presentation materials.

In April 2019, a court convicted an independent media editor of criminal negligence on allegations that some of her staff had been accessing the website of BelTA, the state news agency, without paying a subscription fee. Also in April 2019, authorities searched the offices of Belsat TV and seized computers and data storage devices following a libel complaint from a public official. Siarhei Piatrukhin, a popular critical blogger, was repeatedly detained and fined throughout 2019 for coverage of protests against the battery plant construction near Brest. In April, he was convicted of criminal slander and libel for a series of videos he had uploaded to YouTube alleging police abuses.[[146]](#footnote-146)

On May 7, 2020, the authorities in Mahilou arrested Mikhail Arshynski, a correspondent for the Poland-registered satellite broadcaster Belsat. The next day, the authorities in Mahilou also arrested Alyaksandr Burakou, a freelance correspondent for German broadcaster Deutche Welle, and the authorities in Hlybokaye, in western Belarus, arrested Zmitser Lupach, a Belsat correspondent. On May 9, Mahilou authorities arrested Ales Asiptsou, a correspondent for the independent news agency BelaPan. On May 11 and 12, the courts in Mahilou and Hlybokaye charged the four journalists with “participating in an unauthorized demonstration” over their coverage of blogger and opposition presidential candidate Siarhei Tsikhanouski, and sentenced each journalist to 10 days of administrative detention. On May 15, Mahilou authorities arrested Alyaksandr Burakou, a freelance reporter for the human rights organization Vesna, who has the same name as the Deutsche Welle correspondent, also for allegedly participating in an unauthorized demonstration. All of the detained journalists had covered Tsikhanouski’s campaign events, according to that report and Haretsky. Tsikhanouski, a blogger turned opposition politician, traveled the country over the last month, filming videos about political issues that he uploaded to [his YouTube channel](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCFPC7r3tWWXWzUIROLx46mg), where he has more than 180,000 subscribers. On May 11, a court in Mahilou ordered Asiptsou to serve 10 days in jail, and on the next day ordered Arshynski and Deutche Welle’s Burakou to serve the same sentence, according to the journalist’s association [report](https://baj.by/en/content/review-belarusian-journalists-arrests-and-detention-may). A court in Hlybokaye sentenced Lupach to 10 days in jail on May 11, but he was taken from the courtroom to a hospital for treatment for a heart condition, according to that report, which said that he would begin his jail term on May 18. In reality, the journalists were not participating in the rallies but were doing their job and reporting on the events.

In fact, the arrests began after Tsikhanouski [announced](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JCX-YGwJK54) on May 6, 2020 he would run for president in the country’s August elections. That day, a court sentenced him to 15 days in jail for illegally holding mass events, according to [news reports](https://belsat.eu/ru/news/v-belarusi-za-4-dnya-zaderzhali-okolo-120-chelovek/).[[147]](#footnote-147)

A Belarusian journalist who reported on a police raid at a popular news site has been given a 15-day jail term on May 21, 2021. The Belarusian Association of Journalists said Artym Mayorau of the Belarusians and the Market newspaper was arrested when he came to cover the raid at the Tut.by office. The Moskovsky District Court in Minsk convicted Mayorau on charges of “petty hooliganism” and handed him a 15-day sentence.

Belarusian authorities on May 18, 2021 made the Tut.by news site unavailable to readers and raided its offices and the homes of some staff members. Officials maintained that the news site, arguably the most popular one in Belarus, violated media laws by publishing content on behalf of BYSOL, a foundation that helps victims of political repression but lacks proper state registration. The authorities also accused Tut.by of tax evasion and launched a criminal investigation against the site’s top staff members. They could face charges that carry a maximum penalty of seven years in prison. Fourteen Tut.by staff members and workers from companies affiliated with the site have remained in custody following the raids. The widow of Tut.by founder Yury Zisser, Yuliya Charnyauskaya, has been put under house arrest. The raids on Tut.by showed that the government never stopped to stifle dissent and independent media. Authorities targeted independent media outlets, leveling criminal charges against some reporters. The Belarusian Association of Journalists said 27 media workers were behind bars, either awaiting trial or serving sentences. “Belarus has become the most dangerous country in Europe for journalists,” said the association’s head, Andrei Bastunets. “The crackdown on Tut.by and the strengthening of repressions against journalists have deprived millions of Belarusians of freedom of information.”[[148]](#footnote-148)

The Belarusian regime continues to be repressive and aggressive towards those who challenge it. It torments and mistreats the journalists who criticize it resorting to the cruelest methods and practices in order to stop critics. It uses fabricated criminal charges against dissident mass media figures in order to shut them down.

# ANTI-WESTERNISM AND ANTI-AMERICANISM

Any dictatorship needs two enemies: an internal and external one. In the case of Belarus, the internal enemy is the opposition, while the external is the United States, which supports the internal one. Belarusian’s official ideology is based on anti-Western and anti-American sentiments.

It should be noted that from the very beginning of his political career as a president, Lukashenko promoted the idea of Pan-Slavism, or the idea of the unification of Slavs in one state under the banner of Slavic nationalism which based on anti-Western ideology. In his particular case, Lukashenko hoped to reunite the three East European countries: Belarus, Russia, and Ukraine, by Pan-Slavic nationalistic idea and to lead the newly established state. His hope based on the fact that Russia and Ukraine were ruled by Boris Yeltsin and Leonid Kuchma, aging former communists, and he, a young, energetic, and ambitious politician, could be the best replacement for them. However, his hope dissipated when a young, energetic, and ambitious Vladimir Putin came to power in Russia. Nevertheless, Lukashenko did not abandon the nationalistic Slavic ideology and uses it as a political platform for his dictatorship.

One of the most important features of the Lukashenko’s political doctrine is anti-Americanism. It perfectly fits the whole idea of Pan-Slavism and plays a significant role in the internal and foreign policy of Belarus. One of the most recent examples is a newly established alliance between Belarus and Venezuela, which was cemented by the visit of Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez to Minsk in the last decade of July of 2006. “I have found another friend here and we should form a team. It will be a fighting team,” Chavez, who is known for his anti-Americanism, said at a meeting with Lukashenko.[[149]](#footnote-149) Timesonline reports: “Today, anti-Americanism was de rigueur. Promising to fight the hegemonic interests of the capitals, wherever they may be, in Europe or Latin America," Señor Chávez said he felt "among our brothers,” in Belarus.”[[150]](#footnote-150)

In his mind, Lukashenko connects the opposition with America[[151]](#footnote-151) and sees the dissidents as American spies. According to the International League of Human Rights state-controlled Belarusian Television and Radio (BTR), which maintains its monopoly as the only nationwide television station, aired a special feature of "Resonance," a notorious news commentary program, titled "KGB against CIA." In the run-up to the presidential election, the American special services are intensifying their subversive activities in Belarus, claimed Resonance's host Alexander Zimovsky. Zimovsky's reports are usually heavily biased in favor of the current authorities and sharply critical of opposition politicians, said the audience. According to Zimovsky, 430 U.S. spies have operated in Belarus over the last eight years under cover of diplomatic missions.

The program featured alleged CIA officers, leading columns of opposition demonstrators, and giving them instructions about which angle and positions to take photographs and make video-tape recordings. Zimovsky believes the CIA's activities in Belarus are aimed at discrediting the Belarusian government, generating discord between Belarus and the rest of the world, supporting dissidents, and generating inter-religious animosity. However, according to Zimovsky, Belarusians are not to worry. The Belarusian KGB has been giving a hard time to the American secret-service agents working undercover in the country.”[[152]](#footnote-152)

The KGB which is the right arm of President Lukashenko continues the old Soviet KGB tradition to tame the dissidents with all possible means. Accordingly Mr. Kazlouski’s claim that his apartment was searched and he was beaten by secret agents in 2000 is consistent with the practices of the KGB. The police who are another obedient instrument in President’s hands follow the steps of the KGB and use the same methods of dealing with the opposition. In order to preserve its power the regime is extremely hostile towards the West and the United States. President Lukashenko ensures Belarus’ participation in Moscow`s favored Collective Security Treaty Organization and Eurasian Economic Union, while the West is not much engaged with Belarus. Belarusian participation in the EU’s Eastern Partnership is minimal.[[153]](#footnote-153) Naturally, everything which is connected to the West and America is hostile to Belarus. It is applied to dissidents, fans of pop culture, Westerners, and Americans. The Belarusian ideology targets the West, Westerners, America, Americans, and Americanism while authorities and nationalists implement this policy.

# COOPERATION BETWEEN BELARUS AND RUSSIA

Russia and Belarus share the common past, with Belarus being a part of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union and after the demise of the Soviet Union. Ties between the countries remain very strong. Russia and Belarus continue cooperation in the political, security, military, economic, and cultural spheres.

Military cooperation between the Belarus and Russia is strong and far-reaching. For example, in 2011 and 2015, the countries held mass joint military exercises, using 12,000 and 8,000 troops respectfully.[[154]](#footnote-154) Belarusian and Russian police also have a very strong partnership. The Ministries of the Internal Affairs of the two countries cut the red tape and created secure channels for data transmission, holding working meetings, and approve plans of collaborative efforts on the regular basis.[[155]](#footnote-155) Now, to apprehend criminals or political dissidents in one country, police of the other country do not need special requests and all they need to do is to make a telephone call. Belorussian and Russian secret services also cooperate in their activities.[[156]](#footnote-156) For example, during nine months of 2014 alone, 128 criminals were detained in Russia by request of the Belarusian law enforcement agencies.[[157]](#footnote-157)

In September 2019, Russian media outlet Kommersant leaked a document stating that Russia and Belarus are planning to form an economic confederacy by 2022. The idea of confederacy dates to the 1999 Union State Treaty that was supposed to tie the two countries into a common Soviet-like union. Ever since the treaty was signed, the idea of the union has re-surfaced on numerous occasions. However, it has never materialized. And yet, the recently-announced plans seem to carry more weight as the announcement comes at a crucial time. Creating a union would entail a common legal system, foreign policy, and joint defense and energy regulations. Additionally, it would mean a prolonged Russian border for NATO countries Lithuania and Latvia and a new extended Russian border for Poland. This could simultaneously result in more Russian military facilities or troops in Belarus. In fact, the ambassador of Lithuania to Poland, Eduardas Borisovas, believes that the formalization of the union state would indeed lead to further military integration. Simply put, a buffer between Russia and the EU would no longer exist. More importantly, Belarus would lose the last traces of its sovereignty. These prospects seem to be raising concern to the leaders of both Eastern and Western Europe. For Russian observers, however, the process of slow but irreversible russification of Belarus has not been disrupted with the collapse of the USSR –rather, it has continued and intensified under the leadership of Putin.[[158]](#footnote-158)



**Russian President Vladimir Putin and Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko**

On May 28, 2021, Lukashenko visited Russian President Vladimir Putin, a show of Moscow’s support amid Western condemnation of the dramatic Ryanair flight diversion. Russian President Vladimir Putin offered his Belarusian counterpart Alexander Lukashenko support in his standoff with the West over his handling of the grounding of a passenger jet and the arrest of a dissident blogger.[[159]](#footnote-159)

In order to strengthen its ties to Belarus, Russia released the second installment of a $1-billion loan on June 2, 2021, as Minsk prepares to be hit by a fresh round of Western sanctions.

Russia’s and Belarus’ intelligence agencies have joined forces against “destructive” Western activities in the wake of Minsk’s highly criticized plane diversion to arrest a dissident, the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR) [announced](http://svr.gov.ru/smi/2021/06/na-zashchite-interesov-soyuznogo-gosudarstva.htm) on June 3, 2021. “In the spirit of traditionally fraternal relations, Russia’s SVR and Belarus’ KGB have agreed to work together to counter Western destructive activities aimed at destabilizing the political and socioeconomic situation in the Union State,” SVR said in a statement.

SVR chief Sergei Naryshkin met his KGB counterpart less than two weeks after Belarusian authorities ordered a European flight to land in Minsk and arrested a Belarusian dissident journalist with his Russian girlfriend. Western governments voiced outrage over what they described as “air piracy” and “state-sponsored hijacking” and ordered their airlines to avoid Belarusian airspace, while Russia came to the defense of its close ally. Naryshkin met Belarus KGB chief Ivan Tertel less than 24 hours after Belarusian government-controlled television published footage of the arrested dissident’s interrogation.

The Naryshkin-Tertel talks in the Belarusian city of Vitebsk near the Russian border focused on cooperation “in the context of aggressive U.S. and Western countries’ policies toward Russia and Belarus.” “The importance of consolidating efforts aimed at strengthening Moscow and Minsk’ potential in countering global challenges and new threats to the security of the Union State was noted at the meeting,” the SVR said.[[160]](#footnote-160)

Belarus is a member of the Russian-led military bloc, which includes such dictatorships as Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Its military forces participated in a “peacekeeping” operation to quell protests in Kazakhstan. The Belarusian Defense Ministry informed that the military contingent of “peacekeeping” forces of Belarus secured some critical facilities of the military infrastructure of Kazakhstan. **Belarusian military arrived in Kazakhstan on January 6, 2021 by five planes to perform the task of protecting and defending the military airfield there,** [according](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jluTELZAaNc) to **Deputy Commander of Special Operations Forces of the Armed Forces of Belarus Syarhei Andreyeu.[[161]](#footnote-161)** The participation in the military mission in Kazakhstan demonstrated antidemocratic nature of the Belarusian regime.

Belarus fully supported the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The country became a base for the Russian troops which crossed the Belarusian-Ukrainian border on February 24, 2022. Putin helped Lukashenko to safe his rule in August 2021, and now the Belarusian dictator paid his Russian counterpart back with a favor by supporting Putin’s military campaign in Ukraine.[[162]](#footnote-162)



**Belarus' President Alexander Lukashenko (center) attends his country's joint military exercises with Russia at a firing range outside Minsk on Feb. 17.**

**Maxim Gucheck/BELTA/AFP via Getty Images. https://www.npr.org/2022/03/11/1085548867/belarus-ukraine-russia-invasion-lukashenko-putin**

Belarus keeps staying in the orbit of the Russian foreign police since the fall of the Soviet Union. Historical, religious, linguistic, and cultural closeness of Belarusians and Russians are exploited by the leaders of the both countries in order to suppress their citizens helping each other in this matter.

**CONCLUSION**

Belarus remains the only completely authoritarian dictatorship with totalitarian overtones left in Europe. The reasons for this situation are deep and require separate research. The present situation in Belarus calls for action, not research. People are being persecuted, arrested, kidnapped, and possibly killed for their affiliation with the political opposition. Human rights are not just being abused, they are almost forgotten about. All the power in the country is concentrated in the hands of one person: President Alexander Lukashenko. Those who dare to raise their voices against this person – whether they are journalists, political opponents or common citizens – are being persecuted. The economic condition of the country is degrading because of the unwillingness of Lukashenko to integrate into the international community and turn to a free market economy. Minority groups – religious, ethnic, and sexual – experience constant harassment and are not protected by the state.

Joint actions of international NGOs and the Belarusian opposition bring certain results but have proven unable to radically change the situation in the country. The pressure of the international community has no effect on self-isolated Belarus. Even former Belarusian allies like Russia are turning away from the country. All this puts Belarus in a row of the most cruelly oppressed countries, like Cuba, North Korea, and Venezuela, and puts Lukashenko in the category of their dictators. And as long as he remains in office, no significant change in the situation can be expected.

The Lukashenko regime holds a grip on the country for more than a decade. This time became the period when some leading opponents ended up in prison, were killed, or disappeared. The government did not succeed in shutting down the opposition, but diminished it significantly by using repression and persecution. Thousands of Belarusian opponents fell into hands of the police and the KGB; thousands were harassed, tortured, and abused by officials. The reign of Lukashenko turned Belarus into a brutal dictatorship with no parallel in Europe. The regime features nationalism, intolerance, racism, and anti-Americanism and persecutes those who dare to oppose it.

The police and the KGB, which continues to play an extremely important role in Belarus, would know about person’s background. Taking into account that the protection of privacy is underdeveloped in Belarus and the authorities are not bound by serious restrictions and regulations in this area it is extremely difficult to shield private matters for citizens. In fact, the Belarusian police and secret service preserved a wide net of informants among the population mainly among the housing management staff and workers.

Life in Belarus is a life under the watchful eye of a brutal regime. A person who attempts to express his or her disagreement becomes the victim of the government agents, from the police and the KGB. The history of independent Belarus reveals how strong and brutal the system of persecution of political opponents is. The country turned into the domain of President Lukashenko and his henchmen from the KGB, which resulted in the crackdown on the opposition. With the progression of time, the regime strengthened its stance toward the opposition, which is subjugated and controlled by the state apparatus.

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