

CONTINUITY AND CONSOLIDATION OF AUTHORITARIAN RULE IN BELARUS: POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS IN 2024–2025

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In 2024 to 2025, Belarus exhibits the characteristics of a consolidated authoritarian system in which executive dominance is underwritten by a fully synchronized coercive and administrative apparatus. The post 2020 cycle of contentious politics has yielded a restructuring of the public sphere through legal restriction, institutional cooptation, and routinized repression. Core state organs, including the security services, prosecutorial bodies, courts, and state aligned media, operate in mutually reinforcing fashion to deter mobilization and narrow the boundaries of permissible expression. The result is a governance environment defined by rule by law rather than rule of law, limited associational autonomy, and a persistent chilling effect that substitutes compliance for participation and conformity for deliberation.

The electoral calendar in 2025 served primarily as an instrument of regime maintenance rather than as a mechanism of representation. Candidate exclusion, party deregistration, the criminalization of oppositional activity under expansive extremism provisions, and restrictions on observation collectively transformed elections into a ritualized demonstration of incumbency rather than a contest over policy or leadership. This configuration deepened the erosion of political pluralism and further displaced independent media and civil society from the domestic arena. At the same time, growing political and economic reliance on Russia has reinforced the regime's capacity to withstand external pressure, entrenching a trajectory marked by intensified coercion, institutional stagnation, and the continuing diminution of fundamental rights and freedoms.

Since the large scale protests that followed the contested 2020 presidential election, the political space in Belarus has been systematically dismantled, and the regime of Aliaksandr Lukashenka has entrenched a system of near total control. By the years 2024 to 2025, political opposition had been effectively extinguished through a mixture of legal repression, intimidation, and physical violence. In the lead up to the presidential election of January 26, 2025, the authorities intensified their crackdown on dissent, ensuring that the electoral process functioned as little more than a symbolic exercise that confirmed Lukashenka's continued dominance. Western governments and human rights organizations widely condemned the vote as neither free nor fair, noting an atmosphere of fear, censorship, and state directed propaganda. Opposition activists, civil society leaders, independent journalists, and exiled figures faced relentless surveillance, criminal prosecution, and pressure on their families. The regime combined occasional token gestures, such as the conditional release of a small number of political prisoners, with widespread arrests and intimidation, signaling that any tolerance for dissent was purely performative.

To be more exact, on January 26, 2025, Belarus held its presidential election amid widespread condemnation from opposition groups and international observers, who overwhelmingly dismissed the process as illegitimate. Alexander Lukashenko, the country's authoritarian leader since 1994, was declared the winner with 87.6% of the vote—an outcome met with strong skepticism due to the absence of credible opposition candidates and the regime's relentless suppression of dissent. In the lead-up to the election, authorities intensified their crackdown on political opponents, imprisoning or exiling many activists and effectively eliminating any possibility of genuine electoral competition. Both the European Union and the United States denounced the election, emphasizing that it could not be considered free or fair

under such repressive conditions. The vote further entrenched Lukashenko's authoritarian rule and underscored the ongoing erosion of democratic institutions in Belarus.¹ Ultimately, the election reaffirmed that Belarus remains a brutal dictatorship where fundamental human rights and freedoms are systematically denied.

The regime holds a strong control over the nation, as evidenced by the tightly controlled parliamentary and local elections. These elections further solidified the authority of the country's authoritarian leader, despite opposition calls for a boycott, dismissing the process as a "senseless farce." President Alexander Lukashenko alleged that the West was attempting to use the vote to undermine his government and destabilize the country. The majority of candidates hail from the four officially registered parties: Belaya Rus, the Communist Party, the Liberal Democratic Party, and the Party of Labor and Justice, all of which endorse Lukashenko's policies. In 2023, around a dozen other parties were denied registration,² indicating a lack of prospects for Belarus to alter its regime.

The Belarusian government's severe crackdown on civil society continues unabated. As of September 2024, at least 1,330 individuals are imprisoned on politically motivated charges. In July 2024 alone, 170 people were sentenced on such charges, with another 146 cases in June and at least 152 additional politically driven prosecutions reported in August.³

Belarus has intensified its crackdown on political opposition, employing severe measures such as imprisonment, torture, and suppression of dissent. By September 2024, more than 1,300 political prisoners, including opposition leaders, journalists, and activists, remain behind bars. In

¹ Lukashenko heads for massive win in Belarus election scorned by the West. Reuters, January 26, 2025. <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/west-cries-foul-over-belarus-election-lukashenko-eyes-seventh-term-2025-01-26/>

² Belarus votes in tightly controlled elections opposition have called a 'farce'. The Guardian, February 25, 2024. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/feb/25/belarus-elections-alexander-lukashenko-opposition>

³ Anastasiia Kruope. Belarus Can't Mask Its Ongoing Political Repression. Human Rights Watch, September 25, 2024. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/09/25/belarus-cant-mask-its-ongoing-political-repression>

a notable case from June 2024, Franak Viacorka, an exiled adviser to opposition leader Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, was sentenced in absentia to 20 years in prison on charges of treason and defamation of the president. The regime's reach extends beyond its borders, targeting exiled dissidents like Andrey Gnyot, who faces potential extradition from Serbia, where he fears torture and death if returned to Belarus.⁴

Election manipulation further underscored the regime's determination to silence opponents. Parliamentary and local elections in 2024, as well as the presidential vote in 2025, were carefully managed to prevent genuine competition. Opposition parties were denied registration, candidates were disqualified on technical grounds, and independent observers were barred from polling stations. Voter intimidation, inflated turnout figures, and media blackouts preserved the illusion of broad support for Lukashenka. Within this context, ordinary citizens faced a stark choice between silence and persecution. Thousands were detained for participating in peaceful demonstrations or for expressing critical opinions online. Many lost their jobs, were expelled from universities, or fled abroad under threat of arrest. The human rights group Viasna reported that more than 1,300 political prisoners remained in custody in 2024, while thousands more faced ongoing administrative harassment and surveillance.

The Belarusian regime has launched a campaign of direct intimidation against political opponents living abroad. In May 2024, the Belarusian Investigative Committee launched criminal cases against 104 Belarusian nationals who took part in Freedom Day rallies held in numerous foreign cities, including Warsaw, Vilnius, Wroclaw, Bialystok, Brussels, Batumi, Prague, California, and Philadelphia. The individuals were accused under Article 361-1 of the Belarusian Criminal Code for "establishing and participating in an extremist organization," and

⁴ Marton Dunai in Belgrade and Raphael Minder in Warsaw. Belarus dissident fears 'torture and death' if extradited from Serbia. The Financial Times. October 3, 2024. <https://www.ft.com/content/c6abb26d-65e5-4f05-98fa-5b40fc353224>

under Article 369-1 for “undermining the image of the Republic of Belarus.” Authorities have been actively tracing the assets and property of these individuals inside Belarus, resulting in measures such as investigations, raids, and seizures. This action underscores the Belarusian regime’s escalating crackdown on dissent, expanding its repression across borders to pursue exiled opponents engaged in protest or political activism abroad.⁵

Repression during this period relied on a wide array of methods designed to eliminate opposition at every level. Authorities routinely criminalized dissent by prosecuting activists under fabricated charges of extremism, terrorism, or attempts to seize state power. Scores of opposition figures received long prison terms following secretive or politically staged trials. Reports by international observers and human rights groups documented the widespread use of torture and ill treatment in detention facilities. Prisoners accused of political offenses were frequently subjected to beatings, prolonged isolation, denial of medical care, and forced confessions. In some cases, political prisoners died in custody due to neglect and deliberate denial of medical assistance. The state also targeted the families and associates of exiled opposition members through intimidation, asset confiscation, and coercion to record confession videos. Independent media outlets and online platforms were labeled extremist, their staff arrested or driven abroad, while merely sharing information from such outlets became punishable under the law. The security services, including the KGB and the Interior Ministry, conducted raids, monitored communications, and attempted to infiltrate opposition networks at home and abroad.

Political repression in Belarus has grown markedly over the past decade, reaching unprecedented levels since the disputed 2020 presidential election. President Alexander

⁵ Criminal case initiated against Belarusians who took part in Freedom Day demonstrations around the world. Viasna, May 17, 2024. https://spring96.org/en/news/115233?utm_source=chatgpt.com

Lukashenko's regime has adopted severe tactics to quash dissent, including arbitrary arrests, prolonged detentions, and politically motivated prosecutions. Between 2020 and February 2025, no fewer than 8,147 individuals faced criminal prosecution for political reasons. At least 6,800 of them received politically motivated convictions, and the courts ordered compulsory treatment for political purposes in at least 33 cases.⁶

The broader impact on society has been devastating. Civil society organizations have been dismantled, human rights defenders arrested, and independent journalists silenced. Foreign nongovernmental organizations were expelled, and those that continued to operate inside the country did so under constant threat. The closure of civic space has produced a chilling effect on public life, erasing nearly all forms of independent activism. The crackdown also triggered a large outflow of political refugees, intellectuals, and professionals, accelerating a brain drain that weakens the prospects for reform. For those who remain, daily life is marked by fear, censorship, and the pervasive presence of state control.

Internationally, the repression has drawn widespread condemnation and new rounds of sanctions from the European Union, the United States, and other democratic governments. At the same time, the Lukashenka regime has secured political, security, and economic backing from Moscow, deepening its dependence on Russia. This alignment has further emboldened the authorities to crush opposition with impunity, while portraying repression as a defense of sovereignty and stability. The result is an environment in which the rule of law is absent, courts function as tools of political control, and the use of torture and coercion has become normalized.

The pattern of harassment, arbitrary detention, and physical abuse shows that repression is systemic rather than episodic. Under these conditions, the treatment of opposition figures amounts to a deliberate campaign to extinguish dissent and preserve authoritarian rule.

⁶ Human rights situation in Belarus. Viasna-96, April 8, 2025. <https://spring96.org/en/news/117757>

Continuing arrests, fabricated trials, and a pervasive climate of fear indicate that the Lukashenka government remains among the most repressive in Europe, operating with complete disregard for international human rights norms. The situation in 2024 and 2025 thus reflects not merely a continuation but an escalation of state violence and political persecution in Belarus.

In the period from 2024 to 2025, the governance model of Belarus demonstrated a clear continuation of authoritarian practices, reflecting an unchanged regime structure under President Aliaksandr Lukashenka. The formal institutional system, consisting of executive dominance, a compliant legislature, a politicized judiciary, and state-controlled media, continued to serve as a mechanism for the consolidation of elite power and the suppression of opposition. Political pluralism remained largely symbolic, as opposition parties were prevented from organizing effectively, candidate registration was systematically manipulated, and elections functioned as ceremonial confirmations of incumbency rather than genuine contests over leadership or policy direction. The absence of meaningful institutional reform or liberalization during this period underscores the regime's capacity to maintain a status quo defined by centralized control, restricted political participation, and the ongoing marginalization of independent civic actors.

At the same time, the state's repressive machinery expanded its influence across both public and private spheres. Security agencies, including the KGB and the Ministry of Internal Affairs, intensified surveillance and enforcement operations, targeting domestic opposition figures, journalists, civil society representatives, and even exiled dissidents along with their families. Legal instruments were used to criminalize dissent under broadly interpreted charges such as extremism, terrorism, and attempts to undermine state sovereignty, while the judiciary operated without transparency or adherence to due process. International human rights organizations reported widespread instances of detention, mistreatment, denial of medical care,

and coercive tactics against relatives of political prisoners, including confiscation of property and forced confessions. On the international stage, Belarus strengthened its alignment with Russia, gaining political and economic backing that enhanced its ability to resist external pressure. Taken together, the developments of 2024-2025 reinforce the conclusion that the Belarusian regime remains unchanged in its fundamental orientation and *modus operandi*, sustaining an entrenched system of authoritarian governance.