

This information is aggregated from open source online resources and our own practice. For the sixth month now, we are sending newsletters with, in our opinion, important information on problems in Belarus. In today's newsletter, we summarise information and answer a number of questions.

Summary: Tuesday 5 January to Friday 15 January 2021

Is it true that the repressions have stopped?

No, repressions continue in Belarus. Between August-November 2020 we observed the mass detentions of people attending street protests and marches, and according to human rights activists, at least 30,000 were detained. Now detentions have become more targeted: journalists and activists, as well as those who openly declare their opposition to the election results, have been detained. Once detained, sex, profession, nor age matter. Human rights organisations record detentions and administrative punishment in the case of elderly people, students, men, and women.

Repression is systemic and applies to all citizens. At the moment there are 183 political prisoners (nine more people added to the list this week).¹ More than 1,500 cases of abuse in police custody have been documented, and at least 14,000 people have gone into political exile.

2020 Overview

Health workers and human rights

Medical activism has become a hallmark of the ongoing peaceful demonstrations. For demonstrating a civic position after elections:

- 17 medics have been dismissed;
- 48 medical students were repressed;
- a total of more than 600 days of administrative arrest received as administrative penalty; and
- criminal cases are being conducted against doctors.²

Doctor Artsiom Sarokin was arrested after refuting government claims that 31-year-old opposition protester Raman Bandarenka, who died after being detained by police, had suffered from alcohol poisoning.³ Medical personnel at the Minsk Emergency Hospital, where Bandarenka had been treated, lined up as if they were protesters being arrested, holding

¹ See Viasna: <https://prisoners.spring96.org/en>

² See Belarusfeed: <https://belarusfeed.com/medics-journalists-protest-solidarity-detained-colleagues/>

³ See Tut.by: <https://news.tut.by/society/709946.html>,
<https://belarusfeed.com/belarus-roman-bondarenko-death-investigation/>

signs that read “zero ppm”.⁴ The video went viral, and ‘zero ppm’ has become a slogan, with journalists, students, and activists replicating the protest.⁵

Officially published data on the COVID-19 situation in Belarus indicate that the virus is spreading everywhere, and so the detention of health workers only deteriorates the situation further.

For more information on the details about COVID-19, please see our [December review](#).

Freedom of speech and journalists

During 2020, journalists have been detained 480 times and many foreign journalists have had their accreditation revoked.⁶ Currently, eight people remain in custody.

On 22 December, financial police detained Yuliya Slutskaya, the founder of the Press Club media and education institution; Ala Sharko, the Press Club’s programme director; Siarhei Alsheuski, the Press Club’s financial director; Piotr Slutski, a videographer; and Kseniya Lutskina, a former employee of the government-owned TV and radio holding, Belteleradiocompany. These detentions were in relation to a media project co-run by Press Club’s Academy.

On 31 December, the detainees were charged with committing a crime under Part 2 of Art. 243 of the Criminal Code (tax evasion on a large scale).⁷ This week, Belarusian human rights organisations recognise Yuliya Slutskaya, Ala Sharko, Siarhei Alsheuski, Piotr Slutski, and Kseniya Lutskina as political prisoners.

This week pressure on journalists has continued:

- Andrei Aliaksandrau was detained in a criminal case as a suspect under Art. 342 of the Criminal Code of the Republic of Belarus, ‘Organisation and preparation of actions that grossly violate public order, or active participation in them’.⁸

⁴ See Tut.by: <https://news.tut.by/society/709036.html>

⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B5ZhYpMix8A>

⁶ See DW:

<https://www.dw.com/en/belarus-protests-dw-correspondent-released-after-journalist-detentions/a-54721995>,

<https://europeanjournalists.org/blog/2020/12/30/belarus-journalists-spent-1200-days-behind-bars-in-2020>

⁷ See Viasna: <https://spring96.org/en/news/101168>

⁸ See BAJ:

<https://baj.by/en/content/criminal-case-started-against-journalist-and-media-manager-andrei-aliaksandrau>

- Police search office of BelaPAN news agency. No one was detained, but Investigative Committee officers seized equipment from the office.⁹

Creative and art industries and human rights

During 2020, at least 480 violations of creative industry representatives' rights were recorded. A visual report can be found on the [PEN center website](#).

This week arrests and convictions continued, including that of Kryścina Pałtavič, an artist and art teacher from Skidziel, was detained for painting murals about the events of recent months. A criminal case has been filed against her.

Belarusian customs did not allow the following through the Western border: Viktor Marcinovič's novel titled *Revolution*; *Belarusian National Idea* by Zmicier Łukašuk and Maksim Harunoŭ; and parcels from the [symbal.by](#) store.¹⁰

The pressure on cultural venues has been ongoing for more than a month, and many have been closed down. Among them are the art pub Torvald in Viciebsk and cultural hub OK16 in Minsk.¹¹ OK16 was sponsored by Belgazprombank, and Maryja Kalesnikava was its director before the start of the 2020 election campaign. The hub was home to a lot of contemporary art projects, and its closing is part of the attack on independent Belarusian culture.¹² Due to the closure of the OK16 space, which has long given life to many important projects, performances of the independent theatre TOK have been canceled.¹³

Students and human rights

Over the past five months of the study year, Belarusian Students' Association and Student Initiative Group have collected evidence of 399 detained and 131 expelled students.

- 22 young people have become suspects in criminal cases;
- 97 people have received an administrative arrest; and
- 57 people have been fined.

Detailed visual material is available [here](#).

Workers, trade unions, and human rights

⁹ See BAJ: <https://baj.by/en/content/police-search-office-belapan-news-agency>

¹⁰ See Euroradio

<https://euroradio.pl/mytnya-ne-prapuscila-za-myazhu-raman-viktara-marcinovicha-revalyucyya>

¹¹ <https://vkurier.by/215781>

¹² See Pen-Center

<https://pen-centre.by/en/2021/01/12/a-hto-tam-idze-novy-god-represii-usyo-tyya-zh-vypusk-14.html>

¹³ See Pen-Center

<https://pen-centre.by/en/2021/01/12/a-hto-tam-idze-novy-god-represii-usyo-tyya-zh-vypusk-14.html>

Pressure continues on leaders of independent trade unions and workers who express their opinion. Independent trade union representatives are being detained and imprisoned in order to stop them organising workplace actions.

- On 12 January, the Oktyabrsky district court of Minsk ruled that the anti-violence video address from civil aviation workers was a “picket using the Internet computer network”. Nadezhda Bukataya, an ex-employee of Belavia, received a 15 day jail term for participating in the recording of the video.
- On 11 January, Vladimir Galash got a 15 day jail term for the same video.

It should be noted that participation in a video is now equivalent to “participation in an unauthorised picket”.

Have Belarusians stopped protesting?

Belarus protests now enter the sixth month. Belarusians continue to protest and speak up about the necessity for democratic changes and respect of human rights.

In an effort to avoid arrest by Lukashenka’s security forces, protesters have resorted to so-called ‘flash-mob’ tactics, gathering at locations announced on social media at the last minute.

The flash-mob protests are smaller and shorter protests, usually conducted outside of city centres, rather than the kind of mass demonstrations that have drawn tens of thousands of people, but have been an easy target for brutal crackdowns by the security forces.¹⁴ However, detentions still take place, targeting protesters from off street yards for ‘illegal meetings’ to making snowmen in white-red-white colours.¹⁵

- **Minsk detentions from off street yards**

On 5 January, unknown men (allegedly plain clothes security officers) showed up at neighbourhood meetings in Minsk’s off street yards and detained a number of participants. The attackers came to the yards by ordinary vans and cars, not police vehicles. In total, approximately 20 people were detained. According to volunteers, three detainees were taken to hospitals from Pershamayski district police department, while the others were sent to the detention centre.¹⁶ One of the detained was beaten and threatened with a gun in front of his wife and son.¹⁷

¹⁴ See RFE:

<https://www.rferl.org/a/belarusian-protests-continue-using-flash-mob-tactics-to-avoid-police-crackdown/31039954.html>

¹⁵ See RFE:

<https://www.rferl.org/a/frosty-the-protester-belarusian-man-arrested-for-snowman/31034355.html>

¹⁶ See Belsat: <https://belsat.eu/en/news/plainclothes-people-detain-about-20-residents-in-minsk-yards/>

¹⁷ See RFI: <https://www.svaboda.org/a/31036511.html>

What is happening with justice?

Hundreds of Belarusians facing criminal charges connected with post-election events remain in custody.

In the last two months of 2020, dozens of criminal cases finally reached the courts. The bulk of the cases relate to violence or threat of violence against a police officer, resistance to a police officer or other person protecting public order, and organisation or active participation in group actions which gravely breach public order. The courts have also heard more than a dozen cases of defamatory articles for insulting state symbols, insulting a government official and the president, libel, and others.

The first criminal case on 'rioting' charges was heard in Navahrudak. One of the defendants was sentenced to seven years in a penal colony. This punishment is so far the most severe penalty imposed for a political case in 2020. A total of 45 defendants were sentenced to terms of imprisonment.¹⁸

Pre-trial detention is prolonged for dozens of people who were arrested in the summer or early autumn, such as the case of **Maryya Kalesnikava**, an opposition figure who is facing national security charges.¹⁹ New charges were brought against **Ihar Losik**, administrator of a popular Telegram channel, arrested more than six months ago. In protest, Losik went on a hunger strike, which has already lasted about 30 days.²⁰

Links:

34mag published a documentary film called 'Sisters of the Protest' [«Сестры протеста»](#). It is about the young women who were arrested and detained under Art. 23.34. The film tells the story, in the first person, of how someone is changed by imprisonment and how long it takes to find a way out, even after being set free.

¹⁸ See Viasna: <http://spring96.org/en/news/101216>

¹⁹ See RFE: <https://www.rferl.org/a/belarus-extends-kalesnikava-detention-kalesnikava/31036653.html>

²⁰ See RFE: <https://www.svaboda.org/a/31037956.html>