

The information is aggregated from open online sources and our own practice. In these newsletters, we will update you in brief on human rights violations in numbers and facts.

### **Saturday 4 March 2023 to Friday 17 March 2023**

The human rights crisis in Belarus continues to deepen – in the past weeks, human rights defenders, journalists, democratic leaders, and independent analysts received decades-long prison sentences. At the same time, the OHCHR report on Belarus confirmed that some of the human rights violations committed in Belarus before, during, and after the 2020 presidential election may qualify as crimes against humanity.

### **OHCHR: Crimes against humanity were committed in Belarus**

In the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights [report](#), published on 17 March 2023, and covering the situation of human rights in Belarus in the run-up to the 2020 presidential election and in its aftermath, the High Commissioner concluded that there are sufficient grounds to believe that systematic, widespread and gross human rights violations have been and are being committed in Belarus. The report covers the following types of human rights violations:

- unnecessary and disproportionate use of force (including cases of protestors' deaths);
- torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment (including violent beatings as a form of coercion and conditions in places of detention);
- arbitrary arrest and detention;
- violations of the rights to due process and a fair trial;
- violations of the freedoms of expression, peaceful assembly and association;
- sexual and gender-based violence (including at least 20 rape attempts and 44 rape threats);
- child separation and undue interference in family life (including threats of child removal); and
- forced exile (at least 100,000 individuals have sought safety abroad following political repressions).

The Commissioner also noted that the number of competent lawyers who are able and willing to assist victims of human rights violations is already extremely low in Belarus, with approximately one lawyer for 5,000 persons, further decreasing as a result of ongoing harassment and disbarment.

### **Harsh sentences for HRDs, political analysts, and journalists**

On 3 March 2023, Leninsky District Court of Minsk passed the verdict against [human rights defenders of Viasna Human Rights Center](#) – Nobel Peace Prize laureate Ales Bialiatski was sentenced to 10 years in prison, Valentin Stefanovich – to 9 years, Vladimir Labkovich – to 7 years. Human rights activist Dmitry Solovyov, residing abroad, was sentenced *in absentia* to 8 years in prison. The prosecution maintained that HRDs “trained citizens to participate in a gross violation of public order and also financed these actions under the guise of human rights and charitable activities” by paying fines for people subjected to administrative arrests for participating in protests, as well as covering legal fees and food bills in detention centers.

On 7 March 2023, Minsk City Court passed the verdict on [“TUT.BY case”](#) – editor-in-chief of the media outlet Marina Zolotova and executive director Lyudmila Chekina were sentenced

to 12 years in prison. According to the prosecution, the journalists published materials, which contained a deliberately positive assessment of the actions of the authorities' opponents, casting a negative reflection on the decisions of officials. They were also accused of destabilizing the situation in the country and harming the national security of Belarus. On the eve of the verdict, Belarusian propaganda released [film "Bye-bye TUT.BY."](#) in which propagandist Ksenia Lebedeva stated that the journalists of the outlet showed the protesters as "bright and joyful," while describing pro-government activists in the exact opposite manner. Moreover, she accused the portal's management of refusing to close comments under publications, "thereby maintaining a high degree of tension in society." In the opinion of propaganda and state authorities, "such antagonism of citizens of one country equals the incitement of hostility."

On 17 March 2023, Minsk City Court sentenced [Valeria Kostyugova](#) (political scientist, analyst, founder of the expert community website "Our Opinion") and [Tatsiana Kuzina](#) (founder of the SYMPA project and researcher in the field of public administration) to 10 years of imprisonment on charges of "conspiracy" and "calls to harm national security."

### **Detentions related to the incident with destroying Russian military aircraft in Machulishchi**

On 26 February 2023, the community of former Belarusian security officials BYPOL [stated](#) that two explosions occurred at the Machulishchi airfield, as a result of which a Russian military plane and snow removal equipment were damaged. The organization stated that the sabotage was committed by members of the opposition initiative "Plan Peramoha." Mass detentions related to this incident are still ongoing.

On 7 March 2023, pro-government sources [published](#) a video of the detention of Ukrainian citizen Mykola Shvets, suspected of committing said sabotage. On the same day, the State Security Committee (KGB) [announced the initiation](#) of a criminal case for "an attempt to commit an act of terrorism" under which 20 persons were detained, including the direct executor Shvets, who was dubbed an agent of the Security Service of Ukraine. Due to [the recent amendments to the Criminal Code in 2022](#), an attempt to commit an "act of terrorism" may be punishable by the death penalty.

### **Sentences *in absentia* against Belarusian democratic leaders**

On 6 March 2023, Minsk City Court passed the verdicts in the [case of the "Coordination Council of the Opposition,"](#) which was heard *in absentia*. The leader of the Belarusian democratic forced and, arguable, the true winner of 2020 presidential election Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya was sentenced to 15 years in prison, the head of the National Anti-Crisis Department (NAU) Pavel Latushko was sentenced to 18 years in prison, and the head of the pro-democracy foundation "Country for Life" Maria Moroz, as well as members of the Coordination Council Presidium Olga Kovalkova and Sergey Dylevsky were sentenced to 12 years of imprisonment. Under ten articles of the Criminal Code, depending on the incriminated roles, democratic leaders were accused of organizing illegal strikes to "undermine the national economy and strengthen sanctions," "ensuring the growth of protest moods for the subsequent seizure of power," "high treason," "conspiracy," "creation of an extremist formation," and other "political" crimes.

### **Political prisoners**

The total number of political prisoners in Belarus is [1460](#). The number continues to grow daily. As of 20 March 2023, our colleague [Nasta Lojka](#) has been in custody for 173 days.