

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 5 August 2023 to Friday 19 August 2023

The human rights crisis in Belarus continues to deepen. The analyzed period was marked by severe penalties for critical online comments and support of Ukraine, absurd detentions for demonstration of national Belarusian symbols, the recognition of initiatives active in the civil field and the works of classics of Belarusian literature as “extremist”.

Severe penalties for online criticism

Prison sentences for critical online comments are on the rise.

On 11 August 2023, Minsk City Court sentenced 68-year-old pensioner [Natalia Petrovich](#) to 6 years in prison for writing online comments criticizing the authoritarian Belarusian regime. She was found guilty of “insulting Alexander Lukashenko,” “insulting a government official,” “inciting enmity,” “calling to harm national security,” and “participating in an extremist formation” under Articles 368, 369, 130, 361, and 361-1 of the Criminal Code, respectively.

On 18 August 2023, Grodno Regional Court sentenced Skidel resident [Mikhail Mekeko](#), who had recently returned from Poland, to 6 years in prison. His critical messages and videos on the Internet were interpreted by the security forces as “inciting social discord and enmity against law enforcement officers,” “calls to participate in protests,” and “threats of reprisals and slander against Alexander Lukashenko” under Articles 130, 342, 366 and 367 of the Criminal Code, respectively. Earlier in June 2023, Mikhail was put on the [List of persons involved in terrorist activities](#) by the State Security Committee (KGB) in an extra-judicial manner.

Absurd cases of arrests for “unauthorized picketing”

On 8 August 2023, Gomel resident [was detained](#) – she was riding a motorcycle wearing a white helmet, taped with brick-colored duct tape in the middle, which the security forces interpreted as “an unauthorized demonstration of white-red-white symbols,” (the colors of the independent Belarusian national flag).

On 9 August 2023, security forces [detained](#) a gamer who used “Pahonia” coat of arms as the clan logo in the computer game World of Tanks. Despite the fact the above-mentioned flag and coat of arms were the official symbols of the Republic of Belarus in 1991-1995 and “Pahonia” was included in the State List of Historical and Cultural Values of the Republic of Belarus, state representatives consider them destructive and persecute for their public demonstration.

“Extremism” cases on the rise

On 15 August 2023, KGB recognized human rights initiative “Homel Viasna” and startup hub “Imaguru” [as “extremist formations”](#) in an extra-judicial manner.

“Homel Viasna” is a regional structural subdivision of the human rights center Viasna, whose founder [Ales Bialiatski won the Nobel Peace Prize](#) in 2022. [The List of extremist formations](#) indicates that one of the participants of this “formation” is journalist Larisa Shchiryakova, currently accused of a number of “extremist” articles of the Criminal Code.

Imaguru is a pan-European startup hub, designed to stimulate corporate innovation and accelerate startups. Earlier, the company [actively supported](#) protesters in Belarus, recorded a video of solidarity with the detained participants of the PandaDoc project, took part in the general strike on 26 October 2020, organized by the opposition. One of the company's events was opened by democratically chosen leader of Belarus Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya. Imaguru founder Tatiana Marinich was also a member of the Coordination Council of Belarusian Opposition

On 17 August 2023, by the request of the Prosecutor's Office, the preface to the collection of the works of the writer Vincent Dunin-Martinkevich and two of his poems from the time of the Kastus Kalinovsky uprising in 1863-1864 were recognized [as "extremist materials."](#) The writer is a Belarusian literature classic, whose works are studied in Belarusian schools. Several Belarusian institutions and a street in Minsk bear his name. This trend indicates the prohibition of any mention of the times of confrontation between the Belarusian people and Russia in the past and the forced "russification" of Belarusian culture by the regime as a whole.

Persecution related to the war in Ukraine

On 17 August 2023, Gomel Regional Court sentenced businessman [Yuri Tashkinov](#) to 3 years of imprisonment on charges of "financing an extremist formation" and "inciting enmity" under Articles 361-2 and 130 of the Criminal Code, respectively. [According to the "Flagshtok,"](#) the businessman was accused of transferring money to help Ukraine through the BYSOL fund. Speaking out against the war on social media and publishing reports on humanitarian aid to residents of the Chernihiv region.

Information about the beginning of the trial against another resident of Gomel [Dmitry Makeev](#) has also recently surfaced. He is accused of a number of "extremist" articles of the Criminal Code, including "preparing to participate in a military conflict on the territory of a foreign state" (Article 361-3 of the Criminal Code). [Typically this article is used](#) to persecute people who intend to join volunteer formations fighting on the side of Ukraine against Russia, or provide any assistance to such organizations.

Political prisoners

The total number of political prisoners in Belarus is [1489](#). The number continues to grow daily. As of 19 August 2023, our colleague [Nasta Lojka](#) has been in custody for 324 days.