

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.

Sunday 20 August 2023 to Friday 1 September 2023

The human rights crisis in Belarus continues to deepen. The analyzed period was marked by the continuation of persecution for online publications and journalistic materials containing criticism of the regime, as well as human rights activities and donations to solidarity funds within the framework of “anti-extremist legislation.” More instances of repression against independent political activists, as well as harsh sentences *in absentia* against opposition activists abroad, were documented.

Trials *in absentia* against opposition representatives abroad

On 30 August 2023, Minsk City Court [handed down a verdict](#) *in absentia* to Belarusians accused of attacking the Belarusian Embassy in London. Maxim Zuev and Vadim Bogovkov were sentenced to 10 years in prison, Alexander Napreenko and Sergei Ryabushko were sentenced to 8 years. They were charged under three articles of the Criminal Code, including “inciting enmity” under Article 130. According to the investigation, on 19 December 2022, three employees of the Belarusian diplomatic mission were attacked near the building of the Belarusian Embassy in London. The ministry said that “the attackers behaved aggressively and brazenly, made threats, and also used violence against one of the diplomats, who had his nose broken.”

“Extremist” cases on the rise

On 22 August 2023, Gomel Regional Court sentenced 65-year-old Mozyr entrepreneur [Pyotr Starotitorov](#) to 5 years in prison. He was accused of “inciting hostility,” “calling to harm national security,” “insulting and slandering Lukashenka,” and “discrediting the Republic of Belarus” under Articles 130, 361, 367, 368, and 369-1 of the Criminal Code, respectively. The bases for the accusations were his reposts on social networks, which contained criticism of the current regime.

On 23 August 2023, [human rights center “Viasna,”](#) the oldest human rights organization founded by the Nobel Peace Prize laureate Ales Bialiatski, was recognized as an [“extremist formation.”](#) The decision was taken by the Ministry of Internal Affairs in an extrajudicial manner. Allegedly, the human rights organization was recognized as “extremist” for plotting to encroach on the sovereignty and public security of Belarus.” The coalition of Belarusian human rights organizations [condemned](#) this action.

On 24 August 2023, Minsk City Court sentenced [Artem Lebedko](#), the son of opposition politician Anatoly Lebedko, to 3.5 years in prison on charges of “financing extremist activities” under Article 361-2 of the Criminal Code. According to the investigation, in 2020 Lebedko made donations via Facebook to three foundations recognized as “extremist formations” on the grounds of “ideological enmity.”

On 31 August 2023, Gomel Regional Court sentenced former journalist [Larisa Shchiryakova](#) to 3.5 years in prison and a hefty fine on charges of “aiding extremist activities” and “discrediting the Republic of Belarus” under Articles 361-4 and 369-1 of the Criminal Code, respectively. According to the investigation, Shchiryakova collected and stored information for the human rights center “Viasna” and the independent media “Belsat,” recognized as “extremist formations” in Belarus. The journalist was also accused of “seeking to destabilize the situation in the country” by providing materials for online publication, which allegedly contained “deliberately false information discrediting Belarus.”

Human rights activists document an increase in the number of prosecutions for the distribution of “extremist materials”. According [to Human Constanta](#), from 1 October 2021 to 31 June 2023 (for 21 months), 3084 cases were recorded under Article 19.11 of the Administrative Code. Human rights defenders assume that the number of such cases in the period 2020 - early 2021 may differ from the number of cases in early 2023 by several times (up to 10 times). According [to the human rights center “Viasna”](#), the courts consider an average of 2.5 cases related to the distribution of “extremist materials” per day.

Repression of political analysts

On 18 August 2023, the KGB added political experts [Valeria Kostyukova and Tatiana Kuzina](#), who were previously sentenced to 10 years in prison, to the [List of persons involved in terrorist activities](#). Since the enlistment they are prohibited to make financial transactions, including money transfers to places of detention.

On 29 August 2023, state TV channel ONT released an “investigation film” about the detention of political analyst [Andrei Porotnikov](#). In the film, KGB representative Konstantin Bychek declared that the analyst was accused of “high treason” under Article 356 of the Criminal Code for allegedly cooperating with Polish intelligence. However, based on the examples of analytical reports cited in the film, it can be concluded that the analyst worked only with legitimate and open sources, including attending press conferences and communicating with security forces.

OMCT report on policy and legislative changes in Belarus published

World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT) [report](#) “Suppression of the Right to Defend Human Rights in Belarus: Policy and Legislative Changes in 2021-2023” aims to demonstrate the severity of the human rights crisis in Belarus with respect to human rights defenders (HRDs) and human rights organisations. It analyzes and documents the repressive laws and policies that have been used by Belarusian authorities to target HRDs, especially since the contested 2020 presidential election and the massive protests that ensued. The politics of mass repression, which amounts to international crime of persecution, has not ceased since the beginning of the crisis in 2020. Human rights defenders have been one of the most actively persecuted social groups since 2021. The report discusses the most commonly used tools for targeting human rights organizations and HRDs. e.g. adopting, amending, and arbitrarily interpreting national laws, while ignoring universal human rights standards and the recommendations of international human rights and accountability bodies.

Political prisoners

The total number of political prisoners in Belarus is [1496](#). The number continues to grow daily. As of 1 September 2023, our colleague [Nasta Lojka](#) has been in custody for 338 days.