

SEPTEMBER – DECEMBER 2024

TRENDS.BELHELCOM.ORG

HUMAN RIGHTS IN BELARUS: THE MAIN TRENDS OF PUBLIC POLICY

GENERAL MEASURES | LAW ENFORCEMENT PRACTICE | KEY REACTIONS
OF INTERNATIONAL STRUCTURES



In 2024, AI is not only getting «smarter» but also becoming more accessible to a growing number of people. To capture our audience's attention, we create cover images for reviews using AI, reflecting the reality in Belarus.

In the third trimester, it was clear that the state had entered a second phase of legalizing repression, introducing even harsher amendments to laws that had already been modified in a repressive manner.

In the image generated by Shutterstock.AI, a tired little wild boar is unable to step off the revved-up carousel. It is critical that we not only get off the carousel but also bring it to a complete halt.



© Belarusian Helsinki Committee, 2025

| CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	4
SUMMARY	6
I. GENERAL MEASURES: LEGISLATION, STRATEGIES, AND POLICIES THAT SHAPE THE CONDITIONS AND PREREQUISITES FOR THE FULFILLMENT OF HUMAN RIGHTS IN THE COUNTRY	10
Expansion of the legalization of systemic repressions	10
Formalisation of discrimination based on sexual orientation, gender identity, and reproductive choice	16
Expansion of extra-legal, extrajudicial procedures	16
Indoctrination in education: formalising pro-government narratives about the events of 2020	17
Positive changes in the pension system	19
II. LAW ENFORCEMENT PRACTICE: VIOLATIONS OF CIVIL, POLITICAL, SOCIAL, ECONOMIC, AND CULTURAL RIGHTS	20
Persecution of the LGBTQ+ community	20
New border control practices	20
Increased workplace control	21
New detention practices	21
New patterns of persecution under extremism-related articles	21
III. KEY CHANGES IN THE REACTIONS OF INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTIONS CONCERNING THE HUMAN RIGHTS SITUATION IN BELARUS	23
Lithuania's referral to the International Criminal Court regarding the situation in Belarus	23

| INTRODUCTION

The human rights situation in Belarus remains the subject of monitoring and analysis by both Belarusian and international NGOs and international organisations. Since 2012, the mandate of the **Special Rapporteur** on the situation of human rights in Belarus has been in place. Civil society's alternative reports to treaty bodies overseeing the implementation of the core UN human rights conventions, as well as in the **reports** of these bodies themselves, also provide reviews. In response to the unjustified use of force, torture against peaceful protesters contesting the 2020 rigged elections, and the subsequent repressions, a special **Mandate on the human rights situation in Belarus** was established under the auspices of the OHCHR in March 2021. In 2024, it was **changed** to a group of independent experts, which means more autonomy and independence for this mechanism.

Since 2019, the Belarusian Helsinki Committee has been calculating **the Belarus Human Rights Index**, within which more than 40 Belarusian experts assess changes in each specific human right. Belarusian NGOs regularly conduct targeted human rights situation monitoring based on their areas of expertise.¹

The events of 2020, followed by the war in Ukraine and Belarus' complicity in Russia's aggression, have significantly altered the situation in the country, including its policies and practices in the realm of human rights. The situation is continually deteriorating, with daily updates on legislative changes, government initiatives,² specific violations, etc. Amidst this influx of information, **maintaining focus** and distinguishing between essential and minor aspects **becomes challenging**.

To ensure that significant events are not overlooked and to gain a better understanding of the situation in Belarus regarding the rule of law and human rights, we track **the most significant and qualitative changes in the main trends of state policy in the field of human rights**.

For this purpose, since July 2023, the Belarusian Helsinki Committee has been issuing a periodic review. Its aim is to present our expert assessments of **the most significant and qualitative changes in the trends of Belarusian state policy** in the field of human rights and the international community's reactions to it over the reporting period in three areas:

- *general measures*: systemic issues – legislation, strategies, and policies that generally shape the conditions and prerequisites for the fulfilment of human rights in the country;

¹ See, in particular, *Analytical reviews of the situation with human rights prepared by Human Rights Center «Viasna»*: <https://spring96.org/ru/publications>;
Monitoring the situation of freedom of association and civil society organizations in the Republic of Belarus by Lawtrend: <https://www.lawtrend.org/english>;
Electronic bulletins of mass media in Belarus by the Belarusian Association of Journalists: https://baj.media/en/aglyady_category/baj-monitors/ and others.

² We consider the current authorities in Belarus as the *de facto* authorities.

- *law enforcement practices*: trends in violations of civil and political, social, economic and cultural rights;
- *key decisions and reactions of international institutions* related to the human rights situation in Belarus.

Our analytics will contribute to a better understanding of human rights trends in Belarus, aid international partners in navigating the Belarusian agenda, facilitate monitoring of systemic and qualitative changes in the situation, expand the human rights focus of analytics in related areas (political, economic, social, etc.), and serve as a useful resource for developing strategies and positions.

The analysis for 2023 is presented in 2 reviews. Issues for 2023, as well as a summary analysis of the year as an interactive presentation can be found [here](#).

In 2024, the review will be published three times (after every four months). The January-April and May-August 2024 issue can be found [here](#).

You can subscribe to our review [here](#).



SUBSCRIBE TO THE NEXT
ISSUE OF TRENDS
trends.belhelcom.org

| SUMMARY

- By the end of the year, it was clear that the state had entered a second phase of legalizing repression, introducing even harsher amendments to laws that had already been modified in a repressive manner. This tightening of the legal framework raises the question of whether it aims to close gaps in hastily adopted repressive laws or simply reflects a continuing need to maintain the repressive system as available punitive tools diminish.
- Provisions ensuring immunity and protection for the president after leaving office have evolved, now extending to criminal liability. A new article in the Criminal Code criminalizes «Violence or threats against the President of the Republic of Belarus, including after the termination of their powers». Additionally, existing defamation and insult laws have been amended to include former presidents explicitly. These provisions are already frequently used for politically motivated prosecutions, and the new changes may provide further formal grounds for arbitrary persecution.
- Reporting the location or movement of the Russian military equipment in Belarus has become expressly criminalized. A new offense has been introduced: «Unauthorized dissemination of information about the location or movement of military units, weaponry, military equipment, and ammunition». Prior to this, individuals were prosecuted for such actions under other articles, including those criminalizing facilitating extremist activity (Art. 361-4), participation in an extremist formation (Art. 361-1), and high treason (Art. 356). This is another example of the state formalizing possibilities for retroactive criminal liability to justify arbitrary prosecutions for the acts that were previously punished under unrelated articles, often disconnected from the actual behavior.
- Authorities appear to be seeking new legal grounds for politically motivated criminal prosecutions of Belarusians who have been forced to flee the country. There has been a significant expansion of legal grounds for transnational repression. The number of offenses under the Belarusian Criminal Code for which individuals can be prosecuted while committed abroad increased from three to seventeen. When this repressive provision (paragraph 1-1 of Article 6) was originally introduced, it applied to only three offenses related to the disclosure of state secrets. Today, its scope has widened considerably, encompassing virtually any activity – not only by representatives of democratic forces, but also by experts, human rights defenders, and ordinary Belarusians living abroad.

- A trend that began in 2023 – the departure from the formal equality principle – is taking on new forms. Despite several positive legislative changes regarding criminal liability, such as the introduction of alternative sentences and reduced penalties, these do not apply to individuals convicted under «extremist» articles, which, in practice, means politically motivated cases. This exclusion is explicitly stated in provisions concerning the cancellation of prison sentences and the lifting of pretrial detention as a preventive measure.
- The trend of incorporating loyalty to the authorities as a criterion for professional access continues to evolve. Entry requirements for new professional groups are becoming stricter, and formal grounds for their arbitrary prosecution are expanding. In the last quarter of 2024, pedagogical staff working with children³ were added to the list alongside tour guides and notaries. The criteria for working with children and the hiring procedures for these roles have been revised. All these measures are officially presented as being aimed at protecting children.
- Simultaneously, a legal basis has been established for arbitrarily restricting children's freedom of association. The relevant article in the Law on the Rights of the Child has been amended, now framing restrictions on freedom of association as follows: «...provided that the activities of such associations do not aim to promote terrorism, other extremist activities, or any other acts prohibited by law, nor allow for the possibility of engaging in such activities while pursuing their legitimate objectives».
- The policy and practice of persecuting the LGBTQ+ community continue to evolve. Firstly, at the legislative level, the list of information deemed harmful to children's health and development has been expanded to include content «aimed at promoting homosexual relationships, gender transition, pedophilia, and child-free [lifestyle]». Secondly, in the last quarter of 2024, direct persecution of the LGBTQ+ community has intensified, with increased detentions and arrests.
- The use of arbitrary extrajudicial mechanisms lacking any procedural safeguards is expanding both geographically and in scope.
 - Thus, the competence and mandate term of the Return Commission have been extended.
 - The Commission's mandate has been extended indefinitely: not only Belarusians abroad but also those inside the country can now appeal to the Commission, «in accordance with the President's instruction»; the range of issues the Commission can address has expanded, including the power to make «other decisions necessitated by the implementation of presidential decisions».

- A new stage in the formalization of pro-government narratives regarding the 2020 events is taking place in school curricula. According to the Minister of Education A. Ivanets, a new textbook, «The History of Belarus in the Context of World History», set to be introduced in schools in the 2025-2026 academic year, frames the events of 2020 as an attempted coup d'état. This serves as a tool to pressure children and their parents, aiming to prevent any protest sentiment, stigmatize protest behavior, and delegitimize those who hold views differing from the official state position. It also aims to marginalize and delegitimize participants in the peaceful 2020 protests, as well as those who have been repressed. As a result, this reinforces conditions for increased societal division within Belarus.
- At the same time, some positive changes have been introduced in the pension system: the restriction on pension payments to working pensioners has been lifted; preferential conditions for calculating social insurance periods have been established for women who have given birth to four children (the required insurance period has been reduced from 10 to 5 years); fathers raising children with disabilities without the involvement of the mother can now retire five years earlier; pensions for children with disabilities under 18 who have lost their breadwinner have been increased. On the other hand, in August 2024, the amendments were proposed that significantly reduced key pension guarantees for individuals serving prison sentences.
- Among the new trends in law enforcement practices that violate human rights, several new forms of control related to border crossings have emerged: KGB officers have begun interrogating parents whose children reside abroad; workplace pressure is intensifying (in some schools, «employee movement logs» have been introduced to track staff movements during break periods); new detention practices: internet access is now cut off prior to a person's arrest; new developments in persecution under «extremism» articles (the letter-sending platform «Pismo.bel», widely used for sending letters to political prisoners, has been designated as extremist material).
- The broader political and legal context influencing the human rights situation at the end of 2024 was the seventh presidential election*⁴ in the history of independent Belarus. Some of the measures described in this report – both positive and negative – appear to have been adopted in connection with the elections. While the elections intensified the repressive climate, they did not result in fundamental changes at the policy or law enforcement level (for further details, see [reports](#) from the Belarusian Helsinki Committee and Human Rights Center Viasna Human Rights Defenders for Free Elections campaign).

- As regards international responses to the situation in Belarus, Lithuania took a notable step by formally appealing to the International Criminal Court (ICC), requesting an investigation into alleged crimes against humanity, including deportation, persecution, and other inhumane acts committed in Belarus from May 2020 to the present. The ICC Prosecutor's Office is currently conducting a preliminary examination of the information received, reviewing issues of jurisdiction, admissibility, and the interests of justice, and determining whether there are reasonable grounds to initiate an investigation.

⁴ *The term «elections*» in relation to the 2025 election campaign is used with an asterisk to emphasize the conventionality of this term, since any free and fair election campaign presupposes all conditions under which rights and freedoms are fully realized, including freedom of speech, freedom of peaceful meetings and associations, the right to participate in the governance of one's state, freedom from discrimination, which are currently practically absent in Belarus.*

I. GENERAL MEASURES: LEGISLATION, STRATEGIES, POLICIES, THAT SHAPE THE CONDITIONS AND PREREQUISITES FOR THE FULFILLMENT OF HUMAN RIGHTS IN THE COUNTRY

KEY POINTS:

- The list of offenses for which individuals can be criminally liable for crimes committed abroad has been expanded from 3 to 17.
- A professional ban has been introduced for pedagogical staff, who have been convicted under «political articles», thus formalizing a «political filter» for hiring in pedagogical positions.
- The list of information deemed harmful to children's health and development has been expanded to include content that is «aimed at promoting homosexual relationships, gender transition, pedophilia, and child-free [lifestyle]».

EXPANSION OF THE LEGALIZATION OF SYSTEMIC REPRESSIONS

1. In September 2024, the **amendments** to legislation on criminal liability⁵ passed the first reading⁶. While these amendments introduce some positive changes, they also create new grounds for politically motivated persecution. Notably, several recently introduced repressive provisions have been further tightened.

Firstly, the scope of protections and guarantees for the president, including former presidents, has been expanded:

- The list of criminal offenses against the President of the Republic of Belarus has been broadened. A new article, Article 366-1, has been added to the Criminal Code: «Violence or threats against the President of the

⁵ *The Criminal Code, the Criminal Procedure Code, the Penal Enforcement Code, the Code of Administrative Offenses, and the Procedural Enforcement Code on Administrative Offenses.*

⁶ *At the time of this review's publication, they had been adopted in the second reading (January 2025).*

Republic of Belarus, including after the termination of their powers». Previously, only defamation and insult of the president were explicitly criminalized. Acts of violence against the president could be prosecuted under Article 366, which addressed violence against public officials. The new provision extends to the president's family members and imposes harsher penalties than the general provision.

- Articles 367 and 368 (criminalizing defamation and insult of the president, respectively) have been amended to explicitly cover former presidents. It is essential to consider that these provisions are actively used by the authorities for politically motivated persecution.
- In addition to these substantive changes, procedural revisions have also been made. The scope of cases falling under the exclusive jurisdiction of preliminary investigation bodies and prosecutor's office (Article 174 of the Criminal Procedure Code) has been expanded. It now includes crimes committed against a former president who has left office due to term expiration, resignation, or permanent incapacity due to health reasons, as well as crimes against their family members. The introduction of the new offense, its extension to the president's family, and the broadening of existing provisions to cover former presidents not only provide additional grounds for arbitrary prosecution of dissenters but also reflect a clear effort to guarantee protections for A. Lukashenko in the event of a potential transfer of power. This aligns with a broader trend that started with **significant amendments** to the Law on the President in early 2024, which also addresses guarantees for former presidents and their families. At the same time, it is questionable whether the amended decree itself constitutes an immediate threat as a tool for arbitrary persecution. Rather, it appears to impose positive obligations on a new government to uphold guarantees for a former president. However, given the Belarusian context, the criminalization of acts such as violence, threats, defamation, and insult against a former president and their family members risks turning such guarantees into a potential instrument of arbitrary repression.

Secondly, a new Article 375-3, «Unauthorized Dissemination of Information on the Location or Movement of Military Units, Weapons, Military Equipment, and Ammunition» – has been introduced. The penalties under this provision range from a fine, arrest, or up to three years restriction of liberty, to imprisonment for the same period. If the offense is committed by a group, for personal gain, or results in serious consequences, the penalty increases to up to six years in prison.

This new provision is clearly linked to the war in Ukraine and aims to prosecute individuals who report on the movement of Russian military equipment across Belarus. Previously, such actions **were prosecuted** under other articles, including assistance to extremist activities (Article 361-4), participation in an extremist organization (Article 361-1), and treason (Article 356). The first two provisions were introduced with a similar purpose of broadening the formal grounds for politically motivated persecution.

Thirdly, the extraterritorial application of the Belarusian Criminal Code has been significantly expanded. The list of offenses for which individuals can be prosecuted under Belarusian law – regardless of whether they have been charged in a foreign jurisdiction – has grown dramatically. Initially, when this repressive provision (Para. 1-1, Article 6) was introduced, it applied to only three offenses.⁷ Now, with the addition of new offenses, the total has risen to seventeen.⁸ The list covers an extremely broad spectrum of offenses, ranging from the rehabilitation of Nazism, denial of the genocide of the Belarusian people, and the discrediting of Belarus, to organizing activities of a terrorist organization. Crucially, these provisions can be applied to virtually any professional activity, not just that of representatives of democratic forces or opposition figures, but also experts, human rights defenders, and even ordinary engaged Belarusians. **Thus, this legislative expansion significantly strengthens the tools for transnational repression, making it easier to initiate new criminal cases against those in exile.**

Fourthly, it is important to highlight that a large-scale package of amendments has been proposed, aimed at humanizing criminal legislation. Under different circumstances – including those that would allow human rights defenders to operate in the country safely – this could have formed the basis for a meaningful reform in criminal policy. However, in the current climate, alongside these positive changes, new repressive provisions continue to be introduced. While the state implements positive amendments aimed at softening and humanizing punishments⁹, **it refuses to extend these reforms to individuals persecuted for political reasons.** In particular, individuals convicted of «extremism-related offenses» are explicitly excluded from the application of these leniency provisions, such as:

⁷ At the same time, it is important to note that paragraph 1-1 was added to Article 6 as an exception to the general rule of criminal liability for offenses committed abroad. According to this provision, such crimes can be prosecuted if they are recognized as crimes under the criminal law of the country where they were committed and if the person has not been prosecuted in that country. Para. 1-1 established three offenses that enable politically motivated persecution: Articles 373, 374, and 375; all of them are related to the disclosure of state or official secrets.

⁸ Articles 130 – 130-2, 289 – 290-5, 367 – 369-1, 370, 373, 374.

⁹ In particular, a revision of penalties for 97 criminal offenses is proposed. The sanctions for 65 offenses are expected to be supplemented with alternative, more lenient types of punishment. Meanwhile, the sanctions for 32 offenses are to be adjusted either in terms of the severity of the penalties or by introducing additional alternative sanctions, such as fines or deprivation of the right: <https://news.zerkalo.io/economics/78552.html?c>

- Exemption from imprisonment for women and single men raising children under fourteen or children with disabilities, as well as for people with Group I disabilities who have committed a first-time offense that does not pose a significant public danger or is classified as a minor offense; exemption from imprisonment for individuals under the age of eighteen who have committed a first-time offense that does not pose a significant public danger or is classified as a minor offense.
- Abolition of pretrial detention as a preventive measure (this exemption is denied even for individuals suffering from severe illnesses whose offenses did not result in harm to life or health).

This represents yet another stark example of the ongoing departure from the principle of formal equality, a trend that has become increasingly systemic since 2023.

2. Requirements for access to specific professions continue to tighten across various professional groups, driven by the formalization of loyalty requirements to the state. In the last trimester of 2024, new restrictions were introduced for **pedagogical staff working with children**¹⁰, adding to earlier restrictions imposed on tour guides and interpreters (second half of 2023 and second trimester of 2024) and notaries (second trimester of 2024).

In December, the Council of Ministers proposed **amendments** to legislation concerning children's rights¹¹. These amendments include:

- Introduction of a **mandatory «psychological interview»** as part of the hiring process for pedagogical staff. Successfully passing this interview will be a compulsory requirement for obtaining a position. The procedure for conducting these interviews will be determined by the government. This clearly serves as a filter aimed at eliminating potentially disloyal candidates.
- **Expansion of restrictions** for professions related to working with children (Article 27-1 of the Law on the Rights of the Child). This provision already includes a list of offenses for which a criminal conviction disqualifies an individual from holding a teaching position, such as homicide, incitement to suicide, sexual offenses, drug-related

¹⁰ We refer here to a broader category of persons working with children than just schoolteachers. According to the Code of Education, educators include individuals implementing the content of educational programs and upbringing programs, providing scientific and methodological support for education, and/or managing the educational activities of an educational institution or its structural units.

¹¹ The Law «On the Rights of the Child», the Marriage and Family Code, the Education Code, the Law «On Physical Culture and Sports», and the Law «On Guarantees of Social Protection for Orphans, Children Deprived of Parental Care, and Individuals from Among Orphans and Children Deprived of Parental Care».

crimes, and offenses related to pornography¹². The new amendments **add «extremist offenses»** to this list, covering **a broad range of charges** actively used¹³ by authorities for arbitrary, politically motivated persecution (see, for example, analysis of Belarusian NGO Human Constanta from **April to September 2024**). Some of these offenses, classified as extremism for political repression purposes, are non-violent and do not constitute crimes against the person.

- **Changes to eligibility requirements for the pedagogical staff**, as outlined in the Education Code (Article 51), the Law on the Rights of the Child (Article 27-1), and the Law on Physical Culture and Sports (Article 69). Under these changes, all educational institutions will now be **required to inform** applicants for pedagogical positions about legislation concerning the protection of children from extremist offenses. Specifically, candidates must be briefed on relevant provisions of the Criminal Code of Belarus, including Articles 139, 145–147, 154, Parts 2 and 3 of Article 165, Chapter 20, Article 172, Part 2 of Article 173, Articles 181–182, 187, 327–329, 331, 332, 342-1, 343, and 343-1. They will also need to **sign a formal acknowledgment** of the legal consequences for failing to comply with these legislative requirements.

It is important to note that the list of offences requiring such explanations during the hiring process is equivalent to the list of offences that disqualify individuals from holding pedagogical positions due to a criminal conviction. This list was significantly expanded by earlier legislative changes: initially, it included only six offences related to involving minors in crimes, human trafficking, forced labour, and distribution of pornography. Later, it was expanded to 25 offences. Thus, even before the recent amendments added «political» offences – specifically, «crimes of an extremist nature» – such an extensive list was more about intimidating teachers, and through them, children, rather than genuinely preventing juvenile offences and protecting minors. With the addition of «extremist crimes», which are widely used for political persecution, the already repressive nature of these measures has gained a distinctly political dimension. Under current conditions, this further promotes stricter self-censorship among teachers, which, in turn, is passed down to pupils.

Considering all these legislative changes together, a strict political filter is being imposed on educators working with minors. Individuals convicted of any of the listed offences are permanently barred from teaching, **regardless of whether their**

¹² Articles 139, 145–147, 154, parts 2 and 3 of Article 165, Chapter 20, Article 172, part 2 of Article 173, Articles 181–182, 187, 327–329, 331, 332, 342-1, 343, and 343-1.

¹³ Criminal legislation formally defines «extremist crimes» in very broad terms: crimes involving intentional acts classified as extremism under legislative acts, as well as any other crime under the Criminal Code committed on the grounds of racial, national, or religious hatred or discord, political or ideological hostility, or hostility or discord toward a particular social group.

conviction is expunged, overturned, or their criminal prosecution was terminated due to amnesty or the statute of limitations. This means that educators who have already faced repression will under no circumstances be able to return to their profession, facing a **lifetime ban on profession** – at least while Alexander Lukashenko's regime remains in power. The same lifelong ban applies to politically persecuted individuals who have never held pedagogical positions but wish to enter the profession. Graduates of universities whose primary or additional qualification is in teaching will be particularly vulnerable in this context.

Those who do manage to pass this filter may face additional pressure that reinforces self-censorship and cultivates an atmosphere of fear. This, in turn, breeds forced loyalty to the state and places individuals in a position of complete dependence on the will of their superiors.

3. These same **legislative amendments** concerning the protection of children's rights introduce changes to the Law on the Rights of the Child, arbitrarily restricting **children's right to freedom of association** (Article 26). The current restriction on the creation of children's and youth public associations states that such associations must not pursue goals related to the violent overthrow of the constitutional order or the promotion of war, social, national, religious, or racial hatred. The proposed revision of the article introduces repressive grounds for restriction and significantly broadens the scope for arbitrary interpretation of the prohibition on such associations. The new wording states that their activities must not aim to engage in «terrorist or other extremist activities, other acts prohibited by law, or allowing for the possibility of such activities and acts in the course of pursuing the legitimate goals of their establishment».

4. In November, it became known that the State Border Committee (SBC) **announced** an initiative to grant border service officers the authority to conduct fingerprinting of «a certain category of foreigners» upon their entry into Belarus. This proposal was endorsed by the Parliament's standing committees on national security and international affairs. The head of the SBC's legal department stated that «this legislative adjustment is linked to the military-political situation unfolding along our borders». The specific text of the regulations has not been released, so it is challenging to assess the potential human rights violations. However, considering the broader trend of anti-Western rhetoric, the «unfriendly states» doctrine used by the authorities for nearly two years, and the newly revised Military Doctrine, it is reasonable to expect that national security grounds may be manipulated to justify the arbitrary collection of biometric data. At the very least, this would constitute a violation of the right to privacy.

FORMALIZATION OF DISCRIMINATION BASED ON SEXUAL ORIENTATION, GENDER IDENTITY, AND REPRODUCTIVE CHOICE

The campaign against the LGBTQ+ community at the policy level noticeably intensified **in the first half of 2023**. Following repeated official statements on the need to formalise a ban on the «promotion of LGBTQ, non-traditional sexual relations», the first formal legal provision paving the way for systemic discrimination and persecution based on sexual orientation, gender identity, and reproductive choice appeared in Belarusian legislation in early 2024. This was an amendment to the definition of «pornography» in the Ministry of Culture’s regulations.¹⁴

By the end of the year, it had become clear that this trend was continuing and evolving at new levels. Proposed **amendments** to the Law on the Rights of the Child, mentioned earlier, expand the list of information deemed «harmful to the health and development of children» (Article 37-1 of the Law). In addition to the existing phrase «information that discredits the institution of family and marital relations», the new wording includes: **«information aimed at promoting homosexual relationships, gender transition, paedophilia, and childlessness»**.

This means, inter alia, that such information¹⁵ can no longer be distributed without an age restriction label. Notably, the state continues to equate same-sex relationships, gender transition, and childfree beliefs with a criminal offence – paedophilia. This approach was also reflected in the Ministry of Culture’s revised regulations. However, whereas the Ministry’s instruction related specifically to pornography – allowing at least some possibility of limiting the scope of interpretation – the provision in the Law on the Rights of the Child can be interpreted with virtually no boundaries. This will further stigmatise children’s freedom to express their identity and make independent reproductive choices. It will normalise unequal treatment of people with different gender identities and sexual orientations, those who choose not to have children, and anyone associated with such identities, choices, or beliefs.

EXPANSION OF EXTRA-LEGAL, EXTRAJUDICIAL PROCEDURES

In October, a **decree** issued by Alexander Lukashenko altered the powers of the Commission on Return, which was originally **established** in February 2023 «to

¹⁴ See the detailed analysis of the Belarusian Helsinki Committee (currently available in Russian): <https://belhelcom.org/ru/news/bezopasno-li-teper-imet-akkaunt-s-ukazaniem-seksualnoy-orientacii-v-prilozhenii-dlya-znakomstv>

¹⁵ In various formats: media products, printed publications, audiovisual works, phonograms, games – including electronic display games, computer games, and software on any type of media – or as information disseminated via cultural events. The amendments to this list have also included toys reproducing characters from computer games and films.

maintain civil harmony and ensure the constitutional rights and freedoms of Belarusian citizens». Despite this official framing, the Commission functions as a repressive body, engaging in arbitrary extrajudicial interference in procedural matters (see the Belarusian Helsinki Committee’s analysis for [the first half of 2023](#)).

Under these amendments:

- The Commission’s activities have become permanent (originally, its mandate was set to expire on 31 December 2023, later extended to 31 December 2024).
- In addition to handling applications from Belarusian citizens abroad, the Commission’s jurisdiction has been expanded to include applications from «other citizens of the Republic of Belarus, in accordance with a President’s instruction». This means the Commission will now also review applications from individuals residing within Belarus. However, it is unclear what requirements these applications must meet, as the conditions for applications from citizens abroad do not apply to those submitted by individuals on presidential orders. For instance, it is unknown whether an individual must submit a written confession, provide details of their prosecution, or meet other conditions.
- The scope of matters the Commission can decide upon has broadened. It is now authorised to determine whether an individual should be subjected to a review under criminal or administrative procedural law and whether there are grounds for such a review. Additionally, the Commission can adopt «other decisions determined by the implementation of presidential orders».

In effect, we are witnessing both a territorial and functional expansion of a non-judicial, extralegal body with opaque jurisdiction. This body, through an arbitrary and extrajudicial process – lacking due consideration, oversight, or procedural safeguards – decides matters that should properly fall within the competence of courts or other legal authorities.

INDOCTRINATION IN EDUCATION: FORMALISING PRO-GOVERNMENT NARRATIVES ABOUT THE EVENTS OF 2020

With the introduction of a new subject, «The History of Belarus in the Context of World History», new textbooks have been issued for Year 10 and Year 11 students. In an interview, Education Minister A. Ivanets [stated](#) that during the 2024-2025

academic year, a new Year 11 textbook – which includes the modern history of Belarus – will be piloted in certain schools, with full implementation planned for 2025-2026. This textbook presents the events of 2020 as an attempted coup, explaining who was behind it and why.

It is worth recalling that in November 2023, three new textbooks titled «The Genocide of the Belarusian People During the Great Patriotic War» were introduced for primary (Years 1–4), lower secondary (Years 5–9), and upper secondary (Years 10–11) education. These books are part of a large-scale state campaign to reframe the concept of genocide (see the Belarusian Helsinki Committee’s analyses for [January-June](#) and [July-December 2023](#)). [The Year 10–11 textbook](#) draws an explicit parallel between the actions of Nazis and collaborators and the peaceful protests of 2020, claiming that those who participated in the protests «embraced Nazi methods» and used «the Nazi slogan 'Long Live Belarus'».

At the same time, the «genocide of the Belarusian people» textbook, firstly, serves as the basis for an elective course, although in the Belarusian education system, electives are rarely truly voluntary – students are effectively coerced into selecting them. Secondly, it is a product of a state-led campaign, which explains its focus on comparing protesters to Nazis and collaborators.

However, incorporating ideological interpretations of the 2020 events into a history textbook – while history is a core subject of the school curriculum, which directly affects school-leaving and university entrance exams (centralised testing) – raises the level of ideological indoctrination to an entirely new scale.

As of the publication of this analysis, the text of the Year 11 history textbook has not been made publicly available. However, based on A. Ivanets’s statements, the general narrative is already clear. Firstly, it is a tool for pressuring children and their parents, aimed at preventing any protest sentiments, stigmatising protest behaviour, marginalising those with views different from the official position, and further demonising participants in the 2020 protests and other repressed individuals. Secondly, it cultivates division and hostility within Belarusian society, fostering an environment of confrontation. The impact of this indoctrination will depend on how many generations are educated using these textbooks, determining the depth and longevity of the resulting social consequences

All of this constitutes a violation of freedom of expression, the right to education, and children’s cultural rights, as the manipulative presentation of material deliberately distorts their understanding of critical social and political events in the country.

POSITIVE CHANGES IN THE PENSION SYSTEM

During the period under review, several positive changes were introduced in the pension system, which may indirectly relate to the 2025 presidential campaign.

Under [Decree No. 402](#) «On Social Support» issued by A. Lukashenko:

- The restriction on pension payments to working pensioners has been lifted. Previously, under the Law on Pension Provision, the portion of the pension calculated based on earnings exceeding 130% of the average wage was withheld while the person remained employed;
- The decree introduces benefits for calculating insurance contribution periods¹⁶ for women who have given birth to four children and raised them until at least the age of eight. The required insurance contribution period has been reduced from 10 to 5 years;
- Fathers raising a child with a disability until at least the age of eight are now eligible for early retirement, five years before the standard age, provided they have a total work record of at least 25 years and at least 5 years of insurance contribution. This applies if the child's mother has not acquired pension rights, has renounced them in favor of the father, or has passed away;
- Pension payments have been increased for children with disabilities under 18 who have lost their breadwinner.

On the one hand, these changes are positive and fair. However, the authorities' underlying motivation, particularly regarding pensioners, is revealing. While the decree states that its purpose is to «enhance social support», the official commentary on [the president's website](#) notes that this measure «will improve the efficiency of utilising elderly individuals in the labour market». Moreover, in the [second quarter of 2024](#), the authorities significantly reduced pension guarantees for pensioners serving prison sentences, clearly linking this to the state's financial difficulties.

Thus, despite the positive practical effects of these measures, it is evident that the government's approach to social support is consumptive in nature and based not on human welfare but firstly on the needs of the national economy. This again highlights the incoherent, contradictory, and utilitarian approach to implementing social and economic rights – not as obligations the state must fulfill, but as «gifts» that can be given when convenient and withdrawn when necessary.

¹⁶ See *Belarusian Helsinki Committee infographic and analysis on the issue of pensionable service period in Belarus* <https://pensii.belhelcom.org/en/>

II. LAW ENFORCEMENT PRACTICE: VIOLATIONS OF CIVIL, POLITICAL, SOCIAL, ECONOMIC, AND CULTURAL RIGHTS

KEY POINTS:

- Intensification of direct persecution against the LGBTQ+ community.

PERSECUTION OF THE LGBTQ+ COMMUNITY

The intensification of the repressive campaign against the LGBTQ+ community at the legislative level (see the relevant section of this review) was accompanied in the final quarter of 2024 by a new wave of direct persecution. According to **information** from the Human Rights Centre «Viasna», in September 2024 alone, more than 30 queer activists were detained and subjected to violence in various cities across Belarus, including at least 10 transgender individuals, some of whom now face serious charges and the threat of imprisonment. These repressive measures have led to a rise in the number of LGBTQ+ individuals seeking asylum abroad, fearing persecution and denial of essential medical services.

Publicly available **information** suggests that detainees were most commonly charged with «petty hooliganism» (Article 19.1 of the Administrative Offences Code of Belarus) or subscribing to so-called «extremist» resources (Article 19.11 of the Administrative Offences Code). In some cases, security forces were reported to have forcibly subscribed individuals to such resources themselves to create a pretext for detention. Additionally, at least two confirmed cases involved the application of Article 343 of the Criminal Code of Belarus («Production and Distribution of Pornographic Materials»).

NEW BORDER CONTROL PRACTICES

KGB officers **have started summoning** a new category of individuals for questioning at border crossings – parents of those living abroad. Some parents were asked about why their child had left the country and were urged to call them to persuade them to return.

INCREASED WORKPLACE CONTROL

Workplace surveillance, particularly regarding teachers traveling abroad, has intensified as part of the broader trend of workplace control that has escalated since early 2024 (see the Belarusian Helsinki Committee's analyses for [January-April](#) and [May-August 2024](#)).

In October, [reports emerged](#) that some schools had introduced «employee movement logs». Teachers are now required to sign in whenever they leave the school building during free periods between lessons («windows»). In response to journalists' inquiries, the Ministry of Education claimed it was unaware of such initiatives and stated that monitoring teachers was the responsibility of school directors. This suggests that these measures may be local initiatives of individual school principals, likely as a reaction to general directives to tighten control over employees.

It is important to note that the constant climate of surveillance and fear fosters conditions in which local authorities and administrators at various levels take «preventative» measures in line with the broader repressive trend, even when such actions are not explicitly ordered by higher authorities.

NEW DETENTION PRACTICES

In the final quarter of 2024, reports emerged of a new practice used by KGB during arrests: the officers would disable an individual's mobile network connection before detaining them. Security forces [used this tactic](#) during mass arrests in the regions on 31 October.

NEW PATTERNS OF PERSECUTION UNDER EXTREMISM-RELATED ARTICLES

The «Pismo.bel» letter-sending service [has been designated](#) as «extremist». This service was used for sending letters to prisoners, including political prisoners, and was legally registered in Belarus with a contract with the state postal service, «Belpochta». However, journalists report that only 10% of the letters sent through «Pismo.bel» were addressed to political prisoners, with the majority sent to ordinary prisoners convicted under non-political charges (as they statistically outnumber political prisoners in pre-trial detention centres and penal colonies). Nonetheless, it is clear that this measure specifically targets creating additional barriers to communication with political prisoners.

In the first quarter of 2024, we documented other forms of persecution under extremism-related articles, pursued with the same objective. For instance, authorities have classified financial assistance to political prisoners, such as money transfers and parcels, as «facilitating extremist activity». Additionally, under a separate provision, the very use of the term «political prisoner» has been labelled extremist on the grounds of «publicly and knowingly unlawful legitimisation of the actions of persons who have committed crimes, including by granting them the pseudo-status of 'political prisoners'».

The designation of a postal service as «extremist» has serious consequences, opening the door to further persecution of individuals who used the service to send letters. This includes, for example, potential criminal prosecution for 'facilitating extremist activities'.

III. KEY CHANGES IN THE REACTIONS OF INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTIONS CONCERNING THE HUMAN RIGHTS SITUATION IN BELARUS

LITHUANIA'S REFERRAL TO THE INTERNATIONAL CRIMINAL COURT REGARDING THE SITUATION IN BELARUS

On 30 September 2024, Lithuania **submitted** a request to the International Criminal Court (ICC) to investigate alleged crimes against humanity, including deportation, persecution, and other inhumane acts, committed in Belarus from at least May 2020 up to the date of the submission.

The referral argues that some elements of the alleged crimes took place on Lithuanian territory – a State Party to the ICC – which establishes a basis for the Court's jurisdiction, despite Belarus not being a State Party to the Rome Statute. This interpretation follows the ICC Pre-Trial Chamber's **ruling** in the Bangladesh/Myanmar case, where the Court found that it could exercise jurisdiction over the alleged deportation of the Rohingya from Myanmar (a non-State Party) because part of the crime occurred in Bangladesh (a State Party).

However, a State Party referral does not automatically trigger an investigation. The Office of the Prosecutor is currently **conducting** a preliminary examination of the information received, reviewing issues of jurisdiction, admissibility, and the interests of justice to determine whether there are reasonable grounds to initiate an investigation.



WE WILL BE GRATEFUL

FOR YOUR FEEDBACK

EMAIL US OFFICE@BELHELCOM.ORG