

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

## **Summary: Friday 18 December 2020 to Monday 4 January 2021**

Belarus has been rocked by nearly daily protests since early August 2020 when Lukashenka was declared to have won the presidential election. Police have violently cracked down on the protests. There have also been credible reports of torture and ill-treatment, and several people have died.

### **Journalists and freedom of speech**

**Yuliya Slutskaya**, the founder of an independent Belarusian press group, and several associates (Syarhey Alsheuski, Pyatro Slutski, Ala Sharko, and Denys Sokolouski) were taken into custody on 21 December having been charged with tax evasion and related crimes in a case that comes against the backdrop of a continuing state crackdown on dissent. Slutskaya will remain in pretrial custody until at least 22 February. AFP reported that another press club employee, Russian national Sergei Yakupov, had been deported on 31 December.<sup>1</sup>

In 2020, journalists were detained in Belarus 479 times. Fifteen journalists face criminal charges, with nine of them in custody. Journalists served administrative arrest 97 times and spent 1,200 days behind bars. The total amount of fines imposed on journalists and the media is 59,891 rubles (EUR 18,700). Sixty-two journalists were physically injured by the security forces. Four newspapers suspended publication. The state has restricted access to more than 50 socio-political sites and media sites.<sup>2</sup>

### **Political prisoners and politically motivated persecution**

Criminal prosecution remained one of the main types of repression used by the Belarusian authorities during the elections and in the post-electoral period.

A large category of cases are related to **allegations of violence or violent resistance to police officers** (regardless of the disproportionate use of violence against protesters).

A number of defendants were sentenced to real terms of imprisonment under Art. 339 of the Criminal Code (**hooliganism**) for having graffitied about social and political topics. In total, five people were convicted for writing the phrase 'We will not forget', two of whom, Uladzislau

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<sup>1</sup> See RFE: <https://www.rferl.org/a/belarus-press-club-tax-crimes-crackdown/31028786.html>

<sup>2</sup> See BAJ: <https://baj.by/be/analytics/represii-suprac-zhurnalistau-u-2020-godze-tablica-spis-aryshtavanyh>

Hulis and Maksim Pauliushchyk, were imprisoned for two years, while Dzianis Hrakhanau and Ihar Samusenka were sentenced to one and a half years of restriction of liberty and will be sent to an open-type penal facility. Another defendant in the case, Maryia Babovich, was sentenced to 18 months of home-based restrictions.

Another category is made up of criminal cases initiated under the **defamatory articles** of the Criminal Code as well as cases related to the desecration of state symbols (Art. 370). Most of those convicted under these articles were sentenced to restraint of liberty in open-type penal facilities. On 29 December, the Brahın District Court sentenced in a closed court session local resident Aliaksandr Kulaha to two years in prison for insulting Aliaksandr Lukashenka. The sentence is not final and the convict remains free.

The largest number of criminal cases is initiated under Art. 293 (**riots**) and Art. 342 (**organisation or participation in group actions that grossly violate public order**). The human rights group Viasna is aware of, in total, 634 people involved in criminal cases initiated during the election and in the post-election period. 169 people are currently recognised as political prisoners by the Belarusian human rights community. The figure is inconclusive and is constantly increasing.

The prosecutor's offices and the Investigative Committee have not initiated a single criminal case to investigate reports of systemic and widespread torture of detained protesters from 9 to 12 August 2020. No criminal cases were opened and no investigation was conducted into the deaths of three protesters, Henadz Shutau, Aliaksandr Taraikouski, and Raman Bandarenka, as well as the death of Aliaksandr Vikhor.<sup>3</sup>

## **COVID-19 and human rights**

COVID-19 has engulfed prisons in Belarus that are packed with people in custody for demonstrating against the nation's authoritarian president. Some of the protesters who contracted the coronavirus while incarcerated accuse authorities of neglecting or even encouraging infections. Activists describe massively overcrowded cells without proper ventilation or basic amenities and a lack of medical treatment.

Authorities have not released the numbers of prisoners with COVID-19, but rights activists say that thousands of protesters tested positive after they were detained.

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<sup>3</sup> See Viasna, Human Rights Situation in Belarus: December 2020: <http://spring96.org/en/news/101166>

Belarus has reported more than 180,000 confirmed coronavirus cases since the start of the pandemic, but many suspect authorities of manipulating statistics to hide the true scope of the country's outbreak.<sup>4</sup>

### **Useful links**

The human rights centre Viasna has launched a [web-page in English](#), devoted to political prisoners in Belarus. It contains a full list of political prisoners (169 as of 4 January) with short summaries of each case, postal addresses, and a map, as well as tips on how to help.

Human Constanta has launched [web-portal](#) dedicated to the rights of the defence.

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<sup>4</sup> See VoA:

[https://www.voanews.com/covid-19-pandemic/virus-besets-belarus-prisons-filled-presidents-critics?fbclid=IwAR3khKNLXIXJ2-ffaow0YHnP\\_JcOyG7k8L8IJDuoazUI4YErOLc\\_qbHIVKg](https://www.voanews.com/covid-19-pandemic/virus-besets-belarus-prisons-filled-presidents-critics?fbclid=IwAR3khKNLXIXJ2-ffaow0YHnP_JcOyG7k8L8IJDuoazUI4YErOLc_qbHIVKg)