

COUNTRY BRIEF: BELARUS

OVERVIEW OF RECENT RESTRICTIONS TO CIVIC FREEDOMS



(Photo by STRINGER/AFP)



INTRODUCTION

This brief discusses key civic space restrictions documented by the CIVICUS Monitor over the past year, as Belarus marks two years since the start of 2020 election-related protests and the beginning of the two-year-long wave of repression against civil society repression that followed.

The repression of Belarusian civil society that [followed](#) disputed presidential elections in August 2020 continues relentlessly. Over the past year, the authorities have continued to charge and imprison thousands of protesters, designate civil society as ‘extremist’, disband civil society organisations (CSOs) and media outlets and amend laws to allow prosecution of activists who are outside Belarus.

1. CIVIL SOCIETY ACTORS TARGETED AS EXTREMISTS

Over the last year, the authorities in Belarus have used a range of tactics to intimidate and criminalise the work of civil society. As has been [documented](#) in several CIVICUS Monitor updates, the categorisation of civil society personnel and groups as extremist, in a bid to invalidate and criminalise their work, has become an increasingly common practice. Activists, journalists and independent media have been targeted with this classification, which subjects them to prosecution and banning, as discussed below.

i. Activists

Activists who have been vocal against the ongoing repression of rights in Belarus have seen themselves designated as individuals involved in terrorist activities, due to criticising the authorities. Olga Karach, a human rights activist and head of Our Home Foundation, was one of seven people [added](#) to the list of ‘organisations and individuals involved in terrorist activities’ by the Secret Service of Belarus (KGB) in September 2021. She was accused of complicity in ‘preparation for an act of terrorism by a group of persons by prior conspiracy’ after the KGB claimed that the group was going to cause harm to Grigory Azarenko, an STV Stolichnoye Televideniye television journalist, blow up the communication tower of the Russian Navy in Vileika and set fire to logging equipment in the Berezinsky forestry enterprise. Karach has repeatedly criticised the Belarusian leadership, and in mid-August 2021 she called on Belarusian women to take part in the action ‘cursing all those involved in repressions in Belarus’.

ABOUT THE CIVICUS MONITOR

The [CIVICUS Monitor](#), an online platform that tracks threats to civil society in countries across the globe, rates civic space – the space for civil society – in Belarus as “**Closed**”.

The data provides the basis for civic space ratings, which are based on up-to-date information and indicators on the state of freedom of association, peaceful assembly and expression. Countries can be rated as:

CLOSED

REPRESSED

OBSTRUCTED

NARROWED

OPEN



ii. Journalists

Journalists were also targeted with the unfounded labelling of extremism. Journalist Iryna Slaunikava, formerly with Belsat TV, was detained in October 2021 along with her husband Alyaksandr Loyka. They were later [charged](#) with ‘distributing materials listed as ‘extremist’ on Facebook. Similarly, YouTube host Aleh Kanavalau, from the channel Third Region Belarus, was detained by law enforcement officers after he was accused of promoting messages with extremist content and inciting hate speech. Kanavalau took part in the 2020 protest movement and posted videos of the protests on his channel.

iii. Independent media outlets

Belarusian authorities have also continued to put pressure on and ban independent media outlets, enabled by designating some of them as extremist. On 1 November 2021, the BelaPan Press Agency was [declared](#) an extremist organisation and banned. Later, Belsat, an independent TV station, was added to the same list. These outlets had previously reported on the use of excessive force against protesters during the post-election protests of 2020. Similarly, media outlet TUT.BY found itself on the radar of authorities in October 2021, after the Investigative Committee of Belarus [accused](#) its staff members of inciting hatred and [opened](#) investigations against it. TUT.BY, which extensively covered the post-election protests, was [blocked](#) online in May 2021 and banned in June 2021.

2. 765 CSOS LIQUIDATED SINCE AUGUST 2020

The process of liquidating CSOs has continued over the past year in Belarus. As government authorities continue to accuse CSOs of extremist actions, as discussed above, they have leveraged legislative changes to issue liquidation orders. By May 2022, the number of [liquidated](#) CSOs reached 765. Of these, 448 were forcibly liquidated by the authorities and 317 decided to self-liquidate.

One of many cases that stood out was the liquidation of Ecodom (Ecohouse in English), one of the oldest environmental CSOs in Belarus, which was [liquidated](#) in August 2021, after a [flawed process](#) involving an unscheduled inspection by the authorities revealed alleged violations by the CSO. Its liquidation sparked [international action](#) after state parties to the Aarhus Convention suspended Belarus’s rights and privileges under the Convention in response.

3. AMENDMENTS TO LAW FURTHER REIN IN ACTIVISTS

Amendments to domestic law have been made over the last two years by the authorities in order to create new offences that criminalise civil society and its work.

In May 2022, an [amendment](#) to the Criminal Code was tabled in parliament, which if passed will make it possible to prosecute people outside the country’s national borders. This is particularly concerning because many Belarusian civil society personnel fled the country due to pressure from the authorities in the aftermath of the August 2020 protests and have continued to organise solidarity actions from abroad. The [BelaPAN](#) editorial office, for instance, remains outside the country after the outlet was designated as extremist. Exiles face a risk of unfair trials in absentia, and punishment, for their peaceful work while abroad.



Other [restrictive amendments](#) to the Criminal Code and the Administrative Code took effect in January 2022, further criminalising activities by activists. The Criminal Code amendment criminalises the holding of or participation in activities by organisations that have been suspended or liquidated by the authorities, or those that are yet to obtain registration, while the amendment to the Administrative Code criminalises the raising of funds to pay fines for anyone who is prosecuted for violating the Law on Mass Events. This law essentially [bans](#) any form of public protest against the authorities.

4. JAILING OF PROTESTERS A KEY CONCERN AS NUMBERS SOAR

After Russia's invasion of Ukraine, several protests [took place](#) in Belarus as people across different cities and localities opposed Belarus's involvement in the war against Ukraine. Within the first 45 days of the protests, at least 1,500 protesters were [arrested](#) and detained, with some risking the death penalty after they were accused of treason.

During the same period, trials against the people involved in the 2020 post-election protests [continued](#). By 19 July 2022, the [total number](#) of political prisoners in Belarus was 1,254.



RECOMMENDATIONS

To the Belarusian government:

- Immediately and unconditionally release all those who have been arbitrarily detained in relation to the 2020 protests, and more recently the anti-war protests against Russia's invasion of Ukraine, including human rights defenders, journalists and protesters, and drop all the spurious charges made against them.
- Create an independent mechanism to investigate the violence against protesters, members of the political opposition, human rights defenders and journalists and hold perpetrators accountable for these acts.
- Stop the unwarranted criminalisation and designation of civil society actors as extremist.
- Reinstate all CSOs and media outlets that have been disbanded and allow them to continue their work.
- Review the new amendments to the Criminal Code that aim to target activists who are outside the country.
- Create an enabling environment for civil society and the media so they can operate without fear of reprisals, in line with Belarus's international human rights obligations.

To the international community:

- Call for urgent and immediate action to address fundamental rights violations, including the rights to association, peaceful assembly and expression.
- Hold Belarus accountable for its human rights violations and ensure that Belarus respects its national and international human rights obligations.