



Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission Hearing

Human Rights in Belarus Today: Political Prisoners and the Ongoing Crackdown

February 3, 2025 – 2:30 p.m. 2255 Rayburn House Office Building

Statement Submitted by Amnesty International USA

Introduction

Amnesty International USA submits the following statement on human rights in Belarus. This statement is adapted in part from Amnesty International’s latest annual report, [The State of the World’s Human Rights](#), which covers 2024, along with more recent updates.

In January 2025, incumbent President Aliaksandr Lukashenka claimed to have won re-election amid a [climate of total fear and repression](#). Belarusian authorities have continued to crack down on all forms of public criticism and abused the justice system to penalize peaceful dissent. The suppression of independent media and civil society organizations has only escalated, while torture and other ill-treatment are endemic, and impunity prevails. New cases of enforced disappearances continue to occur, while past cases remain unaddressed. The government has sought to repress religious minorities via a compulsory, opaque registration process. The LGBTI community continues to face harassment, while refugees and migrants have been forced across borders with the EU.

Freedom of expression, association and assembly

Freedom of expression remains severely curtailed. The official list of online, printed and broadcast materials labelled by the authorities as containing “extremist content” continues to grow. Each month, hundreds of individuals are arbitrarily added to the “List of persons involved in extremist activities”, which comprised 6,127 people as of December 2025. At the end of the year, 28 media workers were in prison for their professional activity.

According to the NGO Human Rights Center Viasna, the authorities stepped up their efforts to identify and prosecute participants in the peaceful protests of 2020 as the statute of limitations for the charge used was expiring. Around 200 people were under criminal investigation in the capital Minsk alone, facing prison terms and fines. Additionally, authorities reported that they were bringing charges for supporting extremist activity against over 200 Belarusian protesters who had taken part in protests abroad in March 2025, celebrated as Freedom Day by pro-democracy activists.

As of December 2025, 99 civil society organizations, including independent NGOs and trade unions, had been closed or opted to self-dissolve during the year, due to severe legislative restrictions, interference by the authorities and financial constraints.

Arbitrary detention, unfair trials, and enforced disappearances

The authorities continued to abuse the justice system to silence and punish dissent and opposition. Hundreds of individuals, including human rights defenders, other activists, media workers and lawyers, continued to serve long prison sentences imposed following unfair, politically motivated trials. Over 170 victims of politically motivated imprisonment were released early, between June and December, as part of a U.S.-negotiated deal. Among them were Nobel Prize winner Ales Bialiatski, political opposition leaders Maryia Kalesnikava and Viktor Babaryka, and several other high-profile prisoners, some having been long held incommunicado.

However, more individuals continued to be arbitrarily prosecuted and imprisoned. At least 1,149 victims of politically motivated prosecution remain in Belarusian prisons and must be immediately and unconditionally released. Among them are Marfa Rabkova and Valiantsin Stefanovich of Human Rights Center Viasna, and Nasta Loika of Human Constanta, both well-respected human rights organizations that have been arbitrarily banned.

[Mikalai Statkevich](#) was released on September 11, 2025, as part of a political deal in which 52 prisoners were released in exchange for the lifting of U.S. sanctions on the Belarusian state airline Belavia. Belarusian authorities attempted to exile the entire group the next day, transporting them to the Lithuanian border. However, Statkevich refused to leave Belarus, declaring “I will keep fighting!” before forcing his way out of the bus in which he was being transported alongside other former prisoners. CCTV footage shows him being detained again by masked men. Statkevich’s whereabouts remain unknown and must be immediately disclosed, his safety guaranteed, and his continued unlawful detention brought to an end.

Statkevich and the other victims of politically motivated prosecution who were released as part of the deal should have never been imprisoned in the first place, nor denied their right to stay in their country. Their forced exile as part of the deal violated the formerly imprisoned people's right to freedom of movement, which is, above all, about every person's right to be able to freely leave and return to their country. Yet none of the released prisoners were asked about their choices, nor made aware of their release before it happened. In at least one case, a formerly imprisoned person has, in conversation with Amnesty International, despaired that they could have completed their sentence in full, and been able to remain in their country, with their family. Instead, they were exiled, without documents, denied their right to return to Belarus, and have no recourse. Though

not representing a majority opinion, Amnesty International has since been made aware of other formerly imprisoned people with similar sentiments.

There is no statute of limitations on justice for enforced disappearances, and those committed against prominent opposition figures and their associates in 1999-2000 must also be addressed. The fates and whereabouts of these individuals -- political activists Yury Zakharenka and Viktor Hanchar, businessman Anatol Krasouski, and journalist Zmitser Zavadski -- are unknown. In the years following their disappearances, further disturbing details and allegations have been reported, including that they may have been extrajudicially executed and secretly buried, and that this may have been based on direct orders from the most senior political level. Amnesty International demands a prompt, effective, impartial investigation, and the disclosure of all details relating to their enforced disappearances, as well as justice and full reparations in every case.

Freedom of religion and belief

Persecution of religious organizations and clergy who were not aligned with the authorities has continued, in particular through the compulsory use of an opaque annual re-registration process. In July, any religious organizations that had not undergone re-registration within the previous 12-month period became subject to court-ordered closure.

Refugees' and migrants' rights

Belarus's authorities have continued their practice of forcing refugees and migrants across its border with the EU. According to a joint study by Oxfam and its Polish partner Egala, people pushed back to Belarus were subjected to physical violence and deprived of water, food, shelter and medical care. Cases of sexual abuse were reported.

LGBTI people's rights

The LGBTI community faces harassment, including arbitrary arrests, mostly for purported "minor hooliganism" and subscription to "extremist" materials, but also for "production and distribution of pornographic materials" (a criminal offence if committed repeatedly). In 2024, the Ministry of Culture updated the official definition of pornography by adding "non-traditional sexual relations and/or sexual behavior", clarifying that it included, among other things, consensual same-sex and bisexual relationships.

Recommendations

Congress should:

- Urge the Trump Administration to use all diplomatic levers to facilitate and sustain the release of all prisoners sentenced through unfair and politically-motivated trials.

- Demand an end to forced exile and the provision of voluntary repatriation without threat of rearrest for those exiled as part of all past and future prisoner release deals.
- Urge the Trump Administration to address the enforced disappearance of Mikalai Statkevich with Belarus authorities, pushing them to disclose his whereabouts immediately, guarantee his safety, and bring his continued unlawful detention to an end. His disappearance is not only a gross violation of human rights but also runs afoul of the 2025 political deal for sanctions relief between the U.S. government and the government of Belarus.
- Demand a prompt, effective, impartial investigation of, and the disclosure of all details relating to, the enforced disappearances of political activists Yury Zakharanka and Viktor Hanchar, businessman Anatol Krasouski, and journalist Zmitser Zavadski, as well as justice and full reparations in every case.
- Publicly demand that the Belarusian government respect the right to freedom of religion and belief of all groups, curtail the practice of forcing refugees and migrants across the border with the EU, and repeal or amend all laws and policies that discriminate against LGBTI people's rights.
- Demand justice and accountability for every person, no matter how senior, directly involved or complicit in human rights violations in Belarus. In particular, those involved or complicit in arbitrary detention, unlawful deprivation of liberty, torture and other ill-treatment, unfair trial, and enforced disappearance, must be held accountable in fair trial proceedings and without recourse to the death penalty.

For more information or questions, please contact Ben Linden at blinden@aiusa.org.