

POLICY BRIEF

BELARUS' POLITICAL PRISONERS: WHAT SHOULD BE DONE TO FREE THEM?

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CONTRIBUTORS:

OXFORD BELARUS OBSERVATORY: The Oxford Belarus Observatory (OBO) seeks to raise awareness and knowledge of contemporary issues and challenges facing Belarus today, including those related to the specifics of the COVID-19 pandemic and its enduring consequences. Most specifically, employing the insights unique to Area Studies, OBO will support and promote evidence-based policymaking, knowledge brokering and stakeholder interaction through:

- the comprehensive and rigorous analysis of the impact of and responses to COVID-19 in Belarus;
- the analysis of social, economic, political, cultural and historical issues which shape contemporary Belarus and which can inform external understanding;
- engagement, wherever possible, with domestic stakeholders;
- the production of timely and reliable evidence in response to both real domestic policy needs but also external stakeholder initiatives; and
- the communication of evidence in ways that are useful to, and usable by, policy-makers, national and international civil society, the media and other non-academic stakeholders.

OST RESEARCH CENTRE: OST Research Centre is a department of the **OFFICE OF SVIATLANA TSIKHANOUSKAYA (OST)**. The OST is a democratic representative body of the Belarusian people aiming to achieve a national dialogue, ensure a peaceful transfer of power, and hold new democratic elections. The Office promotes and advocates for democratic changes in Belarus. OST Research Centre conducts a range of analytical activities, including expert discussions, research on the Belarusian agenda, and data analysis.

IGSD, UNIVERSITY OF WARWICK: Institute for Global Sustainable Development (IGSD) is a world-leading research institute with a focus on resilience and sustainable governance. IGSD supports the work of OBO by providing expertise, networks and advocacy for this initiative. It also complements the OBO expertise through its own projects which focus on **Resilience in Ukraine** from a comparative perspective (2022-23); the **GCRF COMPASS+** project on Central Eurasia (2022-23), the EU Horizon project **SHAPEDEM** focusing on the eastern neighbourhood and Belarus in particular (2022-25), and DFF **AGMOW** project (SDU, 2023-26) focusing on Russia. IGSD has expertise from life science, humanities and social sciences and champions transdisciplinary research for transformative change.

IN BELARUS!

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This policy brief focuses on Belarus' political prisoners. The Lukashenka regime has increased pressure on civil society, and suppressed all forms of opposition in Belarus over the years. The 2020 rigged elections and ensuing protests led to a massive increase in political prisoners in the country. This policy brief examines the current situation of Belarus' political prisoners and explores ways in which they might be freed. The final section concludes with policy recommendations.

BACKGROUND

According to the Belarusian human rights centre Viasna, as of March 2023 around 1,500 Belarusians remain behind bars on clearly politically motivated grounds¹. This number is likely to be much higher and includes men and women, minors and the elderly, as well as foreign citizens. Political prisoners are being held in horrific conditions, and their lives and health are in serious danger². Lukashenka's regime uses the incarceration of democratically-minded active Belarusians to foster fear amongst, and to keep pressure on, the local population, aiming to break their pro-democracy spirit, and to destroy horizontal connections in Belarusian society. The release of political prisoners is one of the central priorities of the United Belarusian democratic forces and civic activists. Despite much discussion on how to achieve this vital goal, there is still no clear-cut pathway.

While political prisoners can only be released by Minsk, what kind of leverage might the international community, civic activists and Belarusian democratic politicians exert in order to put pressure on the regime? Is there space for negotiations regarding political prisoners in Belarus? What support do political prisoners and their families need?

These and other questions were discussed at the expert webinar jointly convened by the Research Centre of [Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya Office \(OST Research Centre\)](#), [the Oxford Belarus Observatory](#) and [IGSD University of Warwick](#) (Institute for Global Sustainable Development) on the 16th February 2023. The present policy brief is based on this event, which was moderated by Katsiaryna Lozka, Research Fellow at the Oxford Belarus Observatory, and the speakers of the event included Olga Gorbunova, Social Affairs Representative of the United Transitional Cabinet of Belarus; Ken McBain, UK Representative, Libereco; and Selbi Durdiyeva, Postdoctoral Researcher, Postcolonial Hierarchies in Peace and Conflict, Center for Conflict Studies, Philipps University, Marburg.

LINKS AND INFORMATION

1. The information about political prisoners is regularly updated on the website of Viasna, please see: [VISIT WEBSITE](#)
2. See a recent report on the state of V. Babariko, an imprisoned presidential hopeful, who has been severely beaten and ended up in prison with life threatening health complications ([SEE MORE HERE](#), 27 April 23). A similar situation with Maria Kalesnikava took place in November 2022 ([SEE HERE](#)) as a result of which she was required to undergo serious surgery

BELARUS' POLITICAL PRISONERS: WHAT SHOULD BE DONE TO FREE THEM?

ANALYSIS OF THE ISSUE

Since the fraudulent elections of 2020, tens of thousands of Belarusians have been detained and subjected to inhuman treatment and torture in detention centres and prisons. Since 2022, at least 17 people have been detained in Belarus every day for their opposition to the regime and support for Ukraine in the context of Russia's aggression¹. Tragically, in 2021 political prisoner Vitold Ashurak² died as a result of the intolerable conditions in which he was held and the beatings to which he was subjected. In addition, Belarusian blogger Ihar Losik³ and several others have attempted suicide whilst incarcerated, and there are frequent reports of political prisoners being hospitalised due to inhumane treatment. One of the most famous Belarusian female leaders, Maria Kalesnikava, a political prisoner, had to undergo an urgent medical procedure due to deteriorating health conditions. Currently, the number of political prisoners includes at least 74 people with disabilities and serious illnesses. There are at least 25 pensioners, dozens of minors, parents and mothers of young children⁴. The situation of political prisoners in Belarus, their illegal and ungrounded detention, torture, and mistreatment, is thus a critical issue that urgently requires attention and support for the individuals concerned and their families.

This policy brief aims to shed light on the issue of political prisoners in Belarus. First, to provide an international perspective on the issue of political prisoners in the country, the following sections examine how the international community has responded to similar situations in the past, given that Belarus has a history of political prisoners. Next, the brief outlines some existing international initiatives in support of political prisoners. Third, due to the significant level of crimes, the discussion will also touch upon the issue of transitional justice and outline what should be done now by Belarusian civil society and the international community to address this urgent issue. Finally, the brief will offer some recommendations.

LINKS AND INFORMATION

1. "Belarus, 2022: a minimum of 17 people per day were detained on a politically motivated basis! At least 6,381 have been detained in the course of the year. Information about repressions in the years 2020-2022", People's Embassies of Belarus, 10 January 2023, [READ HERE](#)
2. For more information: Vitold Ashurak, Viasna, [VISIT WEBSITE](#)
3. Ihar Losik attempted suicide for the second time while in custody, Voice of Belarus, 2023, [READ HERE](#)
4. Political prisoners in Belarus in 2022. Infographics, Viasna, 9 January 2023, [VISIT WEBSITE](#)

REPRESSION
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BELARUS' POLITICAL PRISONERS: WHAT SHOULD BE DONE TO FREE THEM?

THE INTERNATIONAL APPROACH TO POLITICAL PRISONERS IN BELARUS: LESSONS FROM THE PAST

The issue of political prisoners has been a recurring problem in the political life of Belarus, particularly in the aftermath of the 2006 and 2010 presidential elections that were followed by mass protests. These events led to the unlawful detention of numerous individuals who were deemed to express dissent or opposition towards the ruling regime. During the previous electoral cycles, political prisoners were instrumentalised as a bargaining chip by the Lukashenka regime in its relations with the West. Typically, in response to crackdowns and violations of electoral codes, Western countries imposed sanctions, and subsequently, the West agreed to partially lift them in exchange for the release of political prisoners¹. However, rehabilitation for these individuals never followed, and Lukashenka's regime has continued to play according to their own rules of the game.

In contrast, the situation took a different turn after the 2020 presidential election in Belarus, which was marred by election fraud and unprecedented violence unleashed by the regime on peaceful protestors, which subsequently sparked the highest level of mass mobilisation in the country's modern history. The regime brutally suppressed the peaceful protests, leading to the detention of thousands of individuals and the deaths of some protestors during the demonstrations². The emergence of the most likely winner of the 2020 "elections" – Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya – marked a significant shift in the country's political landscape. Tsikhanouskaya gained international recognition and support, becoming a representative and a symbol of the Belarusian people's desire for change. Her campaign's success, and the regime's violent response to it, led to a marked difference in the international response to the regime's actions. Western countries and human rights organisations unequivocally condemned the regime's actions and demanded the immediate release of political prisoners, and Belarusian society and the opposition made it clear that they did not want political prisoners to be used as a bargaining chip in Lukashenka's relations with the West again.

Meanwhile, certain countries pursued bilateral negotiations with the Lukashenka regime to secure the release of political prisoners in exchange for concessions. For example, Switzerland managed to achieve the release of a Swiss citizen Natalia Hersche after the Swiss Ambassador to Minsk, Kristina Gonegger, presented letters of credence to Lukashenka in 2022³. However, most countries refrained from such policies.

Within Belarusian society, there is an ongoing heartfelt debate regarding the most effective and ethically appropriate methods for addressing the issue of political prisoners, taking into account not only political considerations but also moral ones. However, the extent to which the position of the Belarusian leaders abroad or the international community can influence the

BELARUS' POLITICAL PRISONERS: WHAT SHOULD BE DONE TO FREE THEM?

situation is uncertain, as the responsibility for releasing political prisoners lies solely with the authorities in Minsk. In this context, Lukashenka's regime has not shown any interest in negotiating the release of political prisoners and does not intend to release them (en masse).

LINKS AND INFORMATION

1. Miadzvetskaya, Yuliya, 2022. Designing sanctions: lessons learnt from EU sanctions against Belarus, GMF, [VISIT WEBSITE](#)
2. Belarus report finds systematic, widespread and gross human rights violations, Office of the UN High, [VISIT WEBSITE](#)
3. For the first time after the rigged elections of 2020, the Western ambassador presented the letters of credence to Lukashenka, Daily News, 30 September 2022, [READ HERE](#)

INITIATIVES IN SUPPORT OF POLITICAL PRISONERS: A BRIEF OVERVIEW

In support of the Belarusian political prisoners, there are a number of international and national programmes that have been initiated.

One of them is the godparent program, which was launched in early 2020 by the Partnership for Human Rights Lebereco¹ when the first series of arrests began in Belarus. The aim of this programme is to get European parliamentarians to align with and support individual political prisoners. It started slowly, but with the events of August 2020 and the subsequent increase in the number of political prisoners, it gained momentum. The godparent programme involves inviting a European Parliamentarian to become a godparent of an individual political prisoner. These Parliamentarians can use media, their social media, and political platforms to highlight the situation of the political prisoner. Currently, the programme has gathered support from 325 European parliamentarians representing several European countries and the European Parliament. Additionally, online meetings have been arranged between the parliamentarians and families of political prisoners to make them more familiar with the situation and provide an update about possible support mechanisms.

In addition to the godparent programme, there are various other initiatives aimed at supporting political prisoners in Belarus, both from the international community and within Belarusian society. One such initiative involves signing petitions calling for the release of political prisoners and increasing their visibility. Another involves writing letters of support to political prisoners, with websites providing templates and guidance on how to do so effectively². Fundraising campaigns to support the families of the political prisoners also abound. These actions help to raise awareness and put pressure on the Belarusian authorities to release political prisoners.

Amid the ongoing situation of unprecedented political repression in Belarus, people inside the country and in the diaspora have been actively supporting political prisoners and their families. One such way is by preparing par-

BELARUS' POLITICAL PRISONERS: WHAT SHOULD BE DONE TO FREE THEM?

cels for prisoners in custody. This includes providing them with essential items such as food and warm clothing. Additionally, people both inside and outside Belarus have been providing financial support to the families of political prisoners, as they often face financial difficulties due to the loss of income and the costs associated with legal fees.

LINKS AND INFORMATION

1. Godparenthood for political prisoners in Belarus, Libereco, [VISIT WEBSITE](#)
2. How you can support political prisoners in Belarus, Libereco, [VISIT WEBSITE](#)

TRANSITIONAL JUSTICE

In addition to immediate actions to support and advocate for political prisoners, another important issue is the need for transitional justice measures to address the broader human rights violations in Belarus now and in the future.

One important action that can be and is already being taken is the clear documentation of all violations. In this regard, the mass crimes of the Lukashenka regime are being recorded extensively. This documentation is critical not only for legal purposes but also for ethical reasons, to avoid further traumatising victims. In certain cases, documentation can even serve as a substitute for formal, legal trial, although it is unclear whether countries in the EU that express interest in criminal trials will pursue this approach. If they do, these trials will likely focus on international crimes, most likely torture, and be conducted under universal jurisdiction.

Taking a long-term perspective, it is crucial that transitional justice measures involve a historical inquiry. This means that they should be backdated to include crimes committed under the Soviet Union, but also investigate the crimes of the Lukashenka dictatorship in earlier periods, including political and economic crimes as well as corruption. The scale of repressions in Belarus indicates that many people associated with the Lukashenka regime are responsible for crimes against political prisoners. It does not only involve organisations such as the State Security Committee and GUBOP [The Main Directorate for Combating Organized Crime and Corruption of the MVD of the Republic of Belarus]. It also involves people working for the regime who played a role in the process or turned a blind eye to widespread repression, detention or torture. Civil society and human rights organisations should continue to contribute to investigations, advocating for the documentation and prosecution of all crimes. Simultaneously, transitional justice measures should be inclusive and democratically designed, meaning that the victims should be consulted. There are legitimate security issues as political prisoners and their families face significant risks and pressure from the regime.

BELARUS' POLITICAL PRISONERS: WHAT SHOULD BE DONE TO FREE THEM?

CONCLUSIONS

The situation of political prisoners in Belarus is a critical human rights issue that demands urgent attention and action from the international community, Belarusian democratic politicians and civil society. While immediate efforts must be made to advocate for the release of political prisoners and provide support for their families, it is also important to consider long-term transitional justice measures to hold those responsible accountable for their crimes. Civil society and human rights organisations play a crucial role in documenting and advocating for justice, and it is essential to continue supporting their efforts. Ultimately, the release of political prisoners and the establishment of transitional justice measures are crucial steps towards a more democratic and just Belarus. Based on the analysis in this brief three recommendations follow:

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1** The godparent initiative which currently matches parliamentarians with political prisoners in Belarus should be extended to cover other people, such as artists, sportsmen and others. This would help make the gravity of the situation more visible and widespread.
- 2** While acknowledging that it is extremely difficult, the families, relatives, and friends of political prisoners remaining behind bars should be supported through all mechanisms available.
- 3** The international community should actively support an initiative of the Belarusian Democratic forces to establish a Fund for Belarusian political prisoners and their families. This Fund would help the Belarusians inside the country, for instance, by providing financial support to their families and children, but also finance rehabilitation stays for political prisoners upon their release.
- 4** While it is difficult to provide effective help to those in prison, it is important to assist those political prisoners who get released or help them to evacuate from Belarus. Assisting EU countries could establish programmes for these people to get qualified medical care and rehabilitation.
- 5** In the post-Lukashenka period, a Truth Commission, chaired by a respected person from society, could be an option for Belarus as part of the transitional justice process. People who held Office during the Lukashenka regime and publicly did not denounce the regime could come forward in front of that Commission. In this regard, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa might serve as a useful example.

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