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Committee on Legal Affairs and Human Rights

Situation of political prisoners in Russia and Belarus

Information Note

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1. Summary

1. This is the first Information Note published since my appointment as the General Rapporteur for political prisoners. Given the scope of my mandate, I have decided to begin the overview of the situation of political prisoners with Russia and Belarus, where systemic repression has become a basic tool to silence dissent, restrict civil society space and criminalise opposition against both regimes.

2. In Russia, the government has maintained its campaign of harassment of anti-war protesters, human rights defenders, and LGBTQ+ individuals. According to OVD-Info, one of the most reputed Russian human rights non-governmental organisations, as of 24 March 2025 there were 1,566 political prisoners in Russia. The most frequent criminal charges used in political persecutions leading to imprisonment are: organisation and participation in the activities of a terrorist organisation, organisation of the activities of an extremist organisation, public incitement to terrorist activities, commission of a terrorist act, forcible seizure of power or forcible retention of power, public dissemination of knowingly false information about the armed forces of the Russian Federation, participation in mass riots, facilitation of terrorist activities, use of violence against a representative of authority, high treason, unlawful acquisition, transfer, sale, storage, transport, shipping, forwarding or carrying of explosives or explosive devices, organisation and participation in a terrorist association, public incitement to carry out extremist activities, rehabilitation of Nazism, unlawful acquisition, transfer, sale, storage, transport, forwarding or carrying of weapons, main parts of firearms and ammunition.¹

3. In Belarus, the situation is equally dire with the Lukashenka regime targeting not only dissidents, but also their relatives. According to a report of 14 February 2025, prepared by the UN Group of Independent Experts on the Human Rights Situation in Belarus, Belarusian authorities have committed widespread human rights violations against the country's civilian population, some amounting to crimes against humanity of imprisonment and persecution on political grounds, as part of a brutal effort to quash all opposition to the rule of Mr Lukashenka.² According to the Belarusian human rights organisation Viasna, as of March 2025 there were 1,201 political prisoners, including more than 150 women in Belarus.³ Trumped-up charges used to prosecute critics of the regime include: defamation, inciting enmity against the social group of law enforcement officers, violent acts or threats of violence against law enforcement officers, extremism, terrorism.⁴

* Document declassified by the Committee on 7 April 2025.

¹ <https://repression.info/criminal/how-many-people-are-imprisoned-today>.

² <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2025/02/belarus-human-rights-violations-remain-rampant-some-amounting-crimes-against?sub-site=HRC>.

³ <https://spring96.org/en/news/117568>.

⁴ <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2024/country-chapters/belarus>.

4. This Information Note will provide further details about the situation of political prisoners in Russia and Belarus, including the conditions of their detention and the charges commonly used to prosecute them, and take stock of the recent factual developments relevant to my mandate.

5. This note covers events up to March 2025.

2. My mandate

6. According to the terms of reference of the general rapporteur on political prisoners in Europe, the general rapporteur is mandated to intervene in matters relating to alleged cases of politically motivated arrests and criminal prosecutions in Europe and in other countries having an observer or cooperative status with the Council of Europe or the Parliamentary Assembly.⁵ The general rapporteur shall follow up previous resolutions of the Assembly on issues related to political prisoners and report periodically to the Committee on Legal Affairs and Human Rights. On 28 January 2025, the Committee appointed me as the general rapporteur. I am grateful to my predecessor, Ms Sunna Ævarsdóttir (Iceland, SOC), for her regular interventions and public statements concerning reported cases of political prisoners in Europe (including in Russia and in Belarus).

7. Assembly Resolution 1900 (2012) establishes the following definition of “political prisoner”:

“A person deprived of his or her personal liberty is to be regarded as a “political prisoner”:

a. if the detention has been imposed in violation of one of the fundamental guarantees set out in the European Convention on Human Rights and its Protocols, in particular freedom of thought, conscience and religion, freedom of expression and information, freedom of assembly and association;

b. if the detention has been imposed for purely political reasons without connection to any offence;

c. if, for political motives, the length of the detention or its conditions are clearly out of proportion to the offence the person has been found guilty of or is suspected of;

d. if, for political motives, he or she is detained in a discriminatory manner as compared to other persons; or,

e. if the detention is the result of proceedings which were clearly unfair and this appears to be connected with political motives of the authorities.”

8. This definition originated in the work conducted in 2001 by the Council of Europe Secretary General’s independent experts on cases of political prisoners in Armenia and Azerbaijan, following those countries’ commitments upon accession to the Council of Europe to release all political prisoners.⁶ It has also been endorsed by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) in the 2014 Baku Declaration⁷ and is a reference for the work of civil society in many countries. It is important to recall that any form or duration of deprivation of liberty, be it imprisonment following conviction, pre-trial detention, detention with a view to extradition⁸, administrative detention or even house arrest, may be covered by the definition of ‘political prisoner’. The finding by the ECtHR in favour of a person deprived of his or her liberty of a violation of Article 5 (right to liberty) in conjunction with Article 18 (limitation on use of restriction of rights) of the European Convention on Human Rights is a strong indication that such a person is a “political prisoner”.

3. Belarus

⁵ <https://rm.coe.int/mandate-general-rapporteur-on-political-prisoners-in-europe/1680ac99d1>.

⁶ See “Addendum to the Report of the Independent Experts”, SG/Inf (2001)34 Addendum I, 24 October 2001.

⁷ <https://www.oscepa.org/en/documents/annual-sessions/2014-baku/declaration-2/2540-2014-baku-declaration-eng/file>.

⁸ See, for example, [Resolution 2571 \(2024\)](#) “The detention and conviction of Julian Assange and their chilling effects on human rights”.

9. In the past, the Assembly has condemned the repression of dissent in Belarus, calling for the immediate and unconditional release of all political prisoners and an end to torture and inhuman treatment. It highlighted the systematic persecution following the 2020 protests against electoral fraud, noting that many political prisoners remained in detention under dire conditions, including incommunicado detention and lacking access medical care. The Assembly deplored the Belarusian regime's failure to comply with international human rights standards and demanded free and fair elections while supporting Belarusian democratic forces led by Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya. It further called on member States to intensify support for Belarusians fleeing persecution, provide socio-economic assistance, and refuse extradition requests that could be considered to be politically motivated.⁹

10. As of 25 March 2025, Viasna reported that Belarus had 1,201 political prisoners, including more than 150 women. Since May 2020, more than 3,776 individuals have been reported to be imprisoned on politically motivated charges, with approximately 2,542 individuals – among them 541 women – having since been released, due to a variety of reasons, including having served their sentences. Overall, Viasna registered 6,560 persons having been convicted in politically motivated criminal cases.¹⁰

11. Prisoners are often required to sign an official plea for pardon, which includes an admission of guilt. Political prisoners are being routinely held incommunicado (including Siarhei Tsikhanouski, who is believed to have been subjected to an enforced disappearance¹¹), subjected to torture, inhuman treatment and isolation in punishment cells, and other forms of ill-treatment. Viasna's reports highlight practices employed by the Belarusian regime, including death threats, severe beatings during arrests and detention, and suffocation techniques such as placing plastic bags over detainees' heads. Additionally, detainees are often forcibly exposed to extreme cold without adequate clothing or bedding, as well as prolonged confinement in overcrowded and unsanitary conditions. Prisoners have been subjected to psychological abuse, including threats, humiliation, and intimidation, contributing to extreme mental distress.¹² Amnesty International reports deaths of at least seven people while in detention since 2020, linking those deaths to the conditions of detention and inadequate medical care.¹³

12. Political prisoners in Belarusian penal colonies are subjected to forced labour. This labour often takes place in state-run factories, agricultural fields, and construction sites, where workers face harsh and exploitative conditions. Reports indicate repeated cases of malnutrition, unsafe working environments, and insufficient access to medical care in these facilities.¹⁴

13. In the run-up to the January 2025 so-called presidential elections, Belarusian authorities have intensified the use of preventative arrests as a tool of repression, targeting not only political activists but also their families. Reports indicate that more than 100 relatives of political prisoners have been detained, a tactic seemingly aimed at exerting pressure on dissidents and suppressing any potential for a mobilisation of democratic forces. Furthermore, authorities have launched criminal proceedings against 45 opposition activists, accusing them of plotting to seize power or disrupt the elections.¹⁵

14. The regime of Mr Lukashenka has intensified its crackdown on citizens supporting Ukraine, particularly those involved in military efforts against the Russian invaders. This repression includes a range of punitive actions, including criminal prosecutions and severe penalties, aimed at deterring Belarusians from joining or aiding the Ukrainian Armed Forces. At least 209 individuals, including 38 women, have been convicted in Belarus for actions considered to be in support of Ukraine. This includes

⁹ [Resolution 2541 \(2024\)](#) "The arbitrary detention of Vladimir Kara-Murza and the systematic persecution of anti-war protesters in the Russian Federation and Belarus", [Resolution 2587 \(2025\)](#) "The urgent need for free and fair elections in Belarus".

¹⁰ <https://spring96.org/en/news/117568>.

¹¹ <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2025/03/belarus-experts-mark-second-anniversary-enforced-disappearance-siarhei>.

¹² <https://spring96.org/en/news/117447>.

¹³ <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/eur49/8966/2025/en/>.

¹⁴ <https://kyivindependent.com/belarusian-political-prisoners-recount-horrors-they-endured-in-lukashenkos-prisons/>.

¹⁵ <https://apnews.com/article/belarus-lukashenko-crackdown-opposition-arrests-717ffa658d17f3bd262ab1a878bab702>.

at least 41 people convicted for donations to Belarusian volunteers, as well as charges related to intent to join the Ukrainian armed forces and information sharing.¹⁶

15. Notably, on 25 September 2024, the Supreme Court of Belarus designated the Kastuś Kalinoŭski Regiment – a unit of Belarusian volunteers supporting Ukraine – as a terrorist organisation. This classification subjects its members and affiliates to severe criminal charges, including the possibility of capital punishment. In addition, Belarusian authorities have actively prosecuted Ukrainian nationals, with at least 13 Ukrainian citizens convicted on charges such as espionage and sabotage attempts.¹⁷ A Belarusian opposition member and former fighter with the Kastuś Kalinoŭski Regiment, Vasil Verameichyk, was detained in Vietnam and extradited to Belarus in November 2024, where he faces charges related to “terrorist activity” that could result in the death penalty being imposed.¹⁸

16. Among those who remain imprisoned are Nobel Peace Prize laureate Ales Bialiatski, vice-president of the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH) Valiantsin Stefanovic, and human rights lawyer Uladzimir Labkovich. On the second anniversary of their sentencing, Belarusian human rights organisations issued a joint statement calling their imprisonment “the embodiment of the destructive policy of the Aliksandr Lukashenka’s regime towards representatives of civil society, including dissidents and political opponents”.¹⁹

17. A leading opposition figure and former campaign manager for Viktor Babaryka, Maria Kalesnikava was held incommunicado for over two years. She was only permitted a visit from her father in November 2024, marking her first contact with the outside world since late 2022. She had been denied all communication with her family and legal representatives, raising serious concerns about her health and safety in prison.²⁰

18. In January 2025, images of Viktor Babaryka – once a leading presidential contender – surfaced for the first time in nearly two years. The footage, released by pro-government blogger Raman Pratasevich, showed Mr Babaryka visibly thinner and wearing a prison uniform with a yellow tag, indicating his status as a political prisoner.²¹ Mr Pratasevich used to be one of the most outspoken critics of Mr Lukashenka, living in exile until his Ryanair flight from Athens to Vilnius was forced to make an emergency landing in Minsk under false pretences in May 2021. Mr Pratasevich was then arrested and sentenced to eight years’ imprisonment for insulting Mr Lukashenka but was later pardoned and is now seen as compliant with the regime (likely as a result of torture or psychological pressure).²²

4. The situation in the Russian Federation

19. As of 25 March 2025, at least 1,566 remain imprisoned on politically motivated charges.²³ They are usually prosecuted for anti-war activities, with dozens sentenced to long prison terms. Hundreds more face administrative fines, harassment, and surveillance for minor acts of protest, such as displaying anti-war symbols or posting critical statements on social media while the judiciary has played a key role in legitimising these repressive measures, imposing harsh sentences on those convicted of “discrediting the Russian army” or “justifying terrorism”.²⁴ According to human rights organisations, more than 20,000 people have been detained by police across Russia since February 2022 for anti-war protests, a thousand being criminally indicted, tried, or imprisoned for this charge, and more than 9,000 being subjected to administrative arrests or penalties.²⁵

¹⁶ <https://spring96.org/en/news/117504>.

¹⁷ <https://spring96.org/en/news/117504>.

¹⁸ <https://www.reuters.com/world/belarus-opposition-fears-former-ukraine-volunteer-extradited-by-vietnam-2024-11-21/>.

¹⁹ <https://belhelcom.org/en/news/verdict-became-embodiment-destructive-policy-lukashenka-regime-statement-anniversary-trial>.

²⁰ <https://www.rferl.org/a/belarusian-opposition-figure-kalesnikava-prison-meeting-father/33199613.html>.

²¹ <https://novayagazeta.eu/articles/2025/01/08/jailed-belarusian-presidential-hopeful-allowed-to-meet-pro-regime-blogger-in-prison-en-news>.

²² <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-57353413>.

²³ <https://repression.info/criminal/how-many-people-are-imprisoned-today>.

²⁴ <https://ovd.info/en/advocacy/persecution-political-prisoners-submission-committee-ministers-council-europe#>.

²⁵ Vladimir Kara-Murza: ‘The best promise of long-term security and stability on our continent lies with a democratic Russia’.

20. The Assembly has consistently found that the problem of political prisoners in Russia is the result of structural and systemic causes that have only been exacerbated over the years with the adoption of restrictive laws, including those enacted after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine.²⁶ In its Resolution 2541 (2024) “The arbitrary detention of Vladimir Kara-Murza and the systematic persecution of anti-war protesters in the Russian Federation and Belarus”, the Assembly recognised that Mr Kara-Murza’s detention highlighted the severe repression of freedom in Russia. I am pleased to note that Mr Kara-Murza and other prominent Russian political prisoners regained their freedom following a large prisoner exchange – a measure called for by the Assembly.²⁷

21. The fate of political prisoners in Russia is characterised by arbitrary detention, manifestly disproportionate penalties, ill-treatment, and systemic repression. In March 2025, a 67-year-old Soviet-era dissident Alexander Skobov received a sixteen-year sentence for his anti-war stance, having been convicted of “justifying terrorism” and “participating in a terrorist organisation”, illustrating the severity of judicial persecution against government critics.²⁸

22. On 23 March 2025, Vladimir Kara-Murza informed on his X profile that during the Sunday service at St. Peter’s church in St. Petersburg, the parish priest, Father Nikolai Savchenko, was arrested by police for a social media post featuring the priest’s photo with the Ukrainian flag and a quote from the Bible: “Thus saith the Lord, Ye shall not go up, nor fight against your brethren”.²⁹

23. Political prisoners frequently face prolonged isolation, restricted access to legal representation, and deliberate obstruction of their fundamental rights, including the right to a fair trial. In several instances, legal representatives of opposition figures have also been targeted, as seen in the case of Alexei Navalny’s lawyers.³⁰ In January 2025, all three of them: Vadim Kobzev, Alexei Liptser and Igor Sergunin, were sentenced to prison terms of up to five-and-a-half years. They were accused of participating in an extremist organisation and allegedly facilitating communication between Navalny and his supporters.³¹

24. Additionally, there has been a resurgence of Soviet-era practices, including the forced placement of dissenters in psychiatric institutions, with reports indicating that dozens of individuals expressing anti-war sentiments have been involuntarily committed.³²

25. Reports indicate that torture and inhumane treatment remain widespread, particularly in cases involving Ukrainian detainees in Russia or in Russian-occupied areas of Ukraine. A report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine of 19 March 2025 concluded that Russia’s use of enforced disappearances and torture, as part of a coordinated state policy targeting the civilian population, amounts to crimes against humanity.³³

26. According to that report, Russian authorities have systematically used arbitrary detention and enforced disappearance in occupied Ukrainian territories, targeting civilians, local officials, civil servants, journalists, and anyone perceived as posing a threat to their military objectives. Detainees have been transferred to detention facilities within Russia, often held incommunicado. They are being

²⁶ Resolution 2446 (2022) “Reported cases of political prisoners in the Russian Federation”.

²⁷ Resolution 2541 (2024) “The arbitrary detention of Vladimir Kara-Murza and the systematic persecution of anti-war protesters in the Russian Federation and Belarus”; [Release of Vladimir Kara-Murza and other political prisoners: 'Our collective resolve can make a difference'](#) .

²⁸ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/mar/21/soviet-era-dissident-alexander-skobov-draconian-jail-sentence-russia-anti-war-views>.

²⁹ <https://x.com/vkaramurza/status/1903823894999351304>.

³⁰ https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2024/09/20/the-hidden-trial-of-navalny-s-three-lawyers_6726765_4.html.

³¹ <https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/01/22/prison-terms-navalnys-russian-defense-lawyers> ; [PACE Rapporteur condemns the search and detention of Alexei Navalny’s lawyers](#).

³² <https://repression.info/criminal/how-many-people-are-imprisoned-today>.

³³ <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2025/03/ukraine-enforced-disappearances-committed-russian-authorities-amount-crimes>.

regularly subjected to torture, including severe beatings, electric shocks, burns, suffocation and sexual violence.³⁴

27. In its judgment *Ukraine v. Russia* of 25 June 2024, concerning Crimea, the European Court of Human Rights concluded that Russia had committed multiple violations of the European Convention on Human Rights stemming from its occupation of Crimea since 2014. It found that Russian authorities were responsible for an ongoing unlawful deprivation of liberty, prosecution, and/or conviction of “Ukrainian political prisoners” based on the application of Russian law in Crimea, in violation of Article 18 in conjunction with Articles 5, 6, 8, 10 and 11 of the Convention. The Court considered that these cases were emblematic of a pattern of retaliatory prosecution and misuse of criminal law and illustrative of a general crackdown on political opposition to Russian policies in Crimea. In its recent decision concerning the supervision of the execution of this judgment, the Committee of Ministers urged Russia to immediately release, and ensure the safe return to the jurisdiction of the Ukrainian authorities, of all the concerned Ukrainian political prisoners. Pending their release and return, Russian authorities should immediately cease all forms of torture and ill-treatment and ensure access of these prisoners to independent legal advice, medical treatment and communication with their families and the outside world; allow independent international bodies to monitor their state of health and conditions of detention and submit the list of persons detained, to enable the Committee to supervise their release into safety.³⁵

28. Alexei Gorinov, a Moscow local councillor who, during a council meeting, said that “children were dying” and that “all efforts of Russian civil society should be aimed at stopping the war and withdrawing troops from the territory of Ukraine”, was the first to be sentenced to almost seven years’ imprisonment for spreading knowingly false information about the Russian army. In November 2024, he was given an additional three-year sentence for “justifying terrorism” – in a clear case of retaliatory prosecution.³⁶

29. Nadezhda Buyanova, a 68-year-old Ukrainian-born paediatrician living in Russia, was sentenced to five and a half years in prison by a Moscow court on 12 November 2024. The charges against her were based on allegations that she made derogatory comments about Russian soldiers during a medical consultation with a patient whose father had been killed in Ukraine.³⁷

30. In December 2024, Dmitry Talantov, a human rights lawyer who publicly criticised Russia’s war against Ukraine, was sentenced to 7 years in prison for allegedly spreading “false information” about the Russian military.³⁸

31. Maria Ponomarenko, a journalist and outspoken critic of the Putin regime, has faced ongoing persecution while in detention. She was arrested for reporting on Russian airstrikes against civilians, she has suffered ill-treatment, isolation, and denial of medical care in prison.³⁹ On 27 March 2025, her prison sentence was extended by an additional one year and ten months for allegedly attacking two prison guards.⁴⁰

32. In the wake of its crackdown on LGBTQ+ community, Russia has intensified the use of anti-extremist legislation to persecute its members. Following the designation of the “international LGBT movement” as an extremist organisation by the Russian Supreme Court, in November 2023, public expression of sexual identity or advocacy in favour of LGBTQ+ rights in Russia might result in a severe penalty being imposed.⁴¹ In early 2024, Russian courts issued the first known convictions under the

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ <https://search.coe.int/cm?i=0900001680b476d6>.

³⁶ <https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-war-crackdown-alexei-gorinov-prison-d1f57a2e6c54ccfaa2de2aa25958e996>.

³⁷ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/nov/12/moscow-doctor-accused-by-patient-of-criticising-war-is-jailed-for-five-years>.

³⁸ <https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-war-crackdown-lawyer-dmitry-talantov-65399a06c2e1d29ed4f611da7d5f46b0>.

³⁹ <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2025/03/russia-authorities-must-urgently-protect-and-release-journalist-maria-ponomarenko/>.

⁴⁰ <https://novayagazeta.eu/articles/2025/03/27/jailed-russian-journalist-handed-fresh-20-month-term-for-prison-staff-assault-en-news>.

⁴¹ <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/11/30/russia-supreme-court-bans-lgbt-movement-extremist>.

new extremism designation. For instance, a court in Volgograd found a man guilty of displaying symbols of an extremist organisation after he posted a photograph of a rainbow flag on his social media account.⁴²

5. Conclusion

33. The above examples show that the situation of political prisoners in Belarus and Russia remains gravely concerning. Amid a wider persecution of human rights defenders and political opponents, both totalitarian regimes target also activists, journalists, lawyers, and civil society organisations through arbitrary detentions, politically motivated charges, violence and legislative restrictions. Belarus and Russia continue to instrumentalize criminal law, anti-extremism measures, and counter-terrorism frameworks to suppress dissent and dismantle whatever is left from independent civil society.

34. In Belarus, the authorities have escalated repression ahead of the 2025 “presidential elections”, employing preventative arrests, torture, and forced labour while expanding the designation of activists and media as “extremists.” The targeting of individuals supporting Ukraine further underscores the government’s efforts to criminalise political opposition and suppress solidarity with democratic movements.

35. In Russia, the regime has deepened its crackdown on anti-war activists, LGBTQ+ community, and human rights lawyers, reinforcing its near total control over the Russian society. The arrests of legal representatives, expansion of the “foreign agent” legislation, and escalating restrictions on LGBTQ+ rights highlight the increasingly repressive political landscape.

36. I urge the Committee on Legal Affairs and Human Rights to pay close attention to the developments described in this Information Note. I will also work closely with the General Rapporteur on Russian democratic forces and the General Rapporteur for a democratic Belarus, to consider what further steps the Assembly can take to help political prisoners in Russia and Belarus.

⁴² <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russia-makes-first-convictions-lgbt-extremism-following-ban-2024-02-01/>.