



CENTER FOR NEW IDEAS

THE BELARUS BAROMETER OF REPRESSION

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SUMMARY

New accounts of repressive and punitive measures come out of Belarus almost every day. Because of this constant stream of information, detecting patterns and changes can be difficult without in-depth analysis.

To capture how the punitive practices of the regime are evolving — what patterns of repression are fading and emerging — the Center for New Ideas will be issuing a quarterly research-based report entitled the Belarus Barometer of Repression.

Our analysis will focus primarily on statistical, quantitative data. Qualitative data, from a wide range of open sources, will be used supplementally.

This research is not intended to replace more granular reports by human rights organizations. Instead, our objectives are more analytical and statistical in nature: we aim to provide a general overview of the repressive/punitive system of the Belarusian regime and discern chronological shifts in how it functions (broken into quarters).

This aggregation of important quantitative indicators (primarily from human rights defenders, but also drawing on official statistics) and contextualized analysis should be useful to anyone seeking to understand how the Belarusian regime goes about putting pressure on society.

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The author would like to express his sincere gratitude to Belarusian human rights advocates and organizations, especially those whose work informed this report. These include [Viasna](#), [Lawtrend](#), [Human Constanta](#), and [Dissidentby](#).

KEY FINDINGS

- *The Belarusian regime is doubling down in its efforts to stamp out any signs of self-organization or self-government in society.*
- *It is also going after any remaining vestiges of an independent media space, particularly regional news outlets and independent bloggers. New laws minimize freedoms for religious organizations, apartment owners, and other groups.*
- *Increasingly, the Belarusian regime is making a clear and consistent distinction between “loyal” and “disloyal” citizens and infringing on the rights of the latter. As of the end of 2023, the authorities have also been targeting citizens who have left the country, amending legislation and staging provocations against them.*
- *The regime has stepped up its efforts to foment an atmosphere of fear and anxiety in society. In place of focused, personalized measures it is turning to mechanisms that victimize large swathes of the population at once (deeming information sources “extremist material” and employing police raids).*
- *The nature of the largest mass police raids (the Coordination Council case and the Election Observers case), indicates that the approaching elections in 2024–25 are a major reason behind this uptick in collective punishment.*
- *Repression is getting more severe and widespread, moving from the capital to the regions. Meanwhile, the regime’s retaliation against Belarusians abroad is becoming increasingly systematized.*
- *It can be argued that during the last quarter of 2023, there was no particular increase in repressive pressure in Belarus — the system worked regularly and stably within a framework established earlier in the year. Thus, in the last quarter, the number of detainees and criminal convictions was lower than the annual average; however, the number of administrative penalties was higher.*
- *At the same time, the government seems to have changed tactics, shifting from violence to intimidation. There is a greater emphasis on expanding repression to the regions and systematizing discriminatory measures against the diaspora.*

THE BELARUS BAROMETER OF REPRESSION 2023

The main development in relations between society and the Lukashenka regime in 2023 has been the establishment of a multi-level repressive/punitive system that now functions in a more or less stable manner. To track patterns and changes to this repressive system, our study focuses on two main tools of repression, both of which have sufficient quantitative data for proper analysis. They are:

- **Intimidation** – measures to instill anxiety and fear by demonstrating the omnipotence of the Belarusian security forces, designed to suppress any aspirations of freedom and self-organization in society as much as possible;
- **Detentions and arrests** – the persecution of citizens who express their disagreement with state policy in some way (against election fraud, unchecked violence, Belarus's complicity in the Russian-Ukrainian war, etc.).

Necessary disclaimer: most quantitative data represent highly conservative estimates due to a) the inaccessibility of many government statistics and b) the pervasive atmosphere of fear in the country that prevents certain information about repressions from reaching human rights advocates. There is much more repression in Belarus than these numbers show.

Supplemental areas of investigation include ones where a distinct pattern emerged during the reporting period. Gaining an understanding of these areas is essential in order to properly analyze the dynamics of the repressive system. The authorities' efforts to carry out repressive measures at different levels are not distributed evenly in time; therefore, the list of supplemental areas may change from year to year. This year, supplemental tools of repression include the following:

- **Control** – dismantling of freedoms and the right to self-organization, i.e., the subordination of the activities of members of society at all levels, from business and the third sector to everyday life, to the interests of the state;
- **Political segregation** – the division of the country's population along political lines, with those who oppose or opposed the existing political regime subject to restrictions.

To understand how the situation developed in the fourth quarter of 2023, let's start with these supplemental, contextual areas.

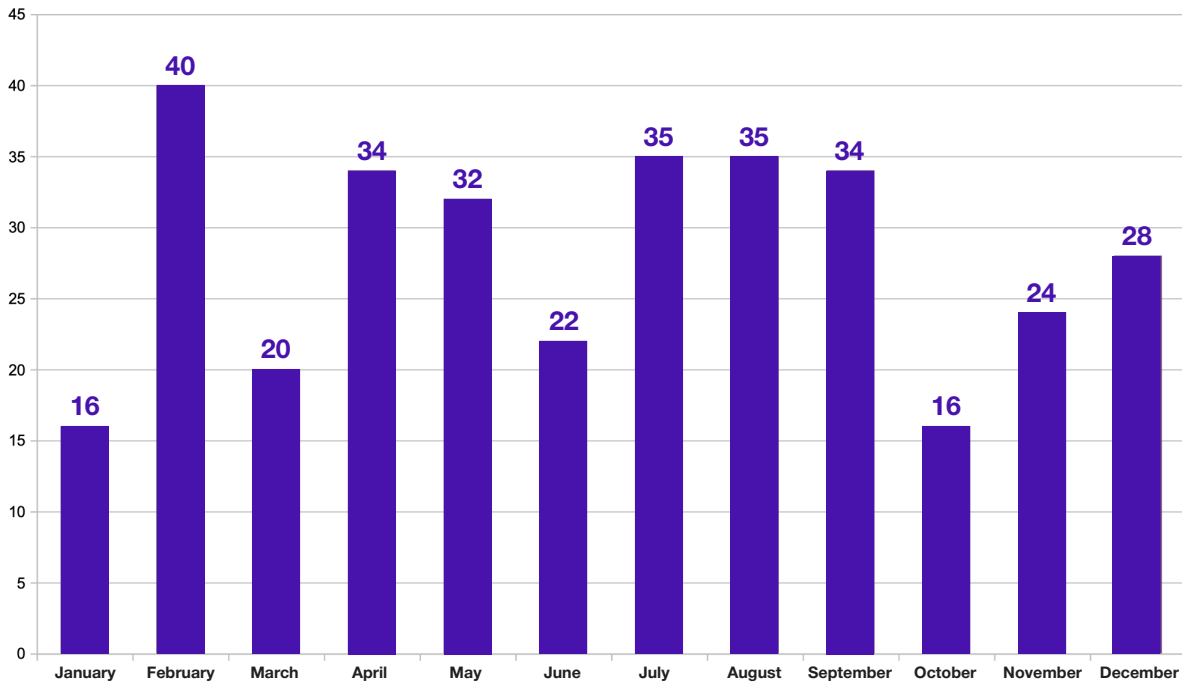
CONTROL: DESTRUCTION, SUBJUGATION, RESTRICTION

One of the main instruments of social control is the elimination of all forms of civil self-organization and citizens' total subordination to the interests of the state. The eradication of self-organization, wherever it occurs and whatever form it takes, is usually achieved through the liquidation (or forced self-liquidation) of any organization that facilitates it. This mainly concerns the activities of the independent media and non-profits. These two groups have been subject to gradual liquidation since 2020, and it may seem that

everything that can be destroyed already has been. However, in practice, there is still much to shut down, forbid, and dismantle.

According to [Lawtrend](#), Belarus has lost more than 1,500 third-sector organizations since 2020. In 2023 at least 336 organizations were liquidated (or self-liquidated);¹ in the fourth quarter losses comprised 68 organizations. This amounts to 23 institutions per month on average, which is slightly lower than in 2023 (28 per month).

Monthly number of third-sector organizations liquidated or set for liquidation in 2023
(according to Lawtrend)



Perhaps the most reprehensible action in this area taken so far has been the [liquidation](#) of the Belarusian chapter of the Chernobyl Children NGO, which has been helping rehabilitate children affected by the nuclear disaster since 1986. This example underscores that at the moment, no NGO, no matter how humanitarian in nature, is safe from police raids or forced liquidation by the authorities.

As for the media space, having destroyed or exiled all independent outlets, the authorities are taking further measures to “normalize” potentially independent entities. Currently, regional media sources are the main focus of this purge. During the reporting period, multiple outlets were targeted for repression, including the Salihorsk TV channel Ranak, the Barisau regional news site *ex-press.live*, and the Mahilyou news outlets *6TV.bw*, *Mogilev Media*, and *Naviny Mahileuskaha Rehienu*. Aleksandr Mantsevich, Editor in Chief of the *Regional Newspaper* in Maladzechna, was sentenced to four years in a penal colony.

But the authorities are doing more than just destroying the independent media: they are seizing control of it and handing it over to state propagandists. This has already [happened](#), at the very least, with the Telegram channel *Our Native Land Lahoyisk*, the Instagram page *Stolbtsy.city*, and *Kraj.by*.

¹ 670 in 2022.

Another notable trend during the reporting period was the escalation of preemptive “normalization” (in some cases featuring short-term arrests) of well-known Belarusian bloggers. Examples include the cases of [Dzianis Kurjan](#), [Anna Bond](#), [Larysa Hrybaliova](#), and the owner of the Telegram channel [Vile Kokobai](#). Earlier, the authorities [had subjected popular vloggers](#) Dmitry Sivchik (aka Dim Dimych) and Vlad Kobryakov to a similar treatment. The repression of regional media outlets and the preemptive “normalization” of bloggers appear to be two aspects of a single broader objective – the complete subjugation of the information space to the state.

In the last quarter, two laws were enacted whose main purpose was to encourage obedience to the authorities. Most important is the Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations, which independent experts [have criticized](#) for significantly limiting the rights of religious communities, organizations, and associations. This law creates the same framework that the Belarusian authorities made use of in 2023 to liquidate political parties in the country.

The second law is On Changing the Legislation for Managing and Utilizing the Housing Stock. It represents a rare instance when even [ordinary citizens](#) took part in the discussion of the bill, criticizing many of its provisions. This law deprives housing associations of many freedoms, including self-government and the right to manage their finances.

Both of these laws essentially amount to petty revenge against religious communities and other associations that flexed their muscles in 2020. This is exactly why the government is targeting them; it has even [admitted it openly](#).

POLITICAL SEGREGATION AND DISCRIMINATION

More and more, the Belarusian regime has been clearly and consistently labeling citizens “loyal” or “disloyal,” actively discriminating against the latter. Targeted discrimination has intensified — against those who are currently in detention, those who now live in Belarus, and those who have been forced to leave their homeland.

Belarusians remaining in the country face significant barriers to employment if their opposition to the Lukashenka regime has been officially registered in some way. Their names are put on lists kept by the Ministry of Internal Affairs or the KGB; from time to time such lists are brought to victims’ workplaces, resulting in dismissal. This practice is [ongoing](#). After being fired in this way, finding employment at a state enterprise becomes impossible. Likewise, private enterprises often prefer not to take risks either, refusing to hire such individuals. This rule even affects people who have already served their time in jail.

Belarusian citizens abroad are a separate category. Since 2022, people who have been outside the country for 30 days or more² are considered non-contributors to the national economy, i.e., social parasites or “dependents” (izhdiventsy). Given the large scale of political emigration following the events of 2020 and 2022, the authorities have apparently deemed this group to be enemies of the Lukashenka regime. Therefore, an increasing number of discriminatory laws are being enacted against them. During the reporting period, the government [introduced](#) a rule that would allow the authorities to retroactively recalculate the cost of housing and communal services at full tariffs for “social parasites” — i.e., for the period even before they were deemed dependents. [Another recent bill](#), vaguely entitled For Official Use, stipulates restrictions on medical care for non-contributors to the economy.

² The exceptions are people who live and work in Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, or Russia.

The bill that sent the biggest shockwaves was adopted before the beginning of the reporting period: the so-called Passport Decree (Decree No. 278 On the Procedure for Issuing Documents and Performing Actions) made it impossible for Belarusians to exchange their passport, extend its validity period, or issue a power of attorney for property while abroad. [As experts have noted](#), in doing so the Belarusian authorities violated a whole list of human rights³ and significantly complicated the lives of their citizens.

The authorities' actions are part of an ongoing trend to systematize retaliation against the Belarusian diaspora. They go hand in hand with earlier decisions to forbid voting from abroad, introduce absentee trials⁴, and revoke citizenship for "extremism."

This persecution of the diaspora was accompanied by a number of provocations by the regime during the reporting period, including a series of fake Telegram bots allegedly related to well-known projects like [the Office of Svetlana Tsikhanouskaya](#), [the Viasna Human Rights Center](#), and [the Belaruskі Hayun](#) project. There have also been more personalized provocations (the [Kovalkova](#) and [Aksenov](#) cases), and measures designed to show off the digital capabilities of law enforcement agencies (e.g. [the KGB getting involved in online measures](#)).

Measures that target the Belarusian diaspora less directly include the continued recognition of [Belarusian communities abroad as extremist](#), the detention of Belarusians who [apply for Polish visas](#), the [ban on Polish language courses](#), and the [ban on advertising job openings in different countries](#).

INTIMIDATION: "EXTREMISM," "TERRORISM," AND POLICE RAIDS

One of the most prominent methods of intimidation used by the authorities is to arbitrarily assign the status of "extremist" and "terrorist"⁵ to their opponents, and the status of "extremist material" to information products. This means that any contact (informational, communication, financial, etc.) with the opposition is potentially criminal: i.e., a punishment can be imposed for it.

According to human rights activists,⁶ some countries, including Belarus, are using measures intended to combat extremism and terrorism in order to suppress constitutionally protected civic activism.⁷ It is noteworthy that before 2020, there was not a single citizen of Belarus on the "terrorist list." Belarusians started appearing on this list only after the Belarusian Revolution.

In 2023, legislation targeting "extremists" and "terrorists" was actively applied against Belarusians.

³ Other abrogated rights include the right not to be discriminated against, to free movement, to non-interference in private life, to own property, to work, to receive education, etc.

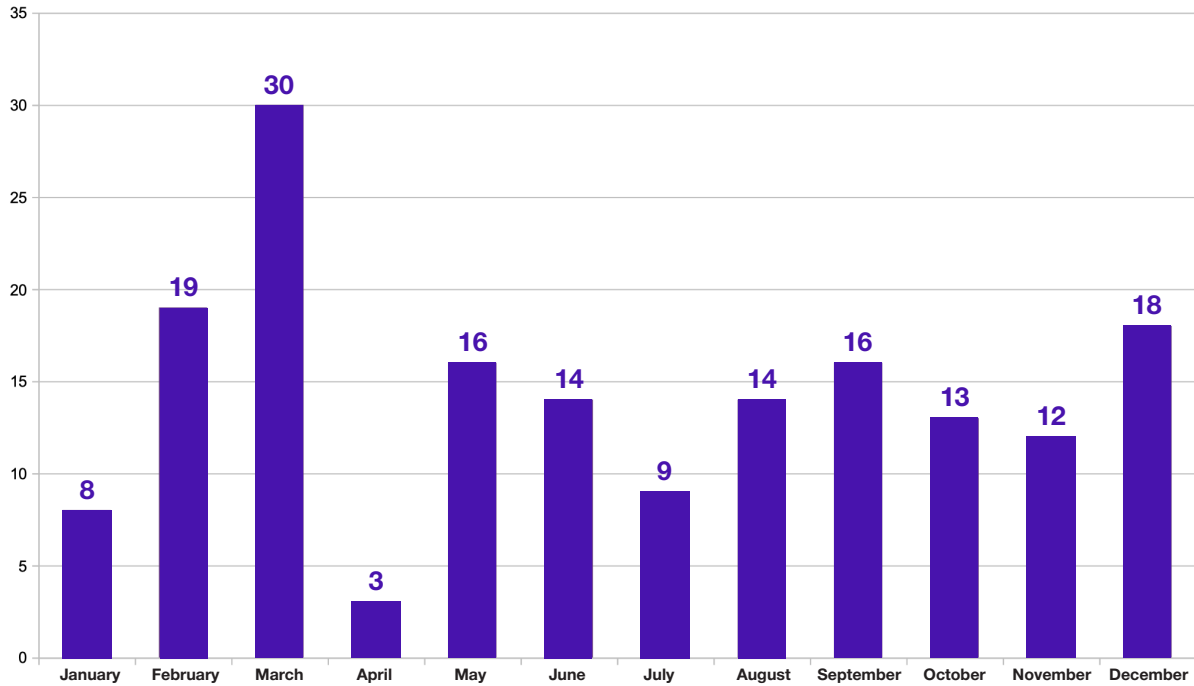
⁴ Since September 2022, at least [31 criminal cases](#) have been initiated in Belarus under the guise of "special proceedings" against individuals who left the country.

⁵ The Belarusian regime has weaponized the legal terms "extremism" and "terrorism" following the political protests in 2020. Loose interpretations of these concepts have been used to repress thousands of Belarusian dissidents, resulting in significant growth of Belarusians prosecuted for human rights activism, political engagement, and media work. While the legal definitions of both of these concepts are very vague, the "extremist" label seems to be applied to people expressing their opinion, whereas the "terrorist" label is mostly reserved for physical actions, such as those of railway partisans.

⁶ [Human Rights Have no Place Here](#): A comparative analysis of anti-extremist legislation and law enforcement in Eastern Europe and Central Asia.

⁷ It is highly indicative that in 2023, the number of criminal convictions on charges of creating, leading, or participating in extremist groups, as well as facilitating and financing extremist activities, increased ([The Human Rights Situation in Belarus in 2023](#)).

The monthly number of people included on the “terrorist list” in 2023
(according to official KGB lists)



This year, the Belarusian authorities included a total of 1,400 people on the list of citizens involved in extremist activities⁸ (in 2022 2,263 people were added). The “terrorist” list compiled by the Belarusian authorities has expanded by 172⁹ (compared to 226 in 2022). On average, 14 people in Belarus were recognized as “terrorists” and 117 as “extremists” per month in 2023. In all cases, the vast majority of these were Belarusians. It is noteworthy that before 2020, there was not a single citizen of Belarus on the Belarusian government’s “terrorist list.”

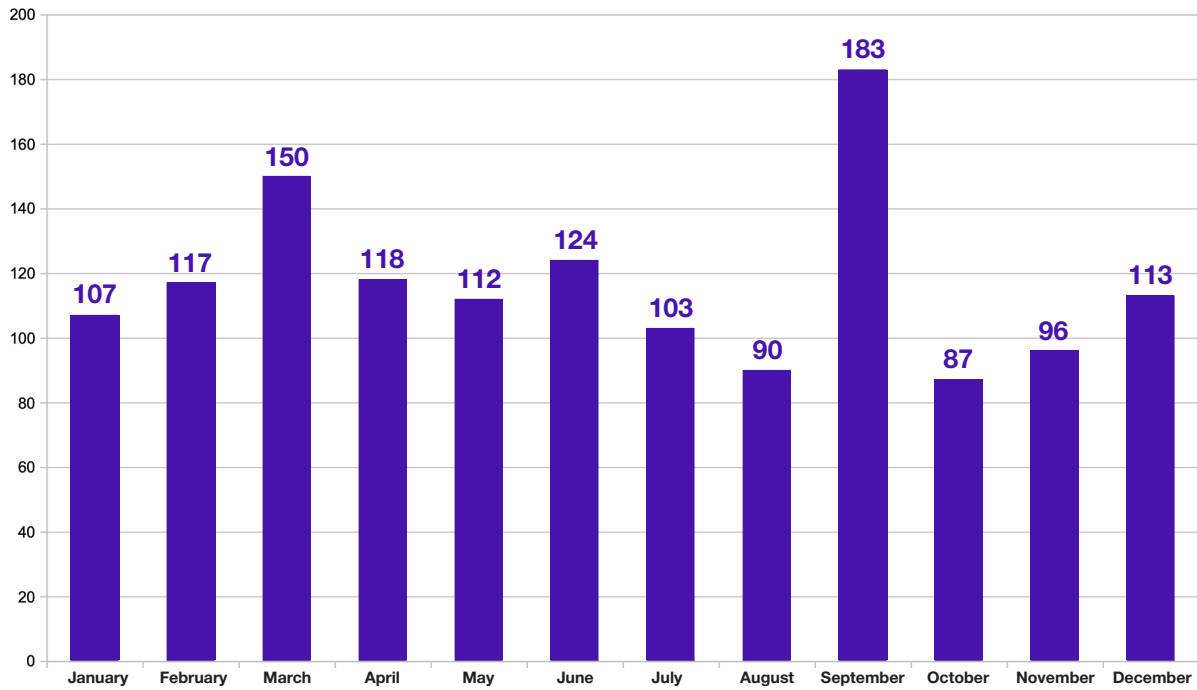
In the last three months of 2023, the average monthly number of “terrorist” confessions was the same as in previous periods: 14 people. The total quarterly growth of this list was 43 people.

Meanwhile, the “extremist” list grew by 296 people in the last quarter of 2023. On average, this comes to 99 people per month, which is a little lower than the annual average of 117.

⁸ At the end of the year, there were 3,654 people on this list.

⁹ At the end of the year, there were 1,156 people on this list, 397 of them Belarusians.

The monthly number of people included on the “list of extremists” in 2023
 (according to official lists by the Ministry of Internal Affairs)

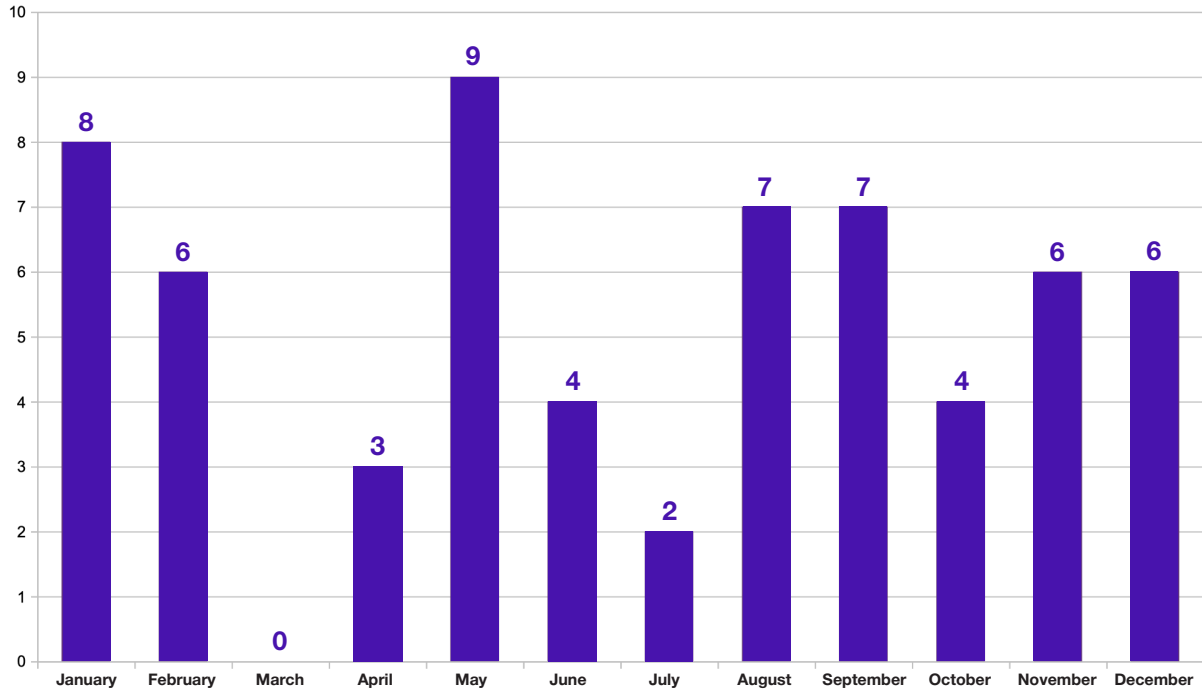


There were no additions to the list of organizations involved in terrorism in 2023.¹⁰

But the number of structures recognized as “extremist formations” increased by 65 over the year (in 2022 there were 80 organizations on the list). During the year, the monthly average was 5-6 organizations. This trend persisted unchanged into the fourth quarter.

¹⁰ Groups on the list include the Civil Self-Defence Detachments of Belarus (OGSB) and Supraciu (with its initiatives Cyber-Guerrillas, People’s Self-Defense Squads - DNC, and Storks are Flying), which were added to the list in 2021. In 2022, NEXTA (with its daughter organizations NEXTA Live and LUXTA) and BYPOL (including the Situation-Analytical Center and Pieramoha Plan) were added.

Monthly number of organizations deemed to be extremist formations
(according to official KGB lists)



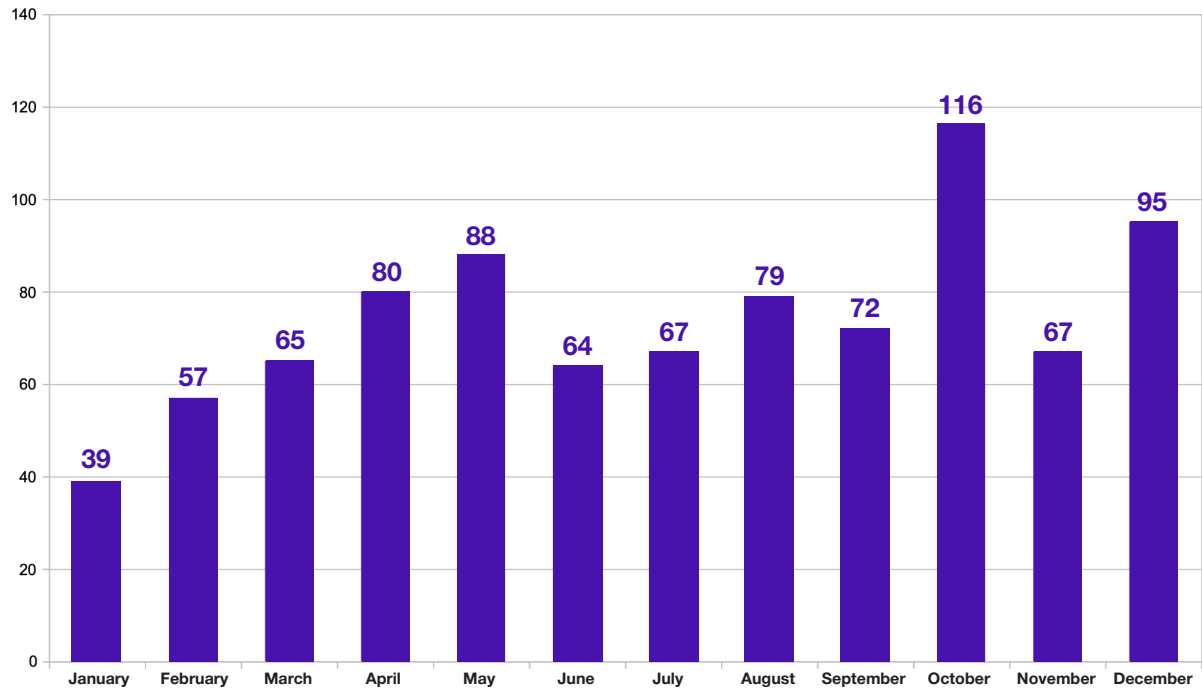
Meanwhile, the number of court cases deeming informational materials to be “extremist” grew rapidly in 2023. Historically, the vast majority of “extremist” materials have been social media accounts and messenger channels belonging to various entities that criticized the Belarusian regime, but this is changing. A notable trend in 2023 has been a tendency to label classic Belarusian literature “extremist” too: examples include writers Vintsent Dunin-Martsinkyevich, Larysa Heniush, Uladzimir Nyaklyayew, and Natallia Arsienieva.

In total, 889 such trials were held in Belarus in 2023, 278 of them in the last quarter of the year. When we compare fourth-quarter data with the annual average, we see that by the end of the year, the frequency of such trials had increased: while the annual average was 74 trials per month, in the last quarter there was an average of 93 trials.

Another indication of the increased intensity of persecution in this area: two out of three record-breaking court sessions, during which the number of information sources deemed extremist hit all-time highs, occurred in the last quarter. Thus, on November 21, a court in the Lenin Region of Hrodna deemed 48 sites, Telegram channels, and social network accounts “extremist” in a single sitting. And on December 7th, the Zheleznodorozhny District Court of Homiel handed down 95 “extremist”¹¹ verdicts.

¹¹ The record number of materials deemed extremist in one session occurred on July 4, 2023, when 105 sources were labeled “extremist” by the Zheleznodorozhny District Court of Homiel.

The monthly number of trials that resulted in materials being deemed extremist in 2023
 (according to official lists of the Ministry of Information)



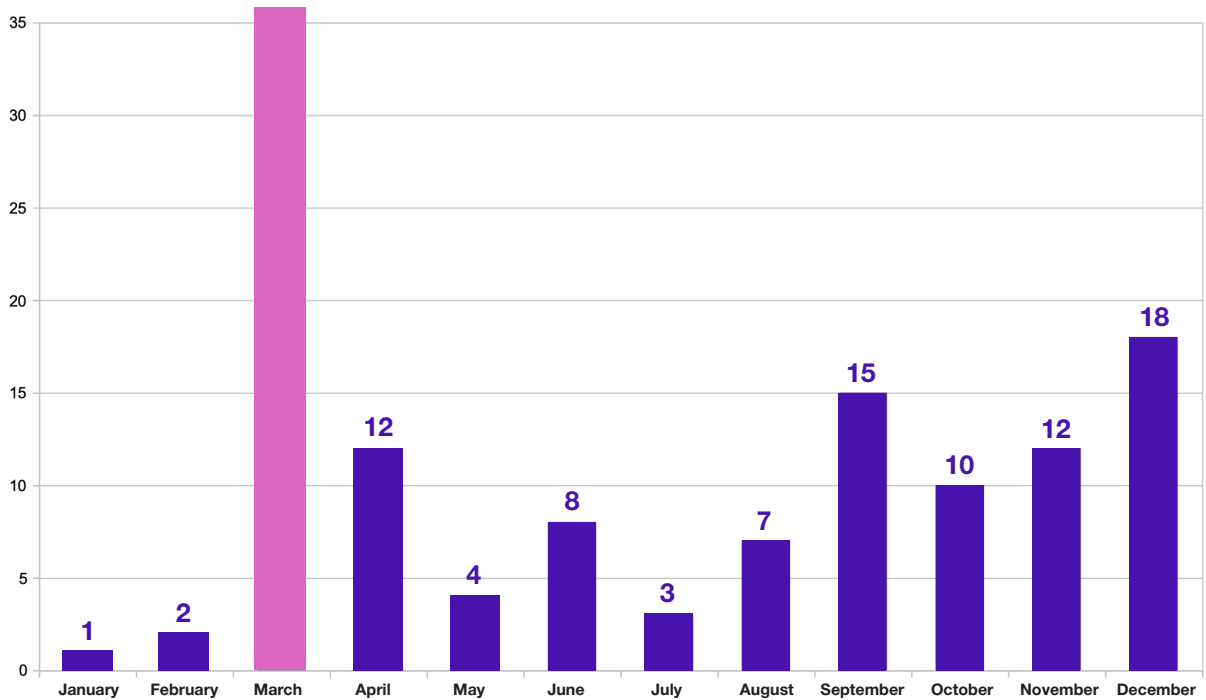
An important manifestation of the authorities’ increased intimidation of society is the growth in “police raids” (*khapuny*)¹². Their number had increased significantly by the end of the year (although this concept isn’t clearly defined, the methodology for gathering data has not changed during the year, allowing us to draw such conclusions).

If we put aside the excesses of the first quarter, when the country saw a huge uptick in searches and detentions following the bombing of a Russian plane at the airport in Machulishchy, then quarterly dynamics are striking. Thus, during the second and third quarters, there were 24–25 total police raids in three months. The situation changed during the last quarter, when at least 40 raids occurred. Two particularly large-scale raids involving dozens of people also occurred in the last quarter. The first consisted of searches for a case against the Coordination Council; the second involved searches and intimidation of election observers.

That said, this uptick in police raids has not translated into more detentions. In other words, while people are facing serious psychological pressure, things has fortunately not escalated into more court cases or incarceration.

¹² By “police raids” we mean simultaneous, relatively large-scale repressive measures (searches, detentions, arrests) carried out mostly in a single geographic location.

Monthly number of police raids
(according to open sources)



Note: the number of raids that occurred in March 2023 as a reaction to the Machulishchy bombing is impossible to calculate even approximately, as raids were practically incessant throughout most of the country.

This could mean that intimidation has become a priority over punishment. This partial realignment of priorities may be due to the approaching 2024–2025 election campaign, which requires the authorities to make special efforts to keep the population in line.

Such an assumption is indirectly confirmed by the conspicuous increase in the number of so-called “anti-corruption” cases in the last quarter of 2023. This primarily concerns the high-profile [minibus drivers](#), agrarians, and [milkmen](#) cases, along with a number of others. The last case even involved the detention of [Ihar Brylo](#), the former head of the Ministry of Agriculture and Lukashenka’s assistant for the Vitebsk region. Populist “anti-corruption” measures are particularly well-loved by the Belarusian government during run-ups to election campaigns.

THE PEAK OF REPRESSIONS: DETENTIONS, COURT CASES, POLITICAL PRISONERS

Detentions continue to follow trends established at least in 2022. These include repressions for participating in the 2020 protests, supporting Ukraine in some way, or expressing disapproval of the Belarusian regime or the Russian army. Repressions' forms also remain fairly unchanged. Common methods include persecution of public figures' relatives, detention of entire families, public detention, so-called "repentance videos," and perpetual cycles of detentions and sentences¹³ (often referred to as "carousels").

A new trend in 2023 was the tightening of border checks, with those returning to Belarus from other countries frequently being detained. Notably, such checks have even been introduced at the Russian border, which has never been the case in recent history. Human rights activists estimate that in 2023, security forces detained at least 200 people, including people returning from Russia.¹⁴

In total, at least 4,100 people were detained in Belarus for political reasons over the past year, with 342 people detained per month on average. During the last three months of the year, the average monthly number of detentions was lower than the yearly average — amounting to 298 people per month in the fourth quarter.

At the same time, several issues stand out. Firstly, there has been increased pressure on the relatives of public figures (Valer Karbalevich's [brother](#), Sasha Filipenko's [father](#), Margarita Vorikhova's [mother](#), etc.). Secondly, persecution of Catholic priests and Protestant pastors is growing.¹⁵ This can probably be linked to the soon-to-be-enacted Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations, which we mentioned earlier. Thirdly, due to the increase in the number of allegedly "extremist" organizations and initiatives, the number of criminal convictions on charges of creating, leading or participating in extremist formations, as well as facilitating and financing extremist activities, has also increased over the year.¹⁶

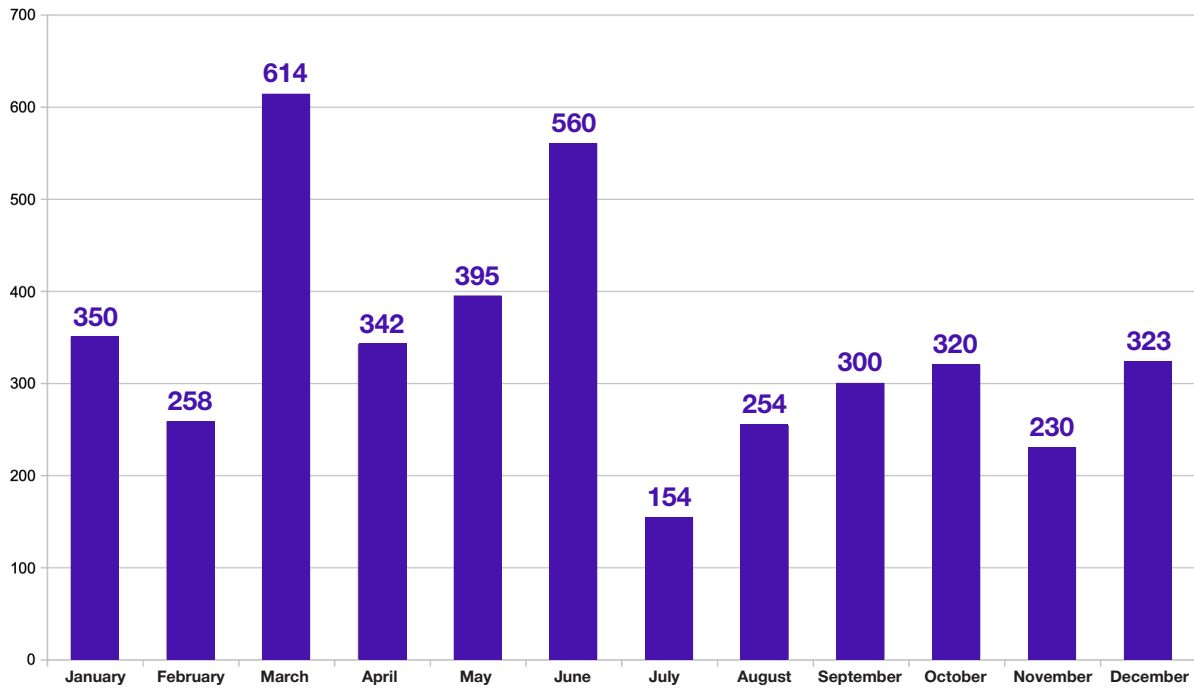
¹³ Prisoners who have already served their sentences are being charged under Article 411 of the Criminal Code: Maliciously Disobeying the Administration of a Correctional Institution.

¹⁴ There were 52 such detentions in 2022.

¹⁵ In 2023, Belarus was [the country with the second most imprisoned priests in the world](#) (Nicaragua was first).

¹⁶ [The Human Rights Situation in Belarus in 2023](#)

Monthly number of people detained for political reasons
(according to data from Viasna)

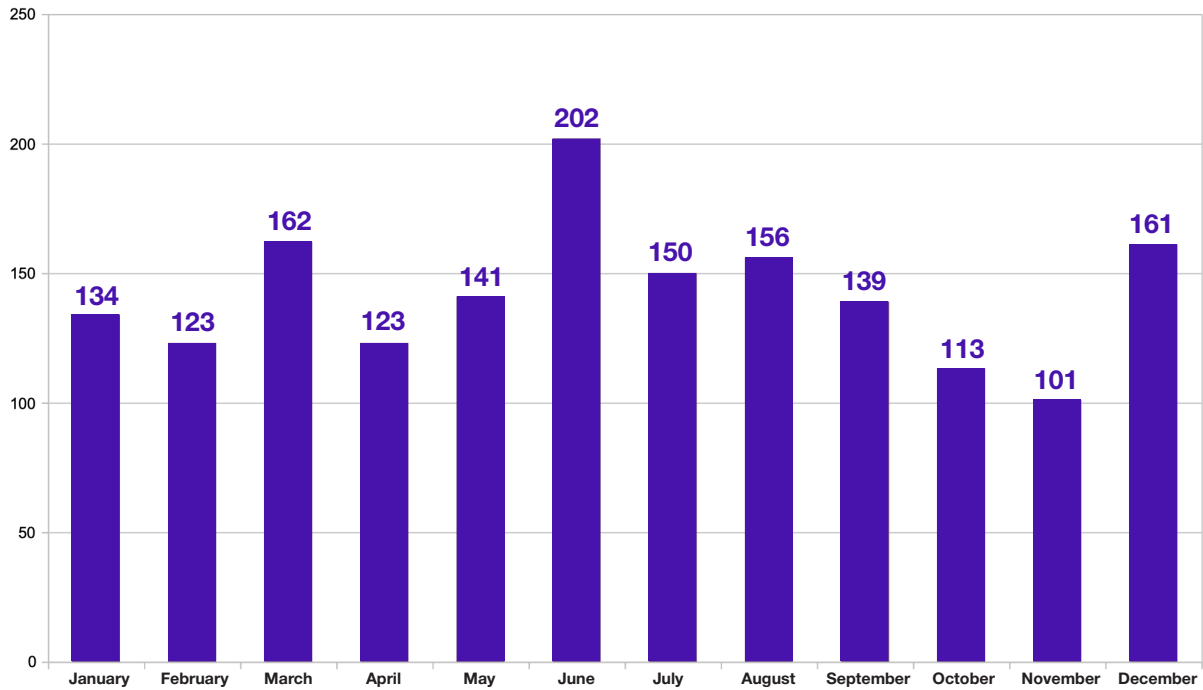


The number of “political” criminal sentences for the last quarter of 2023 generally correlates with the number of detentions during this period: both indicators decreased slightly relative to the yearly average. This is due to the surge in repression after the explosion of a Russian plane at the Machulishchy airport at the end of February 2023. After that, the peak of detentions occurred in March and the following months of the second quarter; the largest number of criminal convictions occurred in June and in the third quarter.

The overall figures for politically motivated criminal cases in 2023 are as follows: in total, in 2023, at least 1,603 people were convicted on criminal charges connected with the protests, averaging 134 people per month. In the last quarter, the number of criminal convictions also decreased, similarly to arrest figures. The average monthly figure for the last quarter was 125 people.

At the same time, one fact could alter current trends moving forward: 161 people were convicted in criminal cases on trumped up charges in December. This is one of three highs for all months of 2023; the other two peaks occurred in the first half of the year. Consequently, it is entirely possible that the number of criminal cases could rise, especially since election season in Belarus is approaching.

Monthly number of people who received politically motivated criminal convictions
(according to Viasna)



Administrative prosecution involving fines and one-day arrests should be addressed separately. In 2023, there were at least 3,945 such court cases against Belarusians, resulting in around 4,500 convictions.

In some ways, the number of victims of such court cases is less important than the underlying pattern, which is unique and quite telling. Thus, in 2023 the number of politically motivated administrative court cases increased consistently: there was steady growth from quarter to quarter.

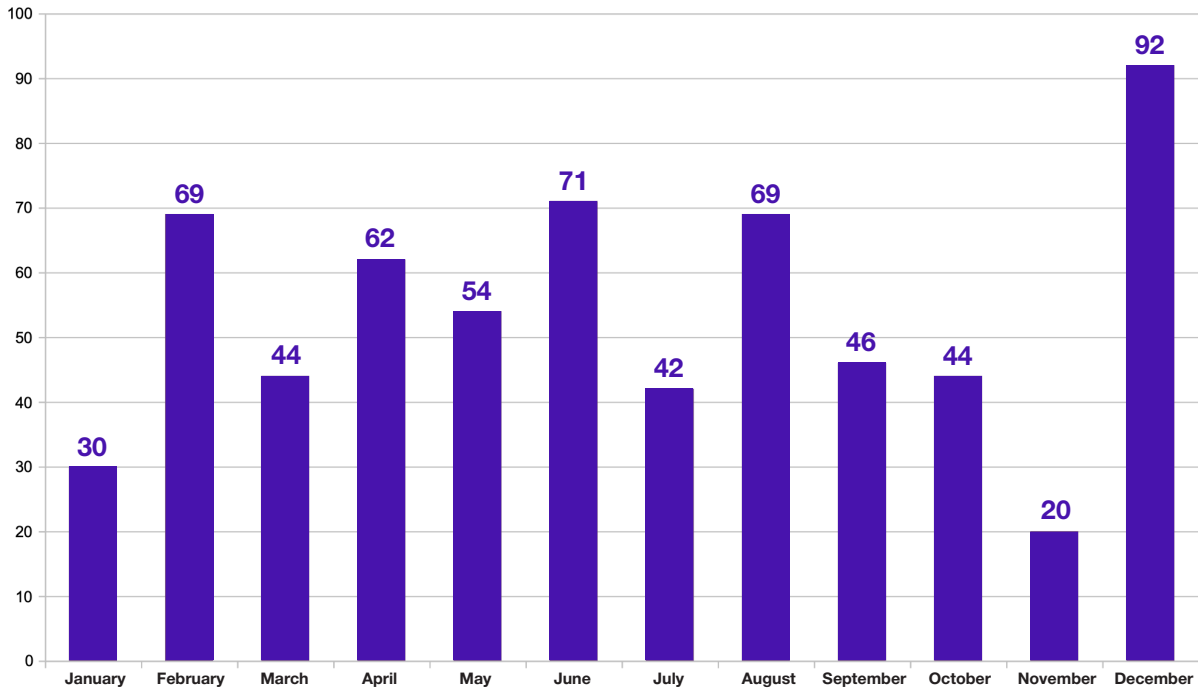
In other words, whereas the number of people deemed to be extremists/terrorists remained more or less stable during the year, the number of arrests and criminal cases temporarily increased due to the Machulishchy incident, and the number of raids and “extremist materials” jumped in the last quarter, administrative prosecution has been growing predictably every quarter throughout the year. This probably reflects the determination of the authorities to continue to mount repressive pressure on society.

Lastly, we must mention the most painful issue: political prisoners. According to Viasna, at year-end 1,452 people with this status were behind bars.¹⁷ In total, human rights advocates counted 643 new political prisoners in 2023. About 55 people were recognized as political prisoners per month on average. During the last quarter, this monthly average remained somewhat constant, even though in December human rights activists counted a record number of new political prisoners for the year: 92 people.

The living conditions political prisoners endure practically amount to torture. They are isolated and denied medical care, and they are arbitrarily given new sentences.

¹⁷ According to human rights activists from Dissidentby, there are 1,612 such people. According to Volha Harbunova, who works on social issues for the Joint Transitional Cabinet, the number of people placed behind bars for political reasons may be several times higher.

Monthly number of new political prisoners
(according to Viasna)



CONCLUSIONS

The authorities continue to view society as potentially dangerous. And not just the part of society that sympathized with the protests — anyone with experience of self-organization or self-realization. As such, the Belarusian regime’s primary domestic policy instrument remains repression in the broadest sense: control, prohibition, restriction, surveillance, coercion, intimidation, punishment, and so on.

To some degree, the machine of repression has already taken shape, while repressions themselves have reached something of a plateau — there was no intensive growth of repressive pressure during the year. The only exception was the consistent increase in the number of administrative cases initiated for political reasons.

At the same time, there has been a geographic expansion of repression, which is increasing in the regions and even reaching the Belarusian diaspora.

The most obvious pattern in the last quarter of 2023 was the regime’s recalibration of priorities in light of the upcoming elections, which entails a shift from repressive and punitive measures (although these persist) towards intimidation (which has grown noticeably).

In conclusion, we would like to reiterate that almost all the quantitative information contained in the report represents the most conservative possible estimates. There is much more repression in Belarus than these numbers show.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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