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## From Protest Suppression to Preventive Control: Authoritarian Governance in Belarus

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### Abstract

*This article examines the consolidation of authoritarian governance in Belarus in the period following the disputed 2020 presidential election. It argues that the post-2020 trajectory was marked not only by intensification of repression, but by a structural shift toward preventive forms of authoritarian control. Drawing on country reporting from Freedom House, Human Rights Watch, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, the OSCE/ODIHR, and the U.S. Department of State, the article shows that constitutional redesign, managed elections, expanded extremism legislation, suppression of civil society, coercive detention practices, and the governance of exile together formed an increasingly integrated system of control. Belarus's alignment with Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine further deepened the securitization of political life and broadened the range of conduct that could be treated as a threat to state stability. The article concludes that contemporary Belarus is best understood not simply as a persistently authoritarian state, but as a system in which repression has become increasingly routinized, legally embedded, and administratively preventive.*

**Keywords:** Belarus; authoritarianism; preventive repression; political opposition; extremism legislation; civil society; political prisoners; exile governance; securitization; state violence

### Introduction

Belarus entered the 2020s as an entrenched authoritarian state, yet the aftermath of the disputed August 2020 presidential election marked a structural transformation in the logic of repression. The mass protests that followed were not contained through temporary force alone. Instead, they

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triggered a reorganization of governance centered on preventive control, legal expansion of extremism frameworks, administrative destruction of independent institutions, and systematic management of exile. Beginning in February 2022, Belarus’s alignment with Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine further entrenched a national security paradigm that broadened prosecutorial discretion and normalized exceptional measures (Freedom House 2022, 2023, 2024, 2025; Human Rights Watch 2021, 2022, 2023, 2024, 2025).

This paper synthesizes evidence from *Freedom in the World* editions 2022 through 2025, *World Report* country chapters covering 2021 through 2025, and U.S. Department of State *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices* for 2022 through 2024. Freedom House editions are cited by publication year and assess developments in the preceding year. Across these reporting streams, the pattern is consistent: constitutional redesign, managed elections, expansive extremism legislation, and erosion of judicial independence are reinforced by torture, incommunicado detention, forced expulsions, and systemic impunity. The argument advanced here is not that Belarus became authoritarian after 2020, but that the period after the protest wave marked a shift toward a more preventive and administratively embedded model of repression (Freedom House 2025; Human Rights Watch 2025; U.S. Department of State 2024).

**Table 1: Core Trends in Governance and Rights (2021–2025)**

Area	Observed Direction	Analytical Interpretation
<b>Political system and elections</b>	2024 parliamentary elections held without opposition candidates; January 2025 presidential	Electoral processes function as mechanisms of confirmation rather than competition.

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	election conducted in a highly restricted environment; OSCE not invited to observe the February 2024 parliamentary elections.	Registration barriers, prosecutions, and exile targeting structurally eliminate viable opposition.
<b>Constitutional and institutional design</b>	2022 referendum formalized the All Belarus People’s Assembly; Lukashenka became its chair in 2024; amendments introduced presidential immunity provisions.	Parallel institutional structures reduce succession risk and consolidate executive dominance beyond formal electoral cycles.
<b>Repression architecture</b>	Broad application of extremism and national security charges; widespread arbitrary detention; routine publication of coerced confession videos.	Extremism legislation transforms routine political expression into criminal conduct, embedding repression in everyday legal practice.
<b>Civil society</b>	By mid November 2024, almost 1,200 NGOs had been shut down; leading organizations designated extremist.	Eliminating organizational infrastructure prevents sustained collective mobilization and weakens monitoring and legal defense capacity.
<b>Media and information</b>	Virtually all independent domestic media eliminated; dozens of journalists imprisoned annually; websites blocked and domains annulled.	Information control narrows public space and criminalizes access to alternative narratives.
<b>Detention and rule of law</b>	Persistent torture; prolonged incommunicado detention; deaths in custody	Violence and isolation operate as systemic deterrence mechanisms

	documented in 2023, 2024, and 2025; no accountability for security forces.	rather than isolated excesses.
<b>Exile governance</b>	Expanded in absentia prosecutions; passport and consular restrictions; citizenship revocation provisions; harassment of relatives.	Exile remains politically regulated, maintaining coercive leverage beyond national borders.
<b>Religion and social control</b>	2024 amendments required religious reregistration and introduced criminal liability for unregistered activity; clergy prosecuted.	Regulatory control over religious institutions reinforces political discipline.
<b>Sexual orientation and gender identity</b>	2024 and 2025 measures classified depictions of homosexuality as pornography and penalized promotion of nontraditional relations.	Moral regulation broadens discretionary enforcement and further constrains civic participation.
<b>War alignment</b>	Belarus enabled Russian military operations and hosted transfers of over 2,000, and in some reports more than 2,400, Ukrainian children.	External conflict reinforces domestic securitization and expands prosecutorial latitude.

**Table 2: Year-by-Year Inflection Points (2021–2025)**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Key Developments</b>	<b>Structural Significance</b>
<b>2021</b>	Mass prosecutions following 2020 protests; forced diversion of Ryanair flight; large scale NGO and media shutdown campaign.	Transition from protest suppression to dismantling of independent civic infrastructure.

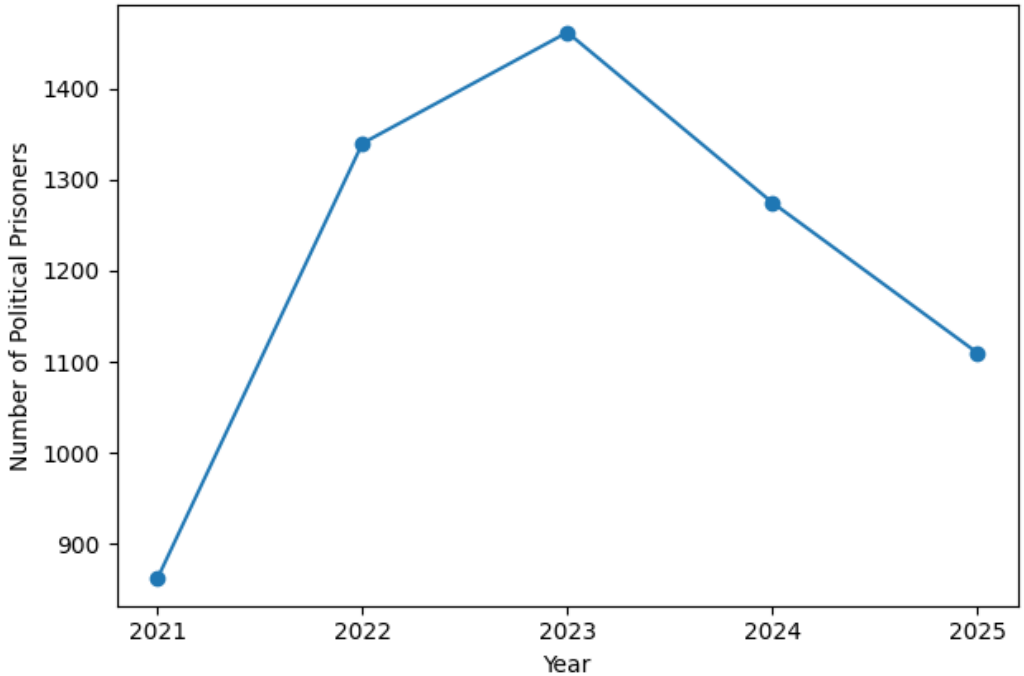
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<p><b>2022</b></p>	<p>Nontransparent constitutional referendum; antiwar protests crushed; trials in absentia and citizenship-revocation amendment adopted in December 2022.</p>	<p>War alignment institutionalized securitization and extended repression to exiles.</p>
<p><b>2023</b></p>	<p>OHCHR reported systematic, widespread violations; HRW notes findings that some may amount to crimes against humanity. Nearly 1,500 political prisoners; major sentences for Viasna leaders.</p>	<p>International recognition of systemic persecution; intensification of prison based coercion.</p>
<p><b>2024</b></p>	<p>Parliamentary elections without opposition; religious reregistration regime; continuing deaths in custody; expanded family targeting.</p>	<p>Electoral closure and social discipline converge to eliminate pluralist participation.</p>
<p><b>2025</b></p>	<p>Freedom House score declined to 7 and Political Rights to 1; trial schedules removed from public domain; forced expulsions of pardoned prisoners.</p>	<p>Further contraction of political representation and increased opacity in judicial proceedings.</p>

### Chart 1: Political Prisoners as Structural Indicator (2021–2025)

Political prisoner counts reported in Human Rights Watch annual country summaries, drawing on data compiled by the Viasna Human Rights Center, indicate sustained levels of repression rather than isolated or episodic fluctuation.

Political Prisoners in Belarus (2021–2025)  
Reported in Human Rights Watch Annual Summaries



### Extended Discussion of Results

#### **Preventive authoritarianism and the elimination of capacity:**

The post-2020 shift is observable not merely in the intensity of repression but in its orientation. This shift became visible progressively between 2021 and 2023, as emergency-style repression hardened into routine administrative practice. Civil society organizations were liquidated or forced to self-dissolve in large numbers. Participation in unregistered organizations was recriminalized in practice through other legal and administrative mechanisms, even after formal changes in earlier years. Independent media were designated extremist or terrorist formations. Digital conduct, including subscribing to Telegram channels or sharing content later labeled extremist, became prosecutable. In this respect,

repression in Belarus became less dependent on mass street violence alone and more dependent on legal and bureaucratic mechanisms that transformed ordinary civic conduct into a source of criminal exposure (Freedom House 2023, 2024, 2025; Human Rights Watch 2022, 2024; U.S. Department of State 2023, 2024).

The causal structure is cumulative rather than episodic. Liquidation of NGOs reduces the number of independent monitors and legal defenders. Fewer monitors produce less documentation of abuses. Reduced documentation weakens accountability claims. Weak accountability strengthens impunity. Impunity increases deterrent power. In this way, administrative closure reinforces coercive enforcement. The objective is not simply punishment after mobilization, but prevention of mobilization by dismantling the infrastructure that makes collective organization possible. This reading is supported by reporting that by mid-November 2024 authorities had shut down almost 1,200 NGOs and that no independent rights organization was able to operate legally within Belarus (Human Rights Watch 2025; Freedom House 2025).

**War alignment as an accelerator of securitization:** Beginning in February 2022, Belarus's role in enabling Russian military operations introduced a durable national security narrative into domestic governance. Antiwar demonstrations were dispersed, and individuals who expressed solidarity with Ukraine or shared information about troop movements were prosecuted under extremism or national security provisions. The war did not create repression, but it widened the permissible scope of repression. Alignment with Russia's war allowed authorities to recast dissent as destabilization or betrayal. The national security frame expanded the set of

behaviors that could be classified as threatening state integrity (Human Rights Watch 2023; Freedom House 2024; U.S. Department of State 2023, 2024).

Reports documenting the transfer of over 2,000, and in some sources more than 2,400, Ukrainian children to facilities in Belarus intensified international scrutiny. While reporting varies somewhat in exact phrasing and counting methodology, the convergence across sources is clear that Belarus played an active role in facilitating these transfers, further deepening international concern regarding the regime's wartime conduct (Freedom House 2024; U.S. Department of State 2024).

**Judicial subordination and structured impunity:** The reporting across the main institutional sources consistently identifies the judiciary as subordinate to executive authority. Prosecutors retained authority to extend detention without meaningful judicial constraint. Politically sensitive trials were frequently closed. In absentia proceedings expanded following legislative amendments in 2022 and 2023. The broad pattern is not simply one of politically biased outcomes but of structural subordination, where courts function as confirmation mechanisms for executive policy rather than as independent adjudicative institutions (Freedom House 2024, 2025; U.S. Department of State 2023, 2024).

The targeting and disbarment of defense lawyers weakened adversarial safeguards. When defense access is restricted and legal practice subordinated to executive authority, adjudication becomes administrative confirmation. The chain is direct: weakened defense capacity reduces contestation of state narratives, which reduces public scrutiny, which reduces pressure for accountability, reinforcing impunity. The reporting across years contains no indication of credible institutional accountability

or meaningful correction in cases of torture, ill-treatment, or politically motivated prosecutions. Impunity is not incidental; it is systemically reproduced (Human Rights Watch 2024; OHCHR 2023; U.S. Department of State 2024).

**Family targeting and social fragmentation:** A distinctive development documented in recent reporting is the systematic targeting of relatives, donors, and assistance networks. Aid initiatives supporting political prisoners were labeled extremist. Recipients were interrogated, fined, or detained. Family members of exiled journalists and activists were subjected to searches and pressure. This produces a layered deterrent effect. Criminalizing aid reduces humanitarian support. Reduced support increases vulnerability of prisoners' families. Increased vulnerability discourages continued engagement. Engagement declines, and solidarity networks fragment. Repression thus operates not only through incarceration but through induced isolation (Human Rights Watch 2024, 2025; U.S. Department of State 2023).

This dimension of repression is analytically significant because it changes the social unit of deterrence. Once punishment extends from the dissident to the family, the costs of political engagement are redistributed across intimate networks. In such an environment, the state does not need to physically detain every critic; it can weaken resistance by turning solidarity itself into a legal and personal risk. That dynamic is central to understanding why the Belarusian model after 2020 should be understood as preventive rather than merely punitive (Human Rights Watch 2024; OHCHR 2023).

**Governance of exile:** Legislative amendments allowing citizenship revocation for extremism-related convictions, passport and consular restrictions, asset freezes, and expanded in absentia trials demonstrate that departure from Belarus does not end exposure to state coercion. Reporting describes confiscation of property, restrictions on documentation, and the growing use of special procedures against exiled opponents. In 2024 and 2025 there was increasing concern over in absentia criminal proceedings against Belarusians abroad and the broader use of legal mechanisms to extend coercion beyond Belarus's borders (Freedom House 2025; OHCHR 2025; U.S. Department of State 2024).

Exile is therefore administratively regulated. Rather than removing dissenters from the political field entirely, the regime preserves legal leverage over them, maintaining a continuing relationship of coercion. Recent reporting on forced expulsions of pardoned prisoners in 2025 further underscores that even release from custody may function not as relief, but as another instrument of control and political management (Human Rights Watch 2026; OHCHR 2026).

**Interpreting the Freedom House score trajectory and the floor effect:** Belarus's aggregate Freedom House score remained at 8 out of 100 in the 2022, 2023, and 2024 editions before declining to 7 in the 2025 edition. Civil Liberties remained at 6 out of 60, while Political Rights fell from 2 to 1. In highly restricted systems near the lower bound of a freedom scale, additional repression often produces score compression. When most political rights are already curtailed, incremental deterioration may not immediately alter aggregate scores. Movement occurs when remaining avenues for pluralist participation are eliminated (Freedom House 2022, 2023, 2024, 2025).

The 2025 decline reflects further contraction of political representation following tightly controlled parliamentary and presidential electoral cycles and the effective exclusion of opposition candidates. The change signals cumulative narrowing rather than abrupt transformation. In this sense, the score shift is analytically important not because it reveals a sudden turn toward authoritarianism, but because it captures the near-elimination of residual political space in a system that was already deeply repressive (Freedom House 2025; OSCE/ODIHR 2025).

### **Scope and Limits**

This analysis relies on three principal institutional reporting streams: *Freedom in the World* editions 2022 through 2025, *World Report* country summaries 2021 through 2025, and U.S. Department of State *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices* 2022 through 2024. Figures cited in those reports are typically described as snapshots “at time of writing” and may fluctuate over the course of a year. The paper does not claim to provide exhaustive event documentation. Rather, it synthesizes patterns consistently identified across multiple high-quality reporting streams. Conclusions are therefore grounded in cross-source convergence rather than single-incident reporting. This is especially important in the Belarusian case, where repression is both extensive and intentionally opaque, and where exact annual totals do not always capture the deeper institutional logic of control (Freedom House 2025; Human Rights Watch 2025; U.S. Department of State 2024).

### **Conclusion**

Between 2021 and 2025, Belarus consolidated a governance model shaped by the experience of mass protest and reinforced by Belarus’s

alignment with Russia's war against Ukraine. Constitutional amendments, expansion of extremism legislation, liquidation of civil society organizations, suppression of independent media, in absentia prosecutions, citizenship restrictions, and documented torture form an integrated system rather than isolated responses. The defining development of this period is the conversion of dissent into a legally administrable condition. Speech, association, donation, and even family connection became potential grounds for investigation. Imprisonment, isolation, and forced expulsion function as enforcement mechanisms within that framework (Freedom House 2025; Human Rights Watch 2025; U.S. Department of State 2024).

The record across the main international reporting streams demonstrates institutionalized authoritarian governance. Under such conditions, political change is constrained not only by fear but by the structural absence of autonomous institutions capable of aggregating and sustaining dissent. What distinguishes contemporary Belarus is not simply the persistence of repression, but its administrative normalization: a system in which political control is embedded in law, bureaucracy, and institutional design rather than relying on episodic coercion alone (OHCHR 2023; Freedom House 2025; Human Rights Watch 2024).

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