

Excellencies, colleagues,

I speak today on behalf of the Belarusian Helsinki Committee - human rights organisation, committed to the promotion and protection of civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights. But also on behalf of several partners who contributed to our coalition report but cannot speak publicly today.

The human rights situation in Belarus has been consistently deteriorating over the past five years, with systemic and large-scale politically motivated repression following the rigged 2020 presidential elections and subsequent peaceful protests. Forms of repression have evolved and now affect not only dissenters, but potentially everyone, as well as all categories of rights, including economic, social and cultural.

It is important to note that none of the recommendations made five years ago in the areas of freedom of assembly and association, the independence of the media and access to information, as well as access to justice, have been implemented. Moreover, the situation in all of these areas has significantly worsened.

The authorities suppress and persecute any form of real or perceived political criticism and disagreement.

Although no street protests have been reported in recent years, arrests and criminal charges continue against peaceful post-election or anti-war protestors. The legislation lacks a presumption of *freedom of assembly*, with excessive restrictions and requirements, including expense payments.

In addition to raids, inspections, suspension of activities, written warnings, blocking of websites, since 2021, the authorities in violation of the *freedom of association* have forcibly dissolved or driven into self-liquidation nearly 2,000 NGOs, including human rights organisations, trade unions, and political parties. The process of registering public associations was made deliberately complex and open to arbitrary refusals. Activities of unregistered associations remains banned, and since 2022, carries up to two years in prison. Anti-extremist legislation is routinely misused to suppress civil society under the pretext of national security. The 2023 Law “On the Fundamentals of Civil Society” sharply narrowed the definition of civil society, excluding most NGOs – including those on human rights, gender equality, youth, and the environment – from formal engagement with the state. Members of civil society organisations, including 5 representatives of human rights organisations, remain imprisoned.

The state has carried out an unprecedented crackdown on *independent media*, employing legislative, administrative, and judicial tools to systematically dismantle the media landscape that operates outside state control. At least 39 media have been labelled “extremist,” making any cooperation with them a criminal offence. The Belarusian authorities carried out hundreds of arbitrary detentions and searches targeting journalists. 37 media professionals

remain imprisoned. State-owned media operate entirely under government control, serving as channels for propaganda, disinformation, and hate speech.

Hundreds of activists and journalists have fled the country and continue to face persecution even in exile, including criminal charges, property seizures, and threats to their families.

National courts act as instruments of repression, issuing politically motivated sentences against dissenters and violating *fair trial* guarantees. Since 2020, tens of thousands have been prosecuted for peaceful protests or dissent, while appeals against state actions are routinely rejected.

The Bar in Belarus lacks independence, operating under the control of the Ministry of Justice. Since 2020, authorities have obstructed lawyers' work in politically sensitive cases by denying access to clients, intercepting communications, imposing non-disclosure rules, and closing trials. At least 141 were disbarred, and 6 imprisoned on political charges. These practices, combined with broader repression of civil society, seriously hinder access to justice and deprive many of a fair trial.

The state is actively legalising repression for systematic politically motivated persecution in various fields: more than 50 normative legal acts were adopted or amended to intentionally formalise arbitrary limitations of human rights or create conditions for their violation.

In closing, Belarus today is a country where fear has replaced trust, repression has replaced dialogue, and law is used not to protect, but to punish. The UPR process offers a rare opportunity to insist that Belarus take concrete steps toward restoring fundamental freedoms. We urge the international community to deliver clear, strong recommendations – and to follow up on their implementation.

Among them:

1. End arbitrary persecution for participating in peaceful assemblies and guarantee freedom of assembly in the future, including by bringing domestic legislation in line with international standards.
2. End forced liquidation of CSOs, restoring dissolved CSOs, and ensuring favorable conditions for their work, including funding access. Lift the criminal liability for activities of unregistered associations under Article 193-1 and restore the rights of those prosecuted.
3. End the repression of independent media, journalists, and individuals exercising freedom of expression, including the misuse of anti-extremist laws. Revise the Law “On Mass Media” to align with international standards, ensuring media freedom and a safe environment free from harassment and intimidation.
4. Ensure the independence of the judiciary and legal profession by safeguarding fair trial guarantees, protecting lawyers from persecution, and enabling effective legal defence in politically motivated cases.

Thank you.