



1.2. The 2020 protests

In its history, Belarus has experienced many episodes of large-scale protests, often linked to allegations of electoral fraud. Demonstrations following Lukashenka's re-election for the third and fourth presidential terms in 2006 and 2010 were met with force by the authorities, resulting in arrests of hundreds of protesters.[62](#) By 2020, due to the established system of governance, state institutions and law enforcement started perceiving protests primarily as a threat rather than an exercise of people's rights.[63](#)

In May 2020, protests broke out after President Lukashenka announced his intention to seek a sixth term in the office.[64](#) After the Central Electoral Commission (CEC) announced Lukashenka's victory in the presidential election held on 9 August 2020,[65](#) hundreds of thousands of people gathered in Minsk[66](#) to protest widespread allegations of electoral fraud.[67](#) The protests spread across the country, being driven – next to the claims of electoral fraud – by a deteriorating economic situation, dissatisfaction with the government's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic, and a decline in public trust in state institutions.[68](#)

The protests were unprecedented in scale and duration, continuing for several months and joined by people from diverse segments of society. Particularly, women, many of whom were previously politically inactive, were reportedly 'at the forefront' of the protests.[69](#) The authorities responded with a violent crackdown, employing excessive force and carrying out large-scale arbitrary arrests and detentions to suppress the protests.[70](#) During the protests, tens of thousands of individuals were reportedly detained for participating in the protests, taking photos, carrying white-red-white flags, or wearing clothes in these colours.[71](#)

By June 2021,[72](#) over 35 000 people had been arbitrarily detained in relation to the protests.[73](#) Protesters had been subjected to summary trials in both administrative and criminal cases.[74](#) As reported by human rights organisation Viasna, as of August 2025, over 3 670 people had been convicted for participation in the 2020 protests, noting that human rights defenders assess the actual figure to be higher due to incomplete data.[75](#)

In detention, ill-treatment and torture were reportedly widespread,[76](#) including instances of sexual and gender-based violence.[77](#) Furthermore, while several leading political opposition figures 'were arbitrarily detained and convicted in unfair trials,' many others were forced into exile, convicted *in absentia*, and face arrest should they return to Belarus.[78](#) The number of Belarusians who left the country after the 2020 protests has been estimated at between 200 000 and 500 000.[79](#) According to some estimates, as of 2024, the number of people who have left Belarus may be up to one million.[80](#)

Despite widespread violence against protesters⁸¹ and human rights violations,⁸² those responsible were not held accountable.⁸³ Instead, ‘many were awarded or promoted’ for carrying out or aligning with Lukashenka’s direct orders,⁸⁴ contributing to a ‘culture of impunity’ within the security apparatus.⁸⁵

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HRW, “I Swear to Fulfill the Duties of Defense Lawyer Honestly and Faithfully.” Politically Motivated Crackdown on Human Rights Lawyers in Belarus, 27 May 2024, [url](#)

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UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Group of Independent Experts on the Situation of Human Rights in Belarus, 7 February 2025, [url](#), para. 24; Bertelsmann Stiftung, BTI 2026 Country Report – Belarus, 2026, [url](#), p. 5

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UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Group of Independent Experts on the Situation of Human Rights in Belarus, 7 February 2025, [url](#), para. 23

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Viasna, 3,670 convicted: The relentless crackdown on Belarus's 2020 protesters, 12 August 2025, [url](#)

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HRW, No Choice for Voters in Belarus' Sham Elections, 24 January 2025, [url](#); HRW, "I Swear to Fulfill the Duties of Defense Lawyer Honestly and Faithfully." Politically Motivated Crackdown on Human Rights Lawyers in Belarus, 27 May 2024, [url](#); Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, Belarus, 14 November 2025, [url](#)

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Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, Belarus, 14 November 2025, [url](#)

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