

BELARUS 2015 HUMAN RIGHTS REPORT

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Belarus is an authoritarian state. The country's constitution provides for a directly elected president who is head of state, and a bicameral parliament, the national assembly. A prime minister appointed by the president is the nominal head of government, but power is concentrated in the presidency, both in fact and in law. Since his election as president in 1994, Aliaksandr Lukashenka has consolidated his rule over all institutions and undermined the rule of law through authoritarian means, including manipulated elections and arbitrary decrees. All subsequent presidential elections, including the one held in 2015, were neither free nor fair and fell well short of international standards. The 2012 parliamentary elections also failed to meet international standards. Civilian authorities, Lukashenka in particular, maintained effective control over security forces.

The most significant human rights problems continued to be: citizens were unable to change their government through elections; in a system bereft of checks and balances, authorities committed abuses; and former political prisoners' political rights remained restricted while the government failed to account for longstanding cases of politically motivated disappearances. On August 22, President Lukashenka released six individuals considered political prisoners by human rights organizations, including 2010 presidential candidate Mikalai Statkevich.

Other human rights problems included abuses by the security forces, which reportedly mistreated suspects during investigations and in prisons. Prison conditions remained poor. Authorities arbitrarily arrested, detained, and imprisoned citizens for criticizing officials, participating in demonstrations, and other political reasons. The judiciary experienced political interference and a lack of independence; trial outcomes often appeared predetermined, and trials occurred behind closed doors or in the absence of the accused. Authorities infringed on the right of privacy. The government restricted civil liberties, including freedom of speech, press, assembly, association, and religion. The government seized printed materials from civil society activists and prevented independent media from disseminating information and materials. The government continued to hinder or prevent the activities of some religious groups, at times fining them or restricting their services. Official corruption in all branches of government remained a problem. Authorities harassed human rights groups, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and political parties, refusing to register many and then threatening them with criminal prosecution for operating without registration.

Violence and discrimination against women were problems, as was violence against children. Trafficking in persons remained a problem, although prosecution and victim identification slightly improved. There was discrimination against lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI) persons; those with disabilities; Roma and other ethnic minorities; persons with HIV/AIDS; and those who sought to use the Belarusian language. Authorities harassed and at times dismissed from their jobs members of independent unions in state-owned enterprises, severely limiting the ability of workers to form and join independent trade unions and to organize and bargain collectively. Authorities also employed various means of forced labor.

Authorities at all levels operated with impunity and failed to take steps to prosecute or punish officials in the government or security forces who committed human rights abuses.

Section 1. Respect for the Integrity of the Person, Including Freedom from:

a. Arbitrary or Unlawful Deprivation of Life

During the year there were no reports that the government or its agents committed arbitrary or unlawful killings and no reports of deaths from torture.

b. Disappearance

There were no developments in the reportedly continuing investigations into the 2000 disappearance of journalist Zmitser Zavadski and the 1999 disappearances of former deputy prime minister Viktor Hanchar, former interior minister Yuri Zakharanka, and businessman Anatol Krasouski. There was evidence of government involvement in the disappearances, but authorities continued to deny any connection with them. In October 2014 a senior Investigations Committee officer informed Zakharanka's mother that by law it was impossible to apply the statute of limitations unless a suspect was identified and charged, and thus the case of her son could not be closed as she had requested. The committee refused Zakharanka's mother's request to study case materials, citing that it was only possible upon completion of the preliminary investigation. Human rights advocates argued that the law does not criminalize enforced disappearances by state agents or by those acting with the authorization, support, or acquiescence of the state.

c. Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment

The law prohibits such practices. Nevertheless, the Committee for State Security (KGB), riot police, and other security forces, often unidentified and in plain clothes, continued to beat detainees occasionally. Security forces also reportedly mistreated individuals during investigations. During arrests police occasionally beat criminal suspects and citizens.

Human rights advocates, opposition leaders, and activists released from detention facilities continued to report maltreatment and other forms of physical and psychological abuse of suspects during criminal and administrative investigations.

On October 13, security forces in Minsk detained and beat blogger Viktor Nikitsenka. The reported reason for the detention was his taking a photo outside the Government House building with a homemade poster that read, “Lukashenka On Trial.” Police refused to open a criminal investigation into Nikitsenka’s beating, and authorities fined the blogger for holding an unsanctioned demonstration and resisting police.

On August 31, Yury Liashenka filed a complaint with the UN Human Rights Committee stemming from a November 2014 protest in which medics detained him, took him to a hospital against his will, and injected him unwillingly with unknown substances. Liashenka, who utilizes a wheelchair, had organized the protest to raise awareness about the rights of persons with disabilities. Liashenka also received a fine for organizing the unsanctioned protest.

Observers reported a few isolated cases of hazing of new army recruits, including beatings and other forms of physical and psychological abuse, although fewer than in previous years due to the government’s increased prosecution of offenders.

Prison and Detention Center Conditions

Prison and detention center conditions remained poor and in many cases posed threats to life and health.

Physical Conditions: According to local activists and human rights lawyers, there were shortages of food, medicine, warm clothing, and bedding as well as inadequate access to basic or emergency medical care and clean drinking water. Ventilation in cells and overall sanitation were poor, and authorities failed to

provide conditions necessary for maintaining proper personal hygiene. Prisoners frequently complained of malnutrition and low-quality uniforms and bedding. Some former political prisoners reported psychological abuse and being forced to share a cell with violent criminals. The law permits family and friends to bring detainees food and hygiene products and to send them parcels by mail, but authorities did not always allow this.

Overcrowding of holding facilities and prisons continued to be a problem, although an amnesty, which began in June 2015, reduced the number of inmates. Ministry of Internal Affairs officials dismissed reports of overcrowding. Persons sentenced to a form of internal exile (khimiya) were allowed to work outside detention facilities but were required to return to prison barracks, where they lived under strict conditions and supervision.

There were isolated reports that police placed underage suspects in pretrial detention facility cells together with adult suspects and former convicts. Authorities held juvenile prisoners separately from adults at juvenile penal colonies, arrest houses, and pretrial holding facilities. In general, conditions for female and juvenile prisoners were slightly better than for male prisoners.

According to human rights NGOs and former prisoners, authorities routinely abused prisoners.

In April the Office of the Prosecutor General stated it would reopen the criminal investigation into the 2013 death from heart attack, following an alleged beating, of 21-year-old prisoner Ihar Ptichkin.

Authorities denied efforts by prisoner Pyotr Kuchura and his wife to obtain an investigation into his mistreatment in the Mahilyou prison in 2013. In 2013 prison authorities reportedly began pressuring Kuchura and limiting his family visits because they believed Kuchura and his wife were trying to publicize violations of inmates' rights. Kuchura was moved to a punishment cell where excessive chlorine in the toilet and sink poisoned him. He remained in jail at year's end.

Credible sources maintained that prison administrators employed inmates to intimidate political prisoners and compel confessions. They also reported that authorities neither explained nor protected political prisoners' legal rights and excessively penalized them for minor violations of the prison rules. For example, on April 30, the Mahilyou region court turned down an appeal filed by Mikalai Dziadok, a political prisoner, to challenge his additional one-year prison term on

charges of allegedly violating prison regulations. He was due to be released in March upon completion of his 4.5-year term; however, his term was extended for one additional year on February 26. The judge denied motions from Dziadok to be present at the appeals hearing. In May, Dziadok cut his wrists and stomach to protest his placement in a cold and poorly ventilated solitary confinement penalty cell for refusing to work overtime, among other alleged violations, at the jail in the town of Horki, where he was moved after his appeals hearing. Prison administration officials transferred him to a medical unit in jail on May 20 but moved him back to the penalty ward shortly after for allegedly violating prison officers' orders. Dziadok spent more than 40 days in solitary confinement in May-June, and the prison administration moved him to a solitary confinement cell for the remainder of his term. His lawyer's visits were also either limited to 15 minutes or denied in June-July, and he continuously faced further penalties for allegedly violating prison regulations. President Lukashenka released Dziadok and five other persons considered political prisoners on August 22.

On January 16, authorities placed 2010 presidential candidate Mikalai Statkevich in solitary confinement and in a prison-type cell for failure to participate in "community work" and "amateur art activities." During the year, citing various infractions, the prison administration also denied Statkevich a three-day meeting with his family and a three-hour meeting with his spouse; they limited his correspondence and transferred him to a higher security jail until December 2016, the end of his six-year sentence. Authorities asserted that Statkevich was "treated fairly leniently" since the court did not extend his six-year term. Statkevich was one of the six political prisoners released on August 22.

Given the poor medical care, observers believed tuberculosis, pneumonia, HIV/AIDS, and other communicable diseases were widespread in prisons. In March 2014 a senior tuberculosis control officer reported that tuberculosis infection in prisons exceeded the national average by four times but claimed that only up to 4 percent of the 7,400 tuberculosis patients across the country were in prisons. The officer also reported that the number of tuberculosis cases in 2014 dropped by 10 percent from 2013.

In September human rights NGOs reported that approximately 80 individuals in internal exile at a facility in Mazyr signed a petition to the Corrections Department of the Interior Ministry protesting maltreatment, dehumanizing conditions, and lack of employment opportunities. The inmates complained they had to wait for the administration to offer employment for as long as eight months, although regulations require employing inmates within a month of their arrival at the

facility. Unemployed inmates had no income and complained that they often had nothing to eat. Officials dismissed these reports.

Administration: Authorities claimed to have conducted annual or more frequent investigations and monitoring of prison and detention center conditions. Human rights groups, however, asserted that such inspections, even if they did occur, lacked any credibility given the absence of an ombudsman and the inability of reliable independent human rights advocates to visit prisons or provide consultations to prisoners.

Prisoners and detainees had limited access to visitors, and denial of meetings with families was a common punishment for disciplinary violations. Authorities often denied or delayed political prisoners meetings with family as a means of pressure and intimidation.

Although the law provides for freedom of religion, and there were no reports of egregious infringements, authorities generally prevented prisoners from holding religious services and performing ceremonies that did not comply with prison regulations.

Former prisoners reported that prison officials often censored or did not forward their complaints to higher authorities, and that prison administrators either ignored or selectively considered requests for investigation of alleged abuses. Prisoners also reported that prison administration frequently refused to provide them with copies of responses to their complaints, which further complicated their defense. Complaints could result in retaliation against prisoners who spoke out, including humiliation, death threats, or other forms of punishment and harassment.

Corruption in prisons was a serious problem, and observers noted that parole often depended on bribes to prison personnel or a prisoner's political affiliation.

Independent Monitoring: Despite numerous requests to the Ministries of Internal Affairs and Justice, government officials continued to refuse to meet with human rights advocates or approve requests from NGOs to visit detention and prison facilities. In its July 29 response to Pavel Sapelka, of the human rights NGO Vyasna, the Interior Ministry's Corrections Department claimed that it would be "inexpedient" for him to visit detention facilities and monitor their conditions.

d. Arbitrary Arrest or Detention

The law limits arbitrary detention, but the government did not respect these limits. Authorities continued to arrest or detain individuals for political reasons and to use administrative measures to detain political activists before, during, and after protests and other major public events. The Investigations Committee is charged with examining killings and other abuses committed by security forces.

Role of the Police and Security Apparatus

The Ministry of Internal Affairs exercises authority over police, but other bodies outside of its control, for example, the KGB, the Financial Investigations Department of the State Control Committee, the Investigation Committee, and presidential security services also exercise police functions. The president also has the authority to subordinate all security bodies to his personal command. Impunity among law enforcement personnel remained a serious problem. Individuals have the right to report police abuse to a prosecutor, although the government often did not investigate reported abuses or hold perpetrators accountable.

Arrest Procedures and Treatment of Detainees

By law police must request permission from a prosecutor to detain a person for more than three hours, but police usually ignored this procedure and routinely detained and arrested individuals without warrants. Authorities may hold a criminal suspect for up to 10 days without filing formal charges and for up to 18 months after filing charges. Under the law prosecutors, investigators, and security service agencies have the authority to extend detention without consulting a judge. Detainees have the right to petition the court system regarding the legality of their detention, but authorities frequently suppressed or ignored such appeals.

Arbitrary Arrest: During the year authorities routinely detained or arrested dozens of individuals, including opposition figures, members of the independent media, and civil society activists for reasons widely considered politically motivated. Authorities used administrative measures to detain political activists before, during, and after planned demonstrations and protests, as well as other public events.

On January 22, police detained nine democratic activists gathered at a park near the Ukrainian Embassy to commemorate those killed at the Maidan Square in Kyiv in 2014. Although three were released without charge, a Minsk district court sentenced activists Maksim Vinyarski and Ales Makayeu to serve 15 days, Yauhen Batura and Mikalai Kolas 10 days, and Volha Mikalaichyk five days on charges of

holding an unsanctioned demonstration. A 67-year-old opposition activist received a fine of 3.6 million rubles (\$226) for the same demonstration and complained of physical and verbal police abuse during detention.

On February 3, authorities detained Siarhei Shtoda, an owner of a hauling company, to prevent a demonstration, which he planned to hold the next day in protest of heavy fines levied against a number of hauling companies for allegedly violating toll road regulations across the country. Shtoda was charged with holding an unauthorized protest and served 15 days in jail.

On June 22, a Minsk district court sentenced Maksim Vinyarski and Siarhei Matskoys, activists from the European Belarus opposition group, for 10 and five days, respectively, for demonstrating for the release of political prisoners. Leanid Kulakou, their associate, was sentenced to 10 days in jail on June 23. Police detained these three European Belarus activists on June 19 and kept them in detention until their trials.

Pretrial Detention: Authorities may hold a criminal suspect for up to 10 days without filing formal charges. Prior to being charged, the law provides detainees with no access to their families or to outside food and medical supplies, both of which are vital given poor conditions in detention facilities. Police routinely held persons for the full 10-day period before charging them.

Police often detained individuals for several hours, ostensibly to confirm their identity; fingerprinted them; and then released them without charge. Police and security forces frequently used this tactic to detain members of the democratic opposition and demonstrators, to prevent the distribution of leaflets and newspapers, or to break up civil society meetings and events.

On September 9, police officers in Yelsk, Homyel region, detained Aliaksandr Rybachenka, a European Belarus activist, for attempting to photograph flyers calling for an election boycott. After being held in the police station for more than three hours, he was released without charges.

Amnesty: An amnesty, which aimed to reduce the prison population, began in June. As of November, 1,725 convicts, including 66 individuals under age 18, were released, and 1,938 individuals had their prison sentences reduced by one year. The Interior Ministry reported that the amnesty was expected to affect more than 8,000 prisoners, including an estimated 2,200 who would be released.

e. Denial of Fair Public Trial

The constitution provides for an independent judiciary, but authorities did not respect judicial independence. Observers believed corruption, inefficiency, and political interference with judicial decisions were widespread. Courts convicted individuals on false and politically motivated charges brought by prosecutors, and observers believed that senior government leaders and local authorities dictated the outcomes of trials.

According to human rights groups, prosecutors wielded excessive and imbalanced authority because they may extend detention periods without the permission of judges. They also noted a power imbalance between the prosecution and the defense. Defense lawyers were unable to examine investigation files, be present during investigations and interrogations, or examine evidence against defendants until a prosecutor formally brought the case to court. Lawyers found it difficult to challenge some evidence because the Prosecutor's Office controlled all technical expertise. According to many defense attorneys, this power imbalance persisted throughout the year, especially in politically motivated criminal and administrative cases. Criminal defendants were exonerated in very few cases during the year.

By law, bar associations are independent, and licensed lawyers are permitted to establish private practices or bureaus. All lawyers, however, must be licensed by the Ministry of Justice and must renew their licenses every five years.

In the past the justice ministry used disbarment as a tool in political cases; the ministry accused the disbarred lawyers of distorting information about the investigations of their clients, their state of health, and their conditions of detention. During the year there were no new disbarments, but no disbarred lawyers had their licenses restored.

Trial Procedures

The law provides for the presumption of innocence. Nevertheless, the lack of judicial independence, state media practice of reporting on high-profile cases as if guilt were already certain, and widespread limits on defense rights frequently placed the burden of proving innocence on the defendant.

The law also provides for public trials, but authorities occasionally closed trials and frequently held them in judges' offices, where attendance was severely limited.

Judges adjudicate all trials; there is no system of trial by jury. For the most serious cases, two civilian advisers assist the judge.

The law provides defendants the right to attend proceedings, confront witnesses, and present evidence on their own behalf, but authorities did not always respect these rights.

The law provides for access to legal counsel for detainees and requires that courts appoint a lawyer for those who cannot afford one. Most judges and prosecutors were not fluent in Belarusian and rejected motions for interpreters. The law provides for the right to choose legal representation freely; however, a presidential decree prohibits NGO members who are lawyers from representing individuals other than members of their organizations in court. The government's disbarment of attorneys who represented political opponents of the regime further limited defendants' choice of counsel. The government also required defense attorneys to sign non-disclosure statements that limited their ability to release any information about the case to the public, media, and even defendants' family members.

Courts often allowed statements obtained by force and threats of bodily harm during interrogations to be used against defendants.

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Political Prisoners and Detainees

Local and international human rights organizations reported several different lists of political prisoners in the country. These included individuals who were not incarcerated but were facing criminal charges or with restrictive parole conditions at year's end. Many of those pardoned reported mistreatment in jail and pressure to sign pardon requests, and most were subsequently unable to exercise some civil and political rights.

On August 22, President Lukashenka pardoned six individuals recognized by local human rights organizations as political prisoners, including 2010 presidential candidate Mikalai Statkevich and two activists in the so-called anarchists case, Ihar Alinevich and Mikalai Dziadok. The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe and international and local human rights groups welcomed their release. The government did not restore the political rights of the released prisoners, and maintained police surveillance over them.

On August 11, authorities arrested four young men, Maksim Pekarski, Vadzim Zheromski, Viachaslau Kasinerau, and Yaraslau Ulyanenkau, on charges of malicious hooliganism for reportedly painting graffiti with patriotic slogans, such as, “Belarus should be Belarusian,” that police deemed to be “promoting violence in society and disregard of universally accepted rules of conduct.” One of two suspects told the press in September that during his detention, police bundled him into a bus, and an officer hit him in the face, fracturing his jaw. When they arrived at the police precinct, investigators pressured him to plead guilty and showed him records of his private phone conversations with his spouse, which were reportedly wiretapped months before the arrest. On August 31, police released Pekarski and Zheromski from custody after they admitted their participation in the acts and reimbursed damages. As of December 11, authorities dropped all charges against Ulyanenkau, charged Pekarski with property damage, Kasinerau with malicious hooliganism, and Zheromski (despite his earlier release) with malicious hooliganism and vandalizing property. The three were banned from leaving the country.

Several prominent political prisoners, who had completed their sentences in 2014, including anticorruption activist Mikalai Autukhovich, remained unable to exercise their full civil and political rights and subject to restrictions on their freedom of movement and police supervision. Autukhovich, for example, was not permitted to travel outside the city without official permission, and on August 7, a Vaukavysk district court extended preventive supervision of him for another six months.

On September 8, authorities detained Ales Mikhalevich, a former presidential candidate, when he sought to return to the country. Mikhalevich was released later in the day but remained under investigation and was banned from leaving the country without police permission. Mikhalevich had been arrested in 2010 in connection with postelection demonstrations, and he alleged that he had been tortured at KGB holding facilities. He had fled after being released on his own

recognizance in 2011. Investigators refused Mikhalevich's two appeals in October and December to drop criminal charges against him.

During their court hearings, defendants in politically motivated cases reported threats against associates and family members to compel testimony against the defendants, as well as pressure to sign confessions. Leading local human rights groups, including Vyasna and the Belarusian Helsinki Committee, either recognized these individuals as prisoners of conscience or noted serious due process violations that required at the very least a retrial.

Prison authorities often confiscated and censored mail of political prisoners, reportedly to exert pressure by further isolating prisoners and limiting their contacts with families and associates. Former political prisoner Ihar Alinevich's mother reported that authorities blocked political prisoners' correspondence and told them, "no one cares about them outside of the prison walls."

Civil Judicial Procedures and Remedies

The law provides that individuals can file lawsuits seeking damages for a human rights violation, but the civil judiciary was not independent and was rarely impartial in such matters.

f. Arbitrary Interference with Privacy, Family, Home, or Correspondence

The law prohibits such actions, but the government did not respect these prohibitions. Authorities used wiretapping, video surveillance, and a network of informers that deprived persons of privacy.

By law persons who obstruct law enforcement personnel in the performance of their duties can be penalized or charged with an administrative offense, even if the "duties" are inconsistent with the law. "Obstruction" could include any effort to prevent KGB or law enforcement officers from entering the premises of a company, establishment, or organization; refusing to allow KGB audits; or denying or restricting KGB access to information systems and databases.

The law requires a warrant before, or immediately after, conducting a search. Nevertheless, some democratic activists believed the KGB entered their homes unannounced. The KGB has the authority to enter any building at any time, as long as it applies for a warrant within 24 hours after the entry.

Security forces continued to target prominent opposition and civil society leaders with arbitrary searches and interrogations at border crossings and airports. For example, on January 16, border officials detained Viktor Sazonau, a Hrodna-based human rights advocate, and his two associates for four hours upon re-entering the country from Poland. Officers thoroughly searched their vehicle and personal belongings but did not confiscate anything.

While the law prohibits authorities from intercepting telephone and other communications without a prosecutor's order, authorities routinely monitored residences, telephones, and computers. Nearly all opposition political figures and many prominent members of civil society groups claimed that authorities monitored their conversations and activities. The government continued to collect and obtain personally identifiable information on independent journalists and democratic activists during raids and by confiscating computer equipment.

The law allows the KGB, the Ministry of Internal Affairs, special security services, financial intelligence personnel, and certain border guard detachments to use wiretaps. Wiretaps require the permission of a prosecutor, but the lack of prosecutorial independence rendered this requirement meaningless.

The Ministry of Communications has the authority to terminate the telephone service of persons who violate their telephone contracts, which prohibit the use of telephone services for purposes contrary to state interests and public order. Cell phone providers are banned from selling cell phone cards to customers who do not produce their passports or to foreigners who are not registered with local immigration services.

Authorities continued to harass family members of NGO leaders and civil society and opposition activists through selective application of the law.

Section 2. Respect for Civil Liberties, Including:

a. Freedom of Speech and Press

The constitution provides for freedom of speech and the press. The government did not respect these rights and enforced numerous laws to control and censor the public and the media. Moreover, the state press propagated views in support of President Lukashenka and official policies, without giving room for critical voices.

Freedom of Speech and Expression: Individuals could not criticize Lukashenka and the government publicly or discuss matters of general public interest without fear of reprisal. Authorities videotaped political meetings, conducted frequent identity checks, and used other forms of intimidation. Authorities also prohibited wearing facemasks, displaying unregistered or opposition flags and symbols, and displaying placards bearing messages deemed threatening to the government or public order.

For example, on May 11, a district court in Smalyavichy sentenced Leanid Kulakou, a European Belarus activist, to seven days in jail for displaying an opposition white-red-white flag and a banner, with the legend, “Invaders, Go Away!” in protest of pro-Putin Russian bikers touring the country.

On August 22, Lukashenka pardoned political prisoner Yury Rubtsou, a member of the Independent Union of Electronic Industry Workers, who police had arrested on multiple occasions for wearing T-shirts bearing anti-Lukashenka slogans.

The law also limits free speech by criminalizing actions such as giving information to a foreigner about the political, economic, social, military, or international situation of the country that authorities deem false or derogatory.

Press and Media Freedoms: Government restrictions limited access to information and often resulted in media self-censorship. State-controlled media did not provide balanced coverage and overwhelmingly presented the official version of events. Appearances by opposition politicians on state media were limited, primarily to those required by law during election campaigns. Authorities warned, fined, detained, and interrogated members of media.

For example, on March 12, police in Mahilyou searched the apartment of Ihar Barysau, the *Nash Mahilyou* web portal editor and an opposition activist, and confiscated three computers, a modem, and his private notebooks based on allegations that Barysau insulted a local businessman in online publications in January. Authorities returned most of his belongings following the closure of the libel investigation and the dropping of administrative charges related to running the website.

Under the law the government may close a publication, printed or online, after two warnings in one year for violating a range of restrictions on the press. Additionally, regulations give authorities arbitrary power to prohibit or censor reporting. The Information Ministry can suspend periodicals or newspapers for

three months without a court ruling. The law also prohibits the media from disseminating information on behalf of unregistered political parties, trade unions, and NGOs.

Limited information was available in the state-run press about the October presidential election, including about independent candidates. Authorities did not censor the publication of candidates' programs in print media. State media otherwise provided only limited coverage of the three candidates running against Lukashenka, who did not participate in a live television debate held before the election.

On May 5, Information Minister Liliya Ananich warned the media about criticizing the government and stated that the law required reporting to "accurately" reflect reality, "facilitate the development of society, and not harm national interests." Ananich also repeated her warning to owners of websites, who may be punished for abusive or "incorrect" comments on their message and forum boards.

The Information Ministry continued to deny registration to independent media outlets. In spite of the lack of registration, independent media, including newspapers, magazines, and internet news websites, sought to provide coverage of events. They operated, however, under repressive media laws, and most faced discriminatory publishing and distribution policies, including limiting access to government officials and press briefings, controlling the size of press runs of papers, and raising the cost of printing.

The government confiscated independent and opposition newspapers and seized leaflets and other materials deemed to have been printed illegally or which they labeled "extremist." For example, on October 8, authorities at a customs checkpoint in Hrodna briefly detained freelance journalist Aliaksei Trubkin and confiscated his copy of a 2010 human rights report by the "Vyasna" Human Rights Center and a book by Andrzej Poczobut, *System Bialorus*, with a photo of Lukashenka on the cover.

Authorities also often fined distributors of independent press publications. On April 27, a Mahilyou district court fined United Civic Party activist Mikalai Hladyshau 4.5 million rubles (\$282) for distributing copies of the independent newspaper *Novy Chas* and the party's anticorruption platform at a local railway station.

On January 23, the Supreme Court turned down an appeal from the *Narodnaya Volya* newspaper challenging a November 2014 warning by the Information Ministry about publishing materials deemed detrimental to public and national interests in an op-ed, which featured an analytical piece on the establishment of the Eurasian Economic Union.

On March 2, the Information Ministry issued warnings to three local private newspapers, *Gazeta Slonimskaya*, *Intex-Press*, and *Hantsavichski Chas*, for minor errors. The two latter newspapers were accused of using a two-letter abbreviation “RB” instead of spelling out “Republic of Belarus.” On March 5, the independent *Borisovskie Novosti* and a commercial supplement received two similar warnings from the ministry. On March 20, the ministry issued the same warning to the private weekly *Novy Chas*. After a complaint from the Belarusian Association of Journalists, the ministry also warned two state publications, the satirical magazine *Vozhyk*, and *Nash Krai* newspaper, on the same grounds as the independent papers.

State-owned media, which were biased and served largely as a propaganda arm of the regime, dominated the information field and maintained the highest circulation through generous subsidies and preferences. There was no countrywide private television. The state-owned postal system, Belposhta, and the state-owned kiosk system, Belsayuzdruk, continued to refuse to deliver or sell numerous independent newspapers that covered politics.

Although authorities continued to allow the circulation of *Narodnaya Volya* and *Nasha Niva*, two independent national newspapers, through state distribution systems, they remained subject to restrictions on the number of copies allowed to circulate and to financial penalties.

Several independent newspapers, including *Vitsyebiski Kuryer*, *Salidarnasc*, *BDG*, and *Bobruyski Kuryer*, disseminated internet-only versions due to printing and distribution restrictions.

International media continued to operate in the country but not without interference and prior censorship. Euronews and the Russian channels First Channel, NTV, and RTR were generally available, although only through paid cable services in many parts of the country and then with a lag time that allowed the removal of news deemed undesirable by authorities. At times authorities blocked, censored, or replaced their international news programs with local programming.

Violence and Harassment: Authorities continued to harass and detain local and foreign journalists routinely.

Security forces continually hampered efforts of independent journalists to cover demonstrations and protests in Minsk and across the country. The independent Belarusian Association of Journalists reported that, as of December 20, police detained 14 journalists while performing their professional duties. For example, on February 26, police detained a journalist of the Belarusian edition of the popular Russian tabloid *Komsomolskaya Pravda* for taking photos of the building of the Academy of Sciences. He was released four hours later after an identification check. The newspaper responded by running an article identifying buildings that were “too sensitive” to photograph.

The government routinely denied accreditation to journalists who work with foreign media. As of December 20, at least 15 journalists had been fined in 28 cases for not having government accreditation or cooperating with a foreign media outlet. On May 19, the Minsk city court upheld earlier decisions by the Foreign Ministry to refuse official accreditation to Viktor Parfianenka, a Hrodna-based freelance journalist writing for various foreign media broadcasting in the country. This was his seventh accreditation denial.

Independent journalist and military expert Aliaksandr Alesin was detained on November 25 and faced charges of cooperating with foreign intelligence sources, which carry a maximum penalty of two years’ imprisonment. He was released on December 10 but was banned from leaving the country, and at year’s end no trial date had been set.

Censorship or Content Restrictions: The government exerted pressure on the vast majority of independent publications to exercise self-censorship, warning them not to report on certain topics or criticize the government. The government tightly and directly controlled the content of state broadcast and print media. Local independent television stations operated in some areas and reported local news, although most were under government pressure to forgo reporting on national and sensitive issues or risk censorship.

Authorities allowed only state-run radio and television networks to broadcast nationwide. The government used this national monopoly to disseminate its version of events and minimize alternative or opposing viewpoints. Authorities banned state media from citing works and broadcasting music by independent local and well-known foreign musicians, artists, writers, and painters who were named

on an alleged, unofficial nationwide “blacklist” for speaking in support of political prisoners and opposition or democratic activists.

Authorities warned businesses not to advertise in newspapers that criticized the government. As a result independent media outlets operated under severe budgetary constraints.

Journalists reporting for international media that gave extensive coverage to the country, such as the Warsaw-based independent satellite channel Belsat TV and Radio Racyja, were denied press accreditation and received warnings from the Prosecutor’s Office and heavy fines.

Libel/Slander Laws: Libel is a criminal offense. There are large fines and prison sentences of up to four years for defaming or insulting the president. Penalties for defamation of character make no distinction between private and public persons. A public figure who is criticized for poor performance while in office may sue both the journalist and the media outlet that disseminated the critical report.

On August 6, police in Slonim opened an investigation, based on interviews by local residents, into a July 29 story in the local private newspaper *Slonimskaya Hazeta* that purportedly defamed Lukashenka.

Authorities frequently cited national security as grounds for censorship of media.

Internet Freedom

The government interfered with internet freedom by reportedly monitoring e-mail and internet chat rooms. While individuals, groups, and publications were generally able to engage in the peaceful expression of views via the internet, including by e-mail, all who did so risked possible legal and personal repercussions and at times were believed to practice self-censorship. Opposition activists’ e-mails and other web-based communications were likely to be monitored.

On January 1, media law amendments making news websites and any internet information sources subject to the same regulations as print media came into effect. Under the amended law, online news providers must remove content and publish corrections if ordered by the authorities and must adhere to a prohibition against “extremist” information. Amendments also restricted access to websites whose content includes promotion of violence, wars, “extremist activities”; materials related to illicit weapons, explosives, and drugs; trafficking in persons;

pornography; and information that can harm the national interests of the country. Authorities may block access to sites that fail to obey government orders, including because of a single violation of distributing prohibited information, without a prosecutor or court's mandate. In addition, owners of internet sites may be held liable for users' comments that carry any prohibited information, and these sites may be blocked. The amended law also mandates the creation of a database of news websites. If a news website receives two or more formal warnings from the authorities, it may be removed from the database and lose its right to distribute information. Amendments also prohibit foreign states and foreign individuals from holding more than a 20 percent stake in local media companies.

In January various state agencies, including the General Prosecutor's Office, the Interior Ministry's cybersecurity department, and the Information and Analytical Center of the Presidential Administration refused to investigate cases of websites being blocked in December 2014, as requested by the Belarusian Association of Journalists. In December 2014, after a sharp devaluation of the Belarusian currency, access to several independent news websites, including [onliner.by](#), [belapan.com](#), [belapan.by](#), [naviny.by](#), [charter97.org](#), [gazetaby.com](#), [zautra.by](#), [belaruspartisan.org](#), [udf.by](#), and [21.by](#), was blocked. With the exception of [onliner.by](#), authorities did not publicly claim responsibility for the blockage. Information Minister Liliya Ananich warned independent media outlets against "inciting panic" during the currency devaluation.

While the list of blocked internet resources remained unavailable to the public, from January to November the Ministry of Information reportedly blocked access to 40 internet sites, including 18 for drug trafficking, 11 (with a court mandate) for distributing extremist materials, five for illicit promotion of medications, one for child pornography and other content violations. Access to four of these sites was later restored.

The authorities reportedly monitored internet traffic. By law the telecommunications monopoly, Beltelekam, and other organizations authorized by the government have the exclusive right to maintain internet domains.

A 2010 presidential edict requires registration of service providers and internet websites, and requires the collection of information on users at internet cafes. It requires service providers to store data on individuals' internet use for a year and provide that information to law enforcement agencies upon request. Violations of the edict are punishable by prison sentences.

State companies and organizations, which included the workplaces of up to 80 percent of the country's workers, reportedly had internet filters.

In response to the government's interference and internet restrictions, many opposition groups and independent newspapers switched to internet domains operating outside the country. Observers said the few remaining independent media sites with domestic ".BY" (Belarus) domain suffixes practiced self-censorship at times.

On May 15, the Information Ministry issued a warning to the website of the Polish-based Radio Racyja and requested information about its owner for reportedly violating media laws. The website of the United Civic Party, the opposition news website www.freeregion.info, and music website tuzin.fm received similar notifications of violating media laws and allegedly spreading "false information that may cause harm to state or public interests."

On June 18, the Ministry of Information blocked access to art and life-style portal kyky.org, after having previously issued a warning to the site. The ministry stated that the website was blocked in accordance with the media law, as its opinion pieces contained content that was judged to be harmful to the national interests, including derogatory remarks about Victory Day and "taboo language." According to the site's editor, kyky.org received a letter on May 15 from the ministry with a warning but did not receive subsequent communication before it was shut down. On June 24, Deputy Information Minister Ihar Lutski ordered access to the site restored after the editor removed the opinion pieces.

On several occasions cyberattacks of unknown origin temporarily disabled independent news portals and social networking sites. For example, on October 5, the popular independent news agency BelaPAN issued an official statement regarding Distributed Denial of Service attacks, which began on October 3, after BelaPAN's sister site, naviny.by, posted a critical article about a high-level event on October 2, in which Lukashenka participated. The news agency described its coverage, which included an interview with students sent to the event, as objective.

According to various media sources, the number of internet users reached approximately 6.5 million persons or approximately 70 percent of the population who used the internet daily or numerous times a month. Internet penetration was approximately 83 percent among users 15 to 50 years of age.

Academic Freedom and Cultural Events

The government restricted academic freedom and cultural events.

Educational institutions were required to teach an official state ideology that combined reverence for the achievements of the former Soviet Union and of Belarus under the leadership of Lukashenka. Government-mandated textbooks contained a heavily propagandized version of history and other subjects. Authorities obligated all schools, including private institutions, to follow state directives to inculcate the official ideology and prohibited schools from being led by opposition members. The education minister has the right to appoint and dismiss the heads of private educational institutions.

Use of the word “academic” was restricted, and NGOs were prohibited from including the word “academy” in their titles. Opportunities to receive a higher education in the Belarusian language (vice Russian) in the majority of fields of study were scarce. The administrations of higher educational institutions made no effort to accommodate students wishing to study in Belarusian-language classes.

The Belarusian Republican Youth Union (BRYU), an official organization modeled on the Soviet-era KOMSOMOL, urged university students to join the BRYU to receive benefits and dormitory rooms. Local authorities also pressured BRYU members to campaign on behalf of government candidates. On October 10, the last date of early voting in the presidential election, students from the Belarusian State University of Computer Science and Radio electronics reported to an independent election monitoring group that university faculty were pressuring students into early voting by threatening them with eviction from the dormitories. Additionally, authorities at times reportedly pressured students to act as informants for the country’s security services.

According to an Education Ministry directive, educational institutions may expel students who engage in anti-government or unsanctioned political activity and must ensure the proper ideological education of students. School officials, however, cited poor academic performance or absence from classes as the official reason for expulsions. On October 10, the last date of early voting in the presidential election, students from the Belarusian State University of Computer Science and Radioelectronics reported to an independent election monitoring group that university faculty were pressuring students into early voting by threatening them with eviction from the dormitories.

The government continued to discourage and prevent teachers and activists from advancing the wider use of the Belarusian language and the preservation of Belarusian culture. A number of universities across the country continued not to enroll students in their undergraduate Belarusian linguistic programs for teachers of the Belarusian language and literature, citing low demand and a low number of applications in recent years.

The government also restricted cultural events, selectively approving performances of what they deemed opposition music groups at small concert halls. Approvals required groups to go through cumbersome and time-consuming procedures to receive permissions. The procedures continued to force some opposition theater and music groups out of public venues and into bars and private apartments by banning their performances.

According to the Belarusian State University (BSU) student association, the BSU administration banned the school's theater group from showing a play based on the life of prominent Belarusian language advocate and linguist Branislau Tarashkevich (1892-1938), who standardized the modern Belarusian language. The play premiered on November 14 and was shown again two days later, after which the administration cancelled subsequent scheduled performances. Authorities also suppressed unofficial commemorations of historical events. In his interview with independent press outlets on August 4, Lukashenka acknowledged that some musicians could be banned unofficially because they could be "some thugs, who have insulted or are against the government."

Authorities in Hrodna banned a July 26 concert by the popular Polish rock band Lombard, although concert organizers were granted prior permission to hold it on the condition that Russian and Belarusian bands would also perform. The organizers, associated with the independent and unregistered Union of Poles in Belarus (UPB), attributed the ban to Lombard's promotion of Polish Solidarity movement ideas and their plans to participate in events related to the 10th anniversary of the UPB. Lombard performed in Hrodna in 1988 and 2008.

The government also restricted the activities of a nonofficial writers union, the independent Union of Belarusian Writers, and extensively supported the pro-government Union of Writers of Belarus. Authorities harassed distributors of books authored by critical and independent writers or written in the Belarusian language. Although sold at bookstores and online across the country, authorities did not allow printing houses and publishers to print copies of books by Sviatlana Aleksievich, winner of the Nobel prize for literature.

In December 2014 the tax ministry imposed a fine of one billion rubles (\$62,700) on Ihar Lohvinau's publishing house for "unlicensed retailing." Lohvinau had applied eight times for a license since authorities ordered him to obtain one in January 2014; each application was rejected. Lohvinau's original license was revoked in 2013, after authorities determined that his 2011 *Belarus Press Photo* book was "extremist material." In January a Minsk court dismissed Lohvinau's appeal of the fine, which the publisher paid after a fundraising campaign. Authorities subsequently licensed the business.

b. Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and Association

Freedom of Assembly

The constitution provides for freedom of peaceful assembly; however, the government severely restricted this right. Authorities employed a variety of means to discourage demonstrations, disperse them, minimize their effect, and punish the participants.

Only registered political parties, trade unions, and NGOs could request permission to hold a demonstration of more than 1,000 persons. Authorities usually denied requests by independent and opposition groups. A general atmosphere of repression and the threat of imprisonment exercised a chilling effect on potential protest organizers. This appeared to have resulted in fewer and smaller demonstrations.

The law criminalizes participation in the activities of unregistered NGOs, training persons to demonstrate, financing public demonstrations, or soliciting foreign assistance "to the detriment" of the country. In 2011 the law was amended to prohibit announcing demonstrations, including via the internet or social networks, before authorities approved them. Violations are punishable by up to three years in prison.

Organizers must apply at least 15 days in advance for permission to conduct a public demonstration, rally, or meeting, and government officials are required to respond no later than five days prior to the scheduled event. Authorities, however, generally granted permits only for opposition demonstrations if held far from city centers. Authorities used intimidation and threats to discourage persons from participating in demonstrations, openly videotaped participants, and imposed heavy fines or jail sentences on participants in unsanctioned demonstrations. In

addition authorities required organizers to conclude contracts with police, fire department, health, and sanitary authorities for their services during and after a mass event. In some localities, local officials told permit applicants that they must first secure these contracts before a permit can be issued. When the applicants asked the police, fire department, health, and sanitary authorities to sign contracts, however, they were told that they first must have an approved permit. Any individual found guilty of violating the law on mass events may not apply for another permit for a year following the conviction. In January authorities rejected more than 70 applications for permission for the United Civic party to stage small demonstrations calling for Lukashenka's resignation.

On many occasions police and other security officials detained demonstrators before, during, and after unsanctioned peaceful demonstrations and major public events (see section 1.d.). Numerous protest participants were detained, fined, and sentenced up to 25 days in administrative detention. Authorities fined opposition activists and members of NGOs for participating in unauthorized protests, including during the presidential election campaign.

Opposition activists held several unsanctioned rallies during the year and faced administrative charges and fines. For example, on September 22, a Minsk district Court fined 2010 presidential candidate and former political prisoner Mikalai Statkevich in absentia 7.2 million rubles (\$451) for holding an unsanctioned rally in downtown Minsk on September 10.

On November 20, authorities fined United Civic Party leader Lyabedzka nine million rubles (\$564) and opposition activist Viachaslau Siuchyuk 10.8 million rubles (\$677) for participating in the October 29 candlelight vigil in front of the KGB building.

A Minsk district court on December 7 fined Stanislau Pavlinkovich, a democratic activist, and Anton Zhylo, a member of the United Civic Party, 4.5 million (\$282) and 3.6 million rubles (\$226), respectively, for participating in a November 24 unsanctioned demonstration to mark the 1996 referendum that stripped the powers of the parliament and expanded the powers of the president, and for carrying an opposition white-red-white flag.

Human rights activists, independent Belarus Free Theater (BFT) members, individuals in wheelchairs, and their supporters held a number of flash mobs on December 23-27 to raise awareness about the human rights of persons with disabilities and to speak out about official and societal discrimination against them.

On December 30, a court in Minsk fined BFT member Mikhail Kauko 3.6 million rubles (\$226) for participating in an unsanctioned demonstration.

Police occasionally used preemptive arrest and detention to prevent democratic activists' participation in protests and activities.

Authorities took various measures to deter prodemocracy activists from celebrating the March 25 anniversary of the country's 1918 declaration of independence (an event the government does not recognize), although Minsk city authorities authorized the demonstration but forced organizers to reschedule it from 6 p.m. to 3 a.m. to ensure a smaller attendance.

Freedom of Association

The law provides for freedom of association, but the government restricted it and selectively enforced laws and registration regulations to restrict the operation of independent associations that might criticize the government. Particularly since 2010, authorities have sought to close any legal loopholes they considered beneficial to NGOs.

All NGOs, political parties, and trade unions must receive Ministry of Justice approval to become registered. A government commission reviews and approves all registration applications; it based its decisions largely on political and ideological compatibility with official views and practices.

Actual registration procedures required applicants to provide the number and names of founders, along with a physical address in a nonresidential building for an office, an extraordinary burden in view of the tight financial straits of most NGOs, and individual property owners' fears of renting space to independent groups. Individuals listed as members were vulnerable to reprisal. The government's refusal to rent office space to unregistered organizations and the expense of renting private space reportedly forced most organizations to use residential addresses, which authorities could use as a reason for deregistration. The law criminalizes activities conducted on behalf of unregistered groups and subjects group members to penalties ranging from heavy fines to two years in prison (also see section 7.a.).

Following the 2010 repression, authorities sought to close any "legal loopholes" they considered beneficial to NGOs. For example, the law on public associations prohibits NGOs from keeping funds for local activities at foreign financial

institutions. The law also prohibits NGOs from facilitating provision of any support or benefits from foreign states to civil servants based on their political or religious views or ethnicity, a provision widely believed to be aimed at the Polish minority.

Only registered NGOs can legally accept foreign grants and technical aid and only for a limited set of approved activities. NGOs must receive approval from the Department for Humanitarian Affairs of the Presidential Administration and the Ministry of the Economy for technical aid before they can accept such funds or register the grants.

The government continued to deny registration to NGOs and political parties, which Lukashenka frequently labeled as “the fifth column,” on a variety of pretexts, including “technical” problems with applications. Authorities frequently harassed and intimidated individuals who identified themselves as founding members of organizations in an effort to induce them to abandon their membership and thus deprive groups of the number of petitioners necessary for registration. Many of the rejected groups previously had been denied registration on multiple occasions.

In September 14, the Supreme Court rejected an appeal by the Belarusian Christian Democracy Party of the Justice Ministry’s August decision to deny its fifth registration request. According to party officials, local authorities across the country had also pressured members of the party to withdraw their signatures from the registration application.

The Justice Ministry denied the fourth registration application of the NGO Tell the Truth NGO on December 21 on the grounds that some documents were not signed by the NGO’s leader Tatsiana Karatkevich, a 2015 presidential candidate. Karatkevich described the refusal as politically motivated. In addition to the burdensome registration process, the law prohibits NGOs from keeping funds for local activities at foreign financial institutions and from facilitating provision of any support or benefits from foreign states to civil servants based on their political or religious views or ethnicity, a provision widely believed to be aimed at the Polish minority.

Harassment in the form of arbitrary inspections by security officials continued. In April authorities demanded that the Independent Trade Union of the Radio Electronic Industry provide information about the income of one of its leaders, Leanid Sudalenka, who had already submitted financial reports for the period in

question. In August, border guards removed Sudalenka from a train by force, detained him for several hours, and inspected his belongings.

c. Freedom of Religion

See the Department of State's *International Religious Freedom Report* at www.state.gov/religiousfreedomreport/.

d. Freedom of Movement, Internally Displaced Persons, Protection of Refugees, and Stateless Persons

The law provides for freedom of movement, including the right to emigrate, but the government at times restricted the right of citizens, former political prisoners in particular to foreign travel. The government cooperated with the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and other humanitarian organizations to provide protection and assistance to internally displaced persons, refugees, returning refugees, asylum seekers, stateless persons, and other persons of concern.

In-country Movement: Passports serve as a form of identity and authorities required them for permanent housing, work, and hotel registration. Police continued to harass selectively individuals who lived at a location other than their legal place of residence indicated in mandatory stamps in their passports.

The law also requires persons who travel to areas within 15 miles of the border (aside from authorized crossing points) to obtain an entrance pass.

Foreign Travel: The government's database of persons banned from traveling abroad contained the names of at least 130,000 persons according to the Ministry of Internal Affairs. Those prohibited from foreign travel include individuals who possessed state secrets, faced criminal prosecution or civil suits, or had outstanding financial obligations in 2014. Authorities informed some persons by letter that their names were in the database; others learned only at border crossings. The Internal Affairs Ministry and security agencies, border and customs services, and financial investigation departments have a right to place persons on "preventive" surveillance lists.

Students required permission from the head of their educational institution to study abroad. Ostensibly intended to counter trafficking in persons, the Ministry of Internal Affairs is also required to track citizens working abroad, and employment agencies must report individuals who do not return from abroad as scheduled.

Exile: The law does not allow forced exile, but sources asserted that security forces continued to threaten some opposition members with bodily harm or prosecution if they did not leave the country, and many were in self-imposed exile.

Many university students who had been expelled or believed they were under threat of expulsion for their political activities opted for self-imposed exile and continued their studies abroad.

Protection of Refugees

Access to Asylum: The law provides for granting asylum or refugee status, complementary and temporary protection to foreign citizens and stateless persons. The government has established a refugee status determination procedure and a system for providing protection to refugees. Additionally, the law provides for protection against refoulement, which is granted to foreigners who are denied refugee status or temporary protection, but cannot be returned to their countries of origin.

All foreigners except Russians have the right to apply for asylum. Under the terms of the Union Treaty with Russia, Russians can legally settle and obtain residence permits in the country based on their Russian citizenship and therefore do not need asylum. Overall, as of November 1, immigration authorities accepted 1,067 applications for asylum compared with 867 in 2014, including from 818 Ukrainians, 96 Syrians, and 36 Afghans.

In addition to refugee status, the country's asylum law provides for complementary protection and protection against refoulement (in the form of temporary residence for a one-year term). In the period January-October, 730 foreigners were granted complementary protection (664 Ukrainians, 49 Syrians, eight Libyans, seven Yemenis, one Iraqi, and one Palestinian from Lebanon); one national of Libya was granted protection against refoulement.

Refugee Abuse: Asylum seekers have freedom of movement within the country but must reside in the region where they filed their applications for refugee status and in a place known to authorities while their applications are being considered, including during appeals. Authorities reportedly often encouraged asylum seekers to settle in rural areas; however, the majority settled in cities and towns. Change of residence was possible with a notification to authorities. Authorities issue registered asylum seekers certificates that serve as documents to confirm their

status of asylum-seekers and identity and protect them from expulsion. In accordance with the law, they also must register with local authorities at their place of residence.

Temporary Protection: Although the government in the past provided temporary protection (for up to one year) to individuals who may not qualify as refugees, it did not do so during the year.

Stateless Persons

As of July 1, UNHCR listed 6,302 stateless persons in the country; all had permanent residence according to authorities.

Permanently resident stateless persons held residence permits and were treated comparably to citizens in terms of access to employment, with the exception of a limited number of positions in the public sector and law enforcement that were available only to citizens. There were reports that stateless persons occasionally faced discrimination in employment, since authorities often encouraged them to settle in rural areas where the range of employment opportunities was limited. According to UNHCR, stateless persons could freely change their region of residence.

There is a path towards nationality or citizenship for this stateless population. The main requirement is at least seven years' permanent residence. Authorities have a procedure for expedited naturalization procedures but mostly for individuals born or permanently residing in the country prior to the collapse of the Soviet Union, ethnic Belarusians, their spouses, and descendants. If a child is born into a family of stateless persons permanently residing in the country, the child is entitled to Belarusian citizenship. The decrease of the number of stateless individuals in the country was attributed to their naturalization.

Section 3. Freedom to Participate in the Political Process

The law provides citizens the ability to choose their government in free and fair periodic elections based on universal and equal suffrage, but the government consistently denied citizens this ability by not conducting elections according to international standards.

Since his election in 1994 to a four-year term as the country's first president, Lukashenka steadily consolidated power in the executive branch to dominate all

branches of government, effectively ending any separation of powers among the branches. Flawed referenda in 1996 and 2004 amended the constitution to broaden his powers, extend his term in office, and remove presidential term limits. Subsequent presidential elections, including the one held in 2015, continued to deny citizens the right to express their will in an honest and transparent process including fair access to independent media and to resources.

Elections and Political Participation

Recent Elections: The October 11 presidential election was marred by significant problems and failed to meet international standards, according to the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe's (OSCE) Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, and the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe international election observation mission intermediate report. According to the Central Election Commission, President Lukashenka won re-election with 83.47 percent of the vote and 86.75 percent voter turnout. The closest opposition candidate, Tatsiana Karatkevich, officially won 4.42 percent of the vote. While the observer mission and the international community welcomed the peaceful conduct of the poll, particularly in contrast to the violent crackdown that followed the 2010 election, the mission nevertheless noted that the country "still has a considerable way to go in meeting its OSCE commitments for democratic elections."

The report found major flaws in the campaign period, electoral framework, and election-day procedures. A presidential candidate must be nominated by a registered initiative group of no less than 100 voters; in July the Central Electoral Commission (CEC) registered eight initiative groups out of 15 applicants. Of the eight registered initiative groups, three initiative groups failed to collect the signatures of 100,000 voters required to register a candidate, and the CEC determined that one candidate failed to collect enough valid signatures. As the OSCE report noted, ultimately only one of the three candidates running against Lukashenka, Tatsiana Karatkevich, was critical of the incumbent, which gave voters limited choice.

Although candidates were able to campaign in an unhindered manner, high-ranking public servants and officials reportedly campaigned during working hours on behalf of the incumbent, which created an uneven playing field for campaigning and blurred the line between partisan interest and the state. The OSCE observer mission assessed that, despite the restrictive media environment, candidates were provided with a platform to convey their messages and were afforded time on

state-run television, including through a televised debate in which the incumbent did not participate. Nevertheless, the incumbent was the most visible candidate due to extensive coverage in his institutional capacity.

The observer mission regretted that key OSCE recommendations from the 2010 and 2012 elections remain unaddressed, especially those concerning the composition of electoral commissions, early voting procedures, safeguards for counting and tabulation, prevention of the misuse of state resources, and the rights of election observers. According to the report, there were no clear and transparent legal criteria for the selection of members of territorial and precinct election commissions, and authorities continued to exclude opposition representatives from election commissions at all levels.

The majority of observers at local polling places appeared to be from government-sponsored NGOs. Many of them reportedly received instructions in advance to report to foreign observers that the proceedings were “in order” and/or to harass independent observers. The OSCE observation mission reported that during the five-day early voting period “in 50 percent of cases observers were denied access to check voter lists, and in some cases observers were prevented from seeing procedures.” They also noted complaints in a number of polling stations alleging discrepancies between reported turnout and the number of signatures in the voter lists, and inconsistent completion of daily protocols.

In many instances international observers reported that authorities conducted vote counting silently and at a distance from observers, which prevented evaluation of the count. There were a number of reports that vote totals changed as authorities transported the ballot boxes between local precincts and territorial election commission offices. The government did not permit independent organizations to conduct exit polls.

Local human rights groups Vyasna and the Belarusian Helsinki Committee stated at a post-election press conference that based on their observation, the election fell short of international standards and did not fully abide by Belarusian legislation. They especially noted their concern with early voting procedures, the lack of transparency in the vote-count process, and the domination of election commissions by progovernment organizations.

Amendments in 2013 to the electoral code introduced a simple majority system in the first round of elections for the National Assembly and ended government funding of campaigns while increasing allowable private funding. Some members

of the democratic opposition alleged that the amendments disproportionately targeted the opposition, which had little access to private funds given Lukashenka's public statements that businesses should not finance the opposition or they would face punishment. Additionally, the amendments prohibit citizens from campaigning to disrupt elections and referenda or to have them cancelled, postponed, or boycotted. Other changes include regulations on who can appeal for a vote recount and what type of questions can be put to public referendum.

Political Parties and Political Participation: Authorities routinely harassed and impeded the activities of opposition political parties and activists. Some opposition parties lacked legal status because authorities refused to register them, and the government routinely interfered with the right to organize, run for election, seek votes, and publicize views. The government allowed approximately half a dozen largely inactive, but officially registered pro-Lukashenka political parties to operate freely, although they appeared to be little more than fig leaves for a system that sought, in effect, to exclude multiparty politics.

The law allows authorities to suspend parties for six months after one warning and close them after two. During the year political parties did not receive any formal warnings, but members of parties that authorities refused to register, such as the Belarus Christian Democracy Party, continued to be subjected to harassment and arbitrary checks. The law also prohibits political parties from receiving support from abroad and requires all political groups and coalitions to register with the Ministry of Justice.

Authorities continued to harass the unrecognized Union of Poles of Belarus and its members. On March 12, authorities issued a formal warning to Anzhalika Borys, one of the UPB leaders, that she could be charged with acting on behalf of an unregistered organization. No criminal charges followed.

Ongoing restrictions on civil society organizations' ability to associate and advocate impeded their ability to monitor and comment on the elections process and restrictions on voter registration.

Participation of Women and Minorities: No laws prevent women or minorities from voting or participating in political life on the same basis as men or nonminority citizens. Tatsiana Karatkevich was the first woman to run for president, and on election day President Lukashenka told the press that "our president has numerous functions, from security to the economy. A person in a

skirt is unlikely to be able to cope with them now.” He added that even if this were not the case, society was not ready for a female president.

In the lower house of the National Assembly, women held 30 of the 110 seats, and in the upper house, they held 19 of the 58 seats. Women led two of the 24 government ministries, the Ministry of Information and the Ministry of Labor and Social Protection, a woman headed the National Statistics Committee, and a woman was a deputy prime minister. A woman also headed the Central Election Committee. Data on the participation of members of minorities in government was not available.

Section 4. Corruption and Lack of Transparency in Government

The law provides criminal penalties for official corruption, and the government regularly jailed officials alleged to be corrupt, but reports indicated that officials continued to engage in corrupt practices. The World Bank’s Worldwide Governance Indicators reflected that corruption was a serious problem in the country.

On July 17, President Lukashenka signed into law anticorruption legislation, which reportedly strengthened existing anticorruption regulations. Under the amended law, individuals dismissed for lower-level corruption face a five-year ban on public service employment, while those found to have committed more serious abuses are banned indefinitely from government employment. The law also allows seizure of property worth more than 25 percent of a public servant’s yearly income. The amendments also introduced provisions for public monitoring of the government’s anticorruption efforts.

Corruption: According to official sources, most corruption cases involved soliciting and accepting bribes, fraud, and abuse of power, although anecdotal evidence indicated such corruption usually did not occur as part of day-to-day interaction between citizens and minor state officials.

The absence of an independent judicial system and law enforcement, the lack of separation of powers, and a harried independent press largely barred from interaction with a nontransparent state bureaucracy made it virtually impossible to gauge the scale of corruption or combat it effectively.

The Prosecutor General’s Office is responsible for organizing and coordinating activities to combat corruption, including monitoring law enforcement operations,

analyzing the efficacy of implemented measures, supervising engaged parties, and drafting further legislation.

The Prosecutor General's Office reported that from January to May courts heard 533 corruption cases compared with 406 cases in the same period in 2014, citing law enforcement's proactive investigation of corruption-related charges. The most corrupt sectors were state administration and procurement, the industrial sector, the construction industry, health-care, and education.

Prosecutor General Aliaksandr Kanyuk reported on February 20 that authorities investigated 1,326 corruption-related crimes in 2014. Of those, 494 were cases of bribery, 411 of embezzlement, and 256 of abuse of powers.

There were numerous corruption prosecutions during the year, but prosecutions remained selective, nontransparent, and appeared (in some cases) politically motivated. On April 15, a Minsk district court sentenced two former senior officials of the Justice Ministry's Bar and Legal Profession Licensing Department to eight and four years, respectively, in jail with property forfeiture on charges of abuse of power and multiple bribery accounts following their arrest in August 2013 upon receiving a \$1,000 bribe. The court also banned the two from serving in any governmental position for a period of five years upon release. The two officers were responsible for the 2011 politically motivated debarment of defense lawyers in the December 2010 postelection demonstration cases.

On June 18, a court in the Minsk region sentenced former Deputy Minister of Forestry Fyodar Lisitsa to five years on charges of corruption. The court also ruled to seize his property and forbade him to serve in governmental positions for five years upon release. Police arrested the official in April 2014.

On December 4, state media reported that President Lukashenka pardoned and exempted from prosecution a former senior official of the education department in Mahilyou, who was charged with corruption-related crimes and faced up to seven years in jail. Prosecutors claimed that the official reimbursed "double or triple" the amount of damages and was released from investigation.

Financial Disclosure: Anticorruption laws require income and asset disclosure by appointed and elected officials, their spouses, and members of households who have reached legal age and continue to live with them in the same household. According to the law, specialized anticorruption departments within the Prosecutor General's Office, the KGB, and the Internal Affairs Ministry monitor and verify

anticorruption practices, and the Prosecutor General and all other prosecutors are mandated to oversee the enforcement of anticorruption law. These declarations were not made available to the public. An exception applies to candidates running in presidential, parliamentary, and municipal elections. There are administrative sanctions and disciplinary penalties for noncompliance.

Public Access to Information: The law, government policies, and a presidential decree severely restricted public access to government information. Citizens had some access to certain categories of information on government databases and websites, but much of the information was neither current nor complete.

Section 5. Governmental Attitude Regarding International and Nongovernmental Investigation of Alleged Violations of Human Rights

There were a number of active domestic human rights NGOs, although authorities were often hostile to their efforts, did not cooperate with them, and were not responsive to their views.

Two prominent human rights NGOs--the Belarusian Helsinki Committee and the Center for Legal Transformations--were registered. The government refused to register others, placing them at risk under the criminal code, which criminalizes organizing, or participating in any activity by, an unregistered organization. The law also prohibits persons from acting on behalf of unregistered NGOs. Nonetheless, a variety of unregistered NGOs, including Vyasna, the Solidarity Committee for the Protection of the Repressed, and Legal Assistance to the Population, continued to operate.

Authorities harassed both registered and unregistered human rights organizations, subjected them to frequent inspections and threats of deregistration, reportedly monitored their correspondence and telephone conversations, and harassed family members of group leaders and activists. The government ignored reports issued by human rights NGOs and rarely met with them. State-run media did not report on human rights NGOs and their actions.

On February 21, authorities expelled Alena Tankachova, a Russian citizen, from the country and stated she would not be permitted to return for three years. Tankachova, the chair of the Legal Transformation Center (also called Lawtrend), had been a permanent resident for 30 years. Authorities accused her of traffic violations and stated she posed a threat to national security. Local human rights

organizations asserted the case was politically motivated and that she was expelled for her human rights work.

During the year the Belarusian Helsinki Committee's bank accounts remained blocked due to longstanding tax arrears related to foreign funding in the early 2000s, but the government allowed the committee to operate without other interference.

Authorities were reluctant to engage on human rights problems with international human rights NGOs or other human rights officials, and international NGO representatives often had difficulty gaining admission to the country.

Authorities routinely ignored local and international groups' recommendations on improving human rights in the country and requests to stop harassing the human rights community.

Authorities can close an NGO after issuing only one warning that it violated the law. The most common pretexts prompting a warning or closure were failure to obtain a legal address and technical discrepancies in application documents. The law allows authorities to close an NGO for accepting what it considered illegal forms of foreign assistance and permits the Ministry of Justice to participate in any NGO activity and to review all NGO documents. NGOs also must submit detailed reports annually to the ministry about their activities, office locations, officers, and total number of members.

The United Nations or Other International Bodies: In July the UN Human Rights Council extended the mandate of Miklos Haraszti as the special rapporteur on the human rights situation in Belarus. During the year Haraszti released two reports on the situation of human rights in the country. Senior foreign ministry officials continued to assert Haraszti's mandate was "politically motivated" and that his appointment was made "without consultations and approval from Belarusian authorities." The government continued to refuse any cooperation with his mission, and he was not permitted to travel to the country.

Government Human Rights Bodies: A standing commission on human rights in the lower chamber of parliament was ineffective.

Section 6. Discrimination, Societal Abuses, and Trafficking in Persons

The law prohibits discrimination based on race, gender, language, or social status, but the government did not always enforce these prohibitions.

Women

Rape and Domestic Violence: The law criminalizes rape in general but does not include separate provisions on marital rape. Rape was a problem, but most women did not report it due to shame or fear that police would blame the victim.

According to the Ministry of Internal Affairs, there were 141 registered cases of rape or attempted rape in 2014.

Domestic violence was a significant problem, and the government took measures to prevent it during the year, although it yet again postponed adoption of a comprehensive law on domestic violence.

Government efforts to combat gender-based violence mainly were directed at preventing such crimes and not at protecting or assisting victims, although crisis rooms provided limited psychological and medical assistance to victims.

As of October, the state operated 108 shelter-type crisis rooms for victims, including domestic violence victims; NGOs operated at least four more shelters for victims of domestic violence. Authorities reported that from January to October crisis rooms assisted 190 individuals, not citing how many of these were domestic violence victims; however, observers noted a lack of adequate staff training, short-term sheltering, limited working hours, and unsafe locations.

A 2014 law on preventing crimes establishes a separate definition of domestic violence and provided for implementation of protective orders. Such orders, ranging from three to 30 days' duration, are issued to abusers who have been charged with two counts of violence within one year. The law requires authorities to provide victims and abusers with temporary accommodation until the protection orders expire. In addition to the newly adopted law, the code on administrative offenses, amended in August 2013, prescribes a heavy fine or detention for up to 15 days for battery, intended infliction of pain, and psychological or physical suffering committed against a close family member. The criminal code does not contain a separate article dealing with domestic violence.

In November police reported that from January to October police identified 1,984 victims of domestic violence, of those 1,509 were female, 475 were male, and 120 were older than age 70. Ninety-six victims of domestic violence cases died, and

169 suffered severe bodily injuries. In the majority of these cases, women said they had been previously threatened with violence. Additionally, police investigated more than 42,000 allegations of domestic violence from January to October. The police official reported that women were the aggressors in at least 10 percent of all domestic violence cases and were responsible for approximately 35 percent of all murders and incidents of severe bodily harm connected to domestic violence.

Authorities issued 1,128 protective orders, including 919 orders to abusers, who had to move out of residences shared with victims for up to 30 days. In addition the code on administrative offenses prescribes a heavy fine or detention for up to 15 days for battery, intentional infliction of pain, psychological, or physical suffering committed against a close family member.

According to a 2014 UN Population Fund study, three out of four women and men between the ages of 18 and 60 claimed they were subjected to some form of domestic violence. Of this number, 76 percent of women and 76 percent of men were subjected to psychological violence, and 37 percent of women and 28 percent of men to economic pressures. More than 31 percent of women and 24.8 percent of men suffered from physical violence, and 18 percent of women and 12 percent of men reported their partners sexually abused them. Women remained reluctant to report domestic violence due to fear of escalating the violence, reprisal, social stigma, and a lack of confidence that they would be rendered appropriate and timely assistance. Moreover, they feared that if the aggressor were fined, the financial burden would fall on the family. Male victims of domestic violence did not report their cases due to their own feelings of guilt, feeling pity for their abuser, and fear of family disruptions. According to the study, 12 percent of male and 29 percent of female victims of domestic violence sought professional assistance.

Government efforts to combat gender-based violence mainly were directed at preventing such crimes and not at protecting or assisting victims, although crisis rooms provided limited psychological and medical assistance to victims. Authorities did not tackle the root causes of violence, including alcoholism, social stigma, and gender-based stereotypes.

Sexual Harassment: Sexual harassment reportedly was widespread, but no specific laws, other than those against physical assault, address the problem.

Reproductive Rights: Couples and individuals have the right to decide the number, spacing, and timing of children; manage their reproductive health; and have access

to the information and means to do so, free from discrimination, coercion, or violence. Access to information on contraception and skilled attendance at delivery and in postpartum care were widely available.

Discrimination: The law provides for equal treatment of women with regard to property ownership and inheritance, family law, and in the judicial system, and the law was generally respected.

Women's groups voiced concerns about the increasing percentage of women in poverty of poverty, particularly among women with more than two children, female-headed households, women taking care of family members with disabilities or older family members, rural women, and older women.

Children

Birth Registration: Citizenship is derived either by birth within the country's territory or from one's parents. A child of a citizen is a citizen regardless of place of birth, even if one of the parents is not a citizen. In general births were registered immediately.

Education: Education is free, compulsory, and universal through the secondary level. There was no significant difference in the treatment and attendance of boys and girls.

Child Abuse: The government continued to implement a 2012-16 comprehensive national plan to improve childcare and the protection of children's rights, including for victims of child abuse, domestic violence, and commercial sexual exploitation, and acknowledged a lack of funding and inefficiency in executing certain protective measures. With assistance from NGOs that promote children's rights, authorities extensively employed procedures for on-the-record, one-time interviewing of child abuse victims in the framework of investigations or criminal cases at specialized facilities under the direct supervision of psychologists. Courts used recorded testimony to avoid repeatedly summoning child abuse victims for hearings. Cases that affected the rights and legitimate interests of minors were generally heard by more experienced judges with expertise in developmental psychology, psychiatry, and education. The government continued to run an intermittent national hotline for assisting children, and independent observers noted that at least one-third of 2,500 calls to it in 2014-2015 went unanswered.

As of January the Ministry of Education ran 138 social-educational centers nationwide for minor victims of any type of violence or minors finding themselves in vulnerable and dangerous conditions. Centers could provide short-term shelter, food, clothing, personal hygiene products, and medical and psychological aid to victims. No data on the number of assisted child abuse victims at these centers was available. General healthcare institutions provided a wide range of medical aid to child abuse victims free of charge.

Authorities intervened to prevent child abuse stemming from domestic violence and identified families in vulnerable conditions, providing foster care to children who could not be kept with their immediate families while preventive work was under way. Although the government increased prosecution of child abusers, its efforts to address the causes of child abuse were inadequate.

Rape or sexual assault of a person known to be a minor is punishable by up to 15 years in jail. Sexual acts between a person older than 18 and a person known to be younger than 16 carry penalties of up to five years in jail.

From January to October, authorities registered 193 pedophilia crimes, including 18 cases of rape, 74 cases of coercive actions of a sexual nature, 87 cases of sexual intercourse with a minor, and 14 cases of sexual abuse. Police identified 135 victims of pedophilia, including 58 children under 14, mostly female.

Early and Forced Marriage: The legal minimum age of marriage for both boys and girls is 18 years old, although girls as young as 14 can be married legally with parental consent. There were reports of early marriage in which girls as young as 14 and boys as young as 16 married with parental consent.

Sexual Exploitation of Children: The minimum age for consensual sex is 16. Prostitution of children was a problem. From January to October, the Internal Affairs Ministry investigated 506 crimes involving the commercial sexual exploitation of children, including 25 cases of the production and distribution of child pornography and six cases in which minors became victims of trafficking for sexual exploitation. The law provides penalties of up to 13 years in prison for production or distribution of pornographic materials depicting a minor. The law generally was enforced.

Institutionalized Children: There was no system for monitoring child abuse in orphanages or other specialized institutions. Authorities did not publicly report on any child abuse incidents in institutions. During the year there were allegations of

abuse in foster families. The government opened or continued investigations into some of these cases.

International Child Abductions: The country is a party to the 1980 Hague Convention on the Civil Aspects of International Child Abduction. For information see the Department of State's report on compliance at travel.state.gov/content/childabduction/en/legal/compliance.html and country-specific information at travel.state.gov/content/childabduction/english/country/Belarus.html.

Anti-Semitism

Jewish groups estimated that between 30,000 and 40,000 persons identified themselves as Jews. Most were not active religiously.

Anti-Semitic incidents continued but were on the decline; authorities sporadically investigated reports of such acts. Jewish community and civil society activists expressed concern over the concept of a "greater Slavic union" that was popular among nationalist organizations, including the neo-Nazi group Russian National Unity, which remained active despite its official dissolution in 2000. Neo-Nazis were widely believed to be behind anti-Semitic incidents across the country. Anti-Semitic and Russian ultranationalist newspapers, literature, DVDs, and videotapes imported from Russia were widely available. The government did not promote antibias and tolerance education.

On March 26, Svetlahorsk city authorities opened a criminal case to investigate vandalism of a number of public buildings, including a hospital, across the city with drawings of Stars of David and the saying "Passover [Coming] Soon, There Will Soon Be Blood." There were no reported developments in the case.

On April 21, independent journalists reported that they saw swastikas painted on gravestones at the Jewish cemetery in the town of Horki. The correspondents did not file a case with the police, and authorities did not launch an investigation.

In December 2014 in Homyel, a local rabbi reported that vandals painted swastikas and anti-Semitic slogans on a Jewish religious and secular community center. Members of the local Jewish community filed a case with police, but by year's end no perpetrators had been identified and the case was closed.

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Trafficking in Persons

See the Department of State’s *Trafficking in Persons Report* at www.state.gov/j/tip/rls/tiprpt/.

Persons with Disabilities

The law does not specifically prohibit discrimination against persons with physical, sensory, intellectual, or mental disabilities in employment, education, air travel and other transportation, access to health care, and other government services, and discrimination was common.

The Ministry of Labor and Social Security is the main government agency responsible for protecting the rights of persons with disabilities. The law mandates that transport, residences, and businesses be accessible to persons with disabilities, but few public areas were wheelchair accessible or accessible for hearing and vision-impaired persons. The National Association of Disabled Wheelchair Users estimated that more than 90 percent of persons with physical disabilities were unable to leave their places of residence without assistance, and their residences were not built to accommodate the physically disabled. While authorities claimed that 30 percent of the country’s total infrastructure was accessible, disability rights organizations considered this figure inflated.

The country’s lack of independent living opportunities left many persons with disabilities no choice but to live in state-run institutions. Approximately 78 such institutions across the country housed more than 18,000 persons. Disability rights organizations reported that the quality of care in these facilities was low, and instances of fundamental human rights violations, harassment, mistreatment, and other abuse were reported. Authorities frequently placed persons with physical and mental disabilities in the same facilities and did not provide either group with specialized care.

Public transportation was free to persons with disabilities, but the majority of subway stations in Minsk and the bus system were not wheelchair accessible. According to government statistics, 2 percent of the country's public transportation network was accessible.

Disability rights organizations reported difficulty organizing advocacy activities due to impediments to freedom of assembly, censorship, and the government's unwillingness to register assistance projects (see section 2.b.).

Advocates also noted that persons with disabilities, especially those with vision and hearing disabilities, lacked the ability to address violations of their rights easily and completely since courts often failed to provide access and sign language interpretation.

Yury Liashenka, a disability rights activist from the city of Svetlahorsk, submitted a complaint to the UN Human Rights Committee on August 31 stemming from his detention and alleged abuse during a protest (see section 1c. on Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment).

Human rights activists, independent Belarus Free Theater (BFT) members, individuals in wheelchairs, and their supporters held a number of flash mobs on December 23-27 to raise awareness about the human rights of persons with disabilities and to speak out about official and societal discrimination against them. On December 30, a court in Minsk fined BFT member Mikhail Kauko 3.6 million rubles (\$226) for participating in an unsanctioned demonstration.

National/Racial/Ethnic Minorities

Governmental and societal discrimination against Roma persisted. There were also expressions of societal hostility toward proponents of Belarusian national culture, which the government often identified with actors of the democratic opposition, repeatedly labeled by President Lukashenka as "the fifth column."

Authorities continued to harass the independent and unregistered Union of Poles of Belarus.

Official and societal discrimination continued against the country's 7,000 (according to the 2009 census) to 60,000 Roma (according to Romani community estimates). The Romani community continued to experience marginalization,

various types of discrimination, high unemployment, low levels of education, and lack of access to social services. Generally, Roma hold Belarusian citizenship, but many lacked official government identity documents and refused to obtain them.

An independent survey, conducted by Romani communities and experts of the state-run Center for National Cultures in 2014, estimated that no more than 2 percent of the Roma had university education, and only approximately 17 percent enrolled in vocational training after junior high school. Twelve percent of Roma older than age 10 remained illiterate. Only 9 percent were officially employed. There continued to be isolated reports that non-Romani children and teachers harassed Romani children, which forced Romani families to withdraw their children from schools. The majority of Romani youth did not finish secondary school and failed to enroll in university programs, although the situation continued to improve as more Romani children from mixed families enrolled and obtained bachelor degrees, including in the regions. There were no special school programs for Roma, although there were such programs for Jews, ethnic Lithuanians, and Poles.

On April 1, the website of the regional newspaper *Avangard* in Buda-Kashaliova published an article that associated Roma with criminal activities and contained a police warning to residents to report “suspicious activity.” Local activists Maryia Klimovich and Ales Yauseyenko raised concerns about the article through media outlets.

According to leaders of the Romani communities, security and law enforcement agencies arbitrarily detained, investigated, and harassed Roma, including by forced fingerprinting, maltreatment in detention, and ethnic insults. In March the Belarusian Helsinki Committee sent an inquiry to the Interior Ministry and the General Prosecutor’s Office, raising their concerns about human rights violations against the Roma and seeking a stop to police discrimination. The agencies reportedly studied cases of maltreatment, and Romani leaders stated the situation improved before year’s end as authorities took measures to prevent discrimination and worked closely with Romani “mediators” to integrate marginalized community members. The Belarusian Helsinki Committee did not register any complaints from Romani communities after March.

While the Russian and Belarusian languages have equal legal status, Russian was the primary language of government. According to independent polling, the overwhelming majority of the population spoke Russian as their mother tongue. Because the government viewed many proponents of the Belarusian language as

political opponents, authorities continued to harass and intimidate academic and cultural groups that sought to promote Belarusian and routinely rejected proposals to widen use of the language. The situation improved slightly after President Lukashenka stated that the Belarusian language was “a national treasure” and spoke in Belarusian at a meeting with writers in October 2014.

Acts of Violence, Discrimination, and Other Abuses Based on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

Consensual same-sex sexual conduct between adults is not illegal, but discrimination against LGBTI persons was widespread, and harassment occurred.

Due to egregious official harassment of the LGBTI community, groups opted for holding private activities and events. LGBTI groups did not seek permission from authorities to hold any public events.

Mikhail Pishcheuski, a gay man who was harassed and severely beaten as he left a club in Minsk in May 2014, died from his injuries in October. The main perpetrator of the assault, Dzmitry Lukashevich, was convicted of hooliganism and inflicting severe bodily harm in October 2014 and was sentenced to two years and eight months in prison. Independent journalists and human rights advocates who observed the trial reported that the defendant openly insulted the victim and his friends in the courtroom. Lukashevich was released as part of the government’s amnesty program in September, ultimately serving only 11 months in prison.

Societal discrimination against LGBTI activists persisted with the tacit support of the regime. The police continued to mistreat LGBTI persons and refused to investigate crimes against LGBTI persons. Two individuals filed complaints but police refused to open investigations during the year. The government does not provide transgender persons with new national ID numbers, which include a digit that signifies gender. Transgender persons reportedly have been refused jobs when potential employers note the “discrepancy” between the ID number and the stated gender of the applicant.

HIV and AIDS Social Stigma

Societal discrimination against persons with HIV/AIDS remained a problem, and the illness carried a heavy social stigma. The Joint UN Program on HIV/AIDS reported that there were numerous reports of HIV-infected individuals who faced discrimination, especially at workplaces and during job interviews.

The government continued to broadcast and post public service advertisements raising awareness about HIV/AIDS and calling for greater tolerance toward persons infected with the virus.

There were also frequent reports of family discrimination against HIV/AIDS-positive relatives, including preventing HIV/AIDS-positive parents from seeing their children or requiring HIV/AIDS-positive family members to use separate dishware. Authorities also reported that a few HIV-positive orphans remained institutionalized due to families' reluctance to adopt or foster children with HIV/AIDS.

Section 7. Worker Rights

a. Freedom of Association and the Right to Collective Bargaining

Although the law provides for the rights of workers, except state security and military personnel, to form and join independent unions and to strike, it places a number of serious restrictions on the exercise of these rights. The law provides for the right to organize and bargain collectively but does not protect against antiunion discrimination. Workers fired for union activity have no effective recourse or remedy.

The government severely restricted independent unions. The government-controlled Federation of Trade Unions of Belarus is the largest union, claiming more than four million members, although that number was inflated, since the country's total workforce was approximately four million. It largely resembled its Soviet predecessors and served as a control mechanism and distributor of benefits. The Belarusian Congress of Democratic Trade Unions (BCDTU), with four constituent unions and approximately 10,000 members of independent trade unions, was the largest independent union umbrella organization, but tight government control over registration requirements and public demonstrations made it difficult for the Congress to organize, expand, and strike.

Prohibitive registration requirements that any new independent union have a large membership and cooperation from the employer continued to present significant obstacles to union formation. Authorities continued to resist attempts by workers to leave the official union and join the independent one.

Management and local authorities blocked worker attempts to organize strikes on many occasions by declaring them illegal. The legal requirements to conduct a strike are high. For example, strikes can only be held at least three months after dispute resolution between the union and employer has failed. Additionally, a minimum number of workers must continue to work during the strike.

Nevertheless, these requirements were largely irrelevant, since the unions that represented almost all workers were under government control. Government authorities and managers of state-owned enterprises routinely interfered with union activities and hindered workers' efforts to bargain collectively, in some instances arbitrarily suspending collective bargaining agreements. Union members who participated in unauthorized public demonstrations were subjected to arrest and detention. Due to a persistent atmosphere of repression and the fear of imprisonment, few public demonstrations took place during the year.

Amendments adopted in 2011 to the Law on Mass Activities continue seriously to limit demonstrations, rallies, and other public action, constraining the right of unions to organize and strike. In June international worker rights organizations again urged the government to implement long-standing recommendations relating to serious cases of antiunion discrimination and continuing obstacles to trade union registration.

The government continued efforts to suppress independent unions, stop their activities, or bring them under its control. Its efforts included frequent refusals to extend employment contracts for members of independent unions and refusals to register independent unions. According to BCDTU leader Aliaksandr Yarashuk, no independent unions have been established since a 1999 decree requiring trade unions to register with the government. Authorities routinely fired workers who were deemed "natural leaders" or who involved themselves in NGOs or opposition political activities.

In August the state-owned Babruisk-based Plant of Tractor Parts and Assemblies administration dismissed Aksana Kernazhytskaya, an activist of the Free Trade Union, despite 19 years of successful employment and after appeals to the local administration. She believed that she was fired for her active participation in union activities. Management of the Plant dismissed Anatol Patapovich, a 55 year-old member of an independent trade union, after his labor contract expired on September 13. The factory's top managers made it clear in private conversations that he had lost his job over his membership in the independent union. Since the beginning of 2014, the Babruisk factory fired more than a dozen independent union activists.

Authorities and state-run enterprises continued to pressure independent trade unions and deny their right to sign collective bargaining agreements.

The government requires state employees, including employees of state-owned enterprises, who constituted approximately 80 percent of the workforce, to sign short-term work contracts. Although such contracts may have terms of up to five years, most expired after one year, which gave the government the ability to fire employees by declining to renew their contracts. Many members of independent unions, political parties, and civil society groups lost their jobs because of this practice. A government edict provides the possibility for employers to sign open-ended work contracts with an employee after five years of good conduct by the employee. The edict limits the right of employers to approve open-ended contracts earlier than five years after the service computation date. The provision does not apply to state employees and other categories of workers who remained subject to mandatory contracts.

Opposition political party members and democratic activists sometimes had difficulty finding work due to government pressure on employers to force them out of their political engagement and activity. In January, Lahoisk-based foreign company Minauta did not extend the contract of Zmitser Shevel, a Belarusian Popular Front activist.

In December 2014, Lukashenka passed Decree No. 5 “On Strengthening the Requirements for Managers and Employees of Organizations”, which the authorities stated was aimed at rooting out “mismanagement,” strengthening discipline, and preventing the hiring of dishonest managers in new positions. Among other subjects under the new decree, managers can reduce payment of bonuses to employees (which often comprised a large portion of salaries), while workers can be fired more easily. An independent trade union lawyer told the press that workers have fewer rights under the new law.

b. Prohibition of Forced or Compulsory Labor

The law prohibits all forms of forced or compulsory labor, but the government did not effectively enforce its provisions.

An April presidential decree, “On preventing Social Parasitism,” which aims at forcing individuals to find employment, establishes a supplemental tax on persons who worked less than six months during the year of up to 3.6 million rubles (\$200)

annually, depending on how much they paid in taxes when working. The decree applies to all permanent residents, with senior pensioners, legal minors, persons with disabilities, and certain other groups exempted. On November 19, the lower chamber of the parliament introduced penalties for failing to pay the so-called “social parasitism” tax, ranging from a fine to a short-term arrest, which provides for court-ordered public community service.

Separately, Minsk authorities issued provisions on May 29 requiring officially registered unemployed individuals to do paid community service two days a month from May to September and one day a month from October to December in 2015; otherwise, they are banned from receiving an unemployment benefit of 180,000 rubles (\$11) a month. Individuals with disabilities, single parents and parents of three and more children, as well as parents of children with disabilities and under 18 years of age were exempt. There were reports that individuals worked at farms harvesting and were paid 120,000 rubles (\$7.50) a day in August.

Forced labor regulations were seldom enforced, and resources and inspections dedicated to preventing forced and compulsory labor were minimal and inadequate to deter violations. Penalties for violations included forfeiture of assets and sentences of five to 15 years imprisonment. The government rarely identified victims of trafficking, and prosecution of those responsible for forced labor remained minimal. Government efforts to prevent and eliminate forced labor in the country did not improve.

Forced labor occurred among men, women, and children. The government prevented state workers in wood processing and related renovation projects from leaving their jobs without employer approval and subjected them to significant fines, such as the repayment of bonuses or benefits.

The government continued the practice of “subbotniks,” which require employees of the government, state enterprises, and many private businesses to work on Saturday and donate their earnings to finance government social and other projects. Employers and authorities intimidated and fined some workers who refused to participate.

Authorities reportedly forced military conscripts to perform work unrelated to their military service.

Prison labor practices amounted to forced labor. Former inmates stated that their monthly wages were as low as 30,000 to 40,000 rubles (\$1.88 to \$2.51). Senior

officials with the General Prosecutor's Office and the Interior Ministry stated on November 28 that at least 97 percent of all work-capable inmates worked in jail as required by law, excluding retirees and persons with disabilities, and that labor in jail was important and useful for rehabilitation and reintegration of inmates. Authorities also continued to employ unpaid agricultural labor, sending university and high school students to help farmers during the harvesting season.

Also see the Department of State's *Trafficking in Persons Report* at www.state.gov/j/tip/rls/tiprpt/.

c. Prohibition of Child Labor and Minimum Age for Employment

The minimum age for employment is 16, but children as young as 14 may conclude a labor contract with the written consent of one parent or a legal guardian. The Prosecutor General's Office reportedly enforced the law effectively. Persons under the age of 18 are allowed to work in nonhazardous jobs but are not allowed to work overtime, on weekends, or on government holidays. Work may not be harmful to children's health or hinder their education.

The government generally enforced these laws, and penalties were sufficient to deter most violations. Nevertheless, schoolchildren occasionally continued to be induced to help local collective farms with the harvest from August to October.

d. Discrimination with Respect to Employment and Occupation

The law prohibits discrimination based on race, gender, language, or social status. These laws do not apply specifically to employment or occupation. The government did not effectively enforce these laws. Discrimination in employment and occupation occurred with respect to ethnicity, gender, disability, language, sexual orientation and/or gender identity, and HIV-positive status (see section 6).

The law requiring equal pay for equal work was not regularly enforced, and the minister of labor and social welfare stated on August 18 that on average women were paid 33 percent less than men. The committee also noted that on average men found new employment in one month, while women searched for approximately two months.

Very few women were in the upper ranks of management or government, and most women were concentrated in the lower-paid public sector. Although the law grants women the right to three years of maternity leave with assurance of job availability

upon return, employers often circumvented employment protections by using short-term contracts, then refusing to renew a woman's contract when she became pregnant.

A government prohibition against workdays longer than seven hours for persons with disabilities reportedly made companies reluctant to hire them. Local NGOs reported that up to 85 percent of persons with disabilities were unemployed. Authorities provided minimal welfare benefits for persons with disabilities, and calculations of pensions did not consider disability status. Members of the country's Paralympic teams received half the salaries and prize money of athletes without disabilities.

e. Acceptable Conditions of Work

As of January 1, the national minimum monthly wage was 2.1 million rubles (\$132). As of September the average monthly wage was 6.86 million rubles (\$430). As of November 1, the government set the poverty line at 1.57 million rubles (\$98) per month per capita.

The law establishes a standard workweek of 40 hours and provides for at least one 24-hour rest period per week. The law provides for mandatory overtime and holiday pay and restricts overtime to 10 hours a week, with a maximum of 180 hours of overtime each year.

The law establishes minimum conditions for workplace safety and worker health, but employers often ignored these standards. Workers at many heavy machinery plants did not wear minimal safety gear. The state labor inspectorate lacked authority to enforce employer compliance and often ignored violations.

The Ministry of Labor and Social Security was responsible for enforcement of these laws. Information regarding resources, inspections, remediation, and penalties was not available. The government reported that approximately 400,000 persons worked in the informal economy. The law did not cover informal workers.

The ministry reported 63 persons killed at workplaces between January and June. The ministry reported the majority of workplace accidents occurred in the heavy machinery production industry and caused by carelessness, poor conditions, malfunctioning equipment, and poor training and instruction.

The law does not provide workers the right to remove themselves from situations that endanger health or safety without jeopardy to their employment.