



# 2025 INTERNATIONAL DAY FOR LAWYERS IN DANGER BELARUS



protect-lawyers.org

This brochure was produced by the International Observatory for Lawyers in Danger (OIAD) in collaboration with the Belarusian Association of Human Rights Lawyers (BAHRL).

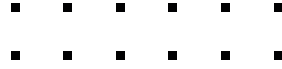
Since 2009, the International Day of the Lawyer in Danger has been marked in cities, countries and continents around the world on 24 January. This day marks the 1977 "Atocha Massacre", in which four colleagues were murdered in Madrid, Calle Atocha 55.

The purpose of this international day is to draw the attention of civil society and public authorities to the situation of lawyers in a particular country, chosen each year, in order to highlight the threats they face in the exercise of their profession.

Following on from the situation of lawyers in Turkey, the Philippines, Honduras, China, Egypt, Pakistan, Azerbaijan, Colombia, Afghanistan and Iran, International Lawyers Day 2025 will be dedicated to the situation of lawyers in Belarus.

"To deny people their human rights is to challenge their very humanity".  
(Nelson Mandela)





The legal profession in Belarus is under serious threat due to **systematic repression by the government**. Because of their commitment to defending their clients, lawyers have suffered severe consequences, including criminal prosecution, imprisonment, disbarment, disciplinary sanctions, harassment, torture and exile.

**Find out more about Belarusian lawyers, who courageously defend the fundamental rights of Belarusian citizens, in the following pages.**



## BELARUS'S POLITICAL FRAMEWORK



Belarus is ruled by an authoritarian regime led by Alexander Lukashenko, who has been in power since 1994. Lukashenko has tightened his grip on all branches of government, especially by weakening the independence of parliament and the judiciary.

Since his controversial re-election in 2020, Belarus' political landscape has been characterised by an almost total lack of pluralism, with opposition parties marginalised and their leaders often imprisoned or exiled. The independent media are severely repressed, and freedom of expression is stifled by restrictive laws and pervasive censorship. Against this backdrop, the Belarusian government relies on loyal security forces to maintain its power, frequently resorting to violence and intimidation to minimise any form of dissent.

The authorities have stepped up their crackdown on human rights lawyers. The government seeks to silence any voice of dissent by particularly targeting those who seek to protect fundamental rights, making Belarus a striking example of the undermining of the rule of law and civil liberties under authoritarian rule.





## BELARUS'S LEGAL AND JUDICIAL FRAMEWORK

### Lack of independence of the judiciary

The Belarusian judicial system is marked by a lack of independence and is tightly controlled by President Lukashenko. As before the constitutional amendments of 2022, the President appoints the majority of judges and dismisses them from office on the proposal of court chairpersons. The influence of the executive branch on the judiciary is apparent as court chairpersons being elected on the President's own nomination.

As a result, national courts are now part of a repressive mechanism, systematically handing down politically motivated sentences against dissidents, in violation of numerous fair trial guarantees. Given the harsh crackdown on lawyers defending politically motivated cases, virtually no lawyer dares to take on such cases, which has severely undermined the right to a fair trial, due process and access to remedy in Belarus.



### Total State control over Legal Profession

At the end of 2021, a reform on the Bar and Legal Practice of the Republic of Belarus was introduced, implementing serious amendments that have further increased the profession's dependence on and control by state entities.

Belarusian authorities took control over the legal profession, eroding its independence; bar associations became the vehicle of the government's agenda and repression. The Ministry of Justice has total control over the Bar, which is closely aligned to the State and systematically supporting government policies. It has the power to dismiss lawyers and dissolve associations on spurious pretexts.

- Active support of government-endorsed elections from the Bar, reinforcing the view of lawyers as government allies;
- Lawyers can no longer work on their own nor open their own practices, but are obliged to join legal advice bureaux set up and supervised by the regional bar associations in coordination with the Ministry of Justice.
- Decreased public confidence in the independence of lawyers, discouraging citizens from seeing them as defenders of individual rights;
- Public reluctance to seek justice in election-related matters due to perceived bias of lawyers in favor of government;
- Restricted access to the legal profession, with loyalty-based selection of delegates and ministry controlled qualifying exams, therefore limiting independent voices;
- Erosion of democratic principles and human rights protections, with citizens denied access to impartial legal defence.

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## BEING A LAWYER IN BELARUS



### OBSTACLES TO THE PRACTICE OF LAW IN POLITICALLY MOTIVATED TRIALS

#### Lack of transparency:

Since 2020, investigators have increasingly forced lawyers to sign overly broad confidentiality notices in politically motivated criminal cases. The fact that disseminating information without permission may constitute a criminal offence has had a chilling effect on lawyers publicly denouncing arbitrariness. Furthermore, there is a widespread practice of closed trials in this type of cases, making the ground more likely for human rights violations to take place.

#### Violation of fair trial standards:

Defence lawyers in politically motivated cases report feeling disarmed and unable to provide an effective defence for their clients given the constant violation of due process. The principle of 'equality of arms' is undermined, often by preventing access to full case material, limiting lawyers' access to their clients, as well as the confidentiality of their communications.



### PERSECUTION OF LAWYERS

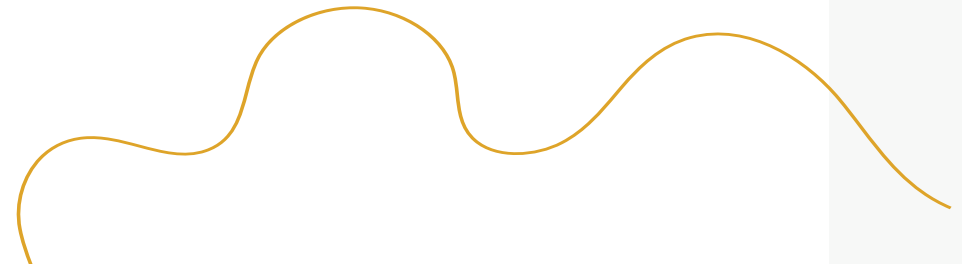
For the first time in the history of modern Belarus, lawyers have become political prisoners themselves for their work on behalf of clients.

The crackdown on lawyers in Belarus has intensified since the 2020 elections. Those who defend political opponents or criticise the government's actions are systematically prosecuted or arrested. Sanctions, whether administrative or criminal, almost inevitably lead to their exclusion, creating a constant climate of fear. This situation exacerbates the erosion of the rule of law, making fair justice for citizens impossible.



### FORMS OF REPRESSION

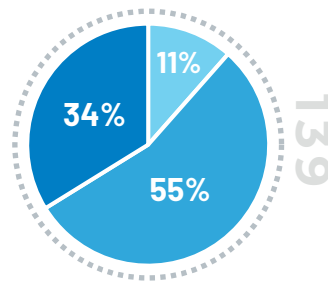
Lawyers suffer various forms of repression, the most common of which are disbarment, administrative and criminal arrests, harassment and public discredit. Some have been imprisoned, subjected to unfair trials, or even forcibly disappeared, all with the aim of silencing them and preventing any defence of human rights.



## FIGURES 2020-2024:

- At least **11 lawyers** criminally prosecuted for their legal practice
- **6 lawyers** currently in prison – one of them kept incommunicado
- **4 lawyers** reported to have been the subject of torture during their detentions and interrogations
- At least **3 lawyers** reportedly forced to be videotaped in so-called “confessed videos” where they were coerced into confessing of committing illegal acts.
- At least **139 lawyers** were deprived of their right to exercise their profession on the basis of:

- Misconduct incompatible with the title of lawyer
- The results of the certification / re-certification by the qualification commission under the aegis of the Ministry of Justice (76/139)
- The decision of the disciplinary commission of the territorial bar (Council of the territorial bar)



Since the beginning of 2024, information on the deprivation of lawyers' licences has been widely withheld by the authorities and the territorial Bar Councils.



## CONSEQUENCES FOR LAWYERS: EXILE AS A MEANS OF SURVIVAL

The harsh crackdown on lawyers has led to a mass exile of many of them in order to avoid their arrest. Belarusian lawyers who managed to flee the country still face persecution in the following forms:

- Threats against their relatives;
- Initiation of criminal cases against them and seizure of their property that remained in Belarus;
- Criminal prosecution of lawyers in absentia in politically motivated cases (“special proceedings”)
- Deprivation of citizenship if charged with a political crime



## TORTURE AND ILL-TREATMENT IN DETENTION

According to eyewitness accounts, the police also use torture during arrests, detention and interrogation. Lawyers are also reportedly beaten, tased and handcuffed, and face threats including threats of sexual violence.

Lawyers sentenced to administrative arrests have reportedly experienced inhuman and degrading treatment in detention centers. However, no information is provided regarding the conditions under which lawyers convicted in criminal cases serve their sentences.

After 2020, not a single criminal case of police abuse or torture has been brought, leaving these gross human rights violations in total impunity.



## Natallia Matskevich



Natallia worked as a lawyer in Minsk from 1994 to 2021. Her career began when Belarus established its independence as a post-Soviet state, which over time slid towards the authoritarian regime of Alexander Lukashenko.

*"I have defended human rights before national courts and United Nations bodies, and I have dealt with migration issues. I have dealt with cases involving politicians, human rights defenders, activists and journalists.*

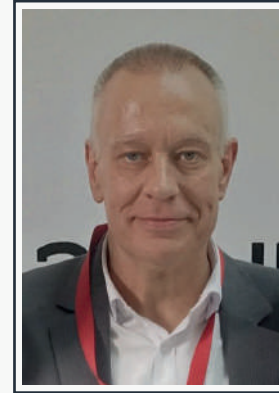
*In 2020-2021, during the political and legal crisis in Belarus linked to the 2020 presidential election, I dealt with the cases of Lukashenko's main political opponents, Sergey Tihanovski and Viktor Babaryka. Because of my professional activities, I was disbarred in October 2021.*

*I was frequently exposed to violations of professional guarantees and procedural rights. I was sometimes denied the right to visit my clients in places of detention. In April 2021, my confidential conversation with Sergey Tihanovski in a pre-trial detention centre was translated on state television. I was suspended from practising as a lawyer in October 2021, in the middle of Tihanovski's trial, which was held behind closed doors in a prison. After that, I was deprived of the right to practise in Belarus, but I continued to defend my clients before UN bodies.*

*After being summoned for questioning about my links with human rights organisations, my family and I were forced to leave Belarus for Georgia (to avoid crossing the EU border), and then for Lithuania.*

*Today, I work as an expert in non-formal human rights education programmes for lawyers and human rights defenders and am involved in projects to develop legislative reform for the future Belarus. I continue to represent my clients in international bodies and in the public sphere."*

## Andrei Atamanchuk

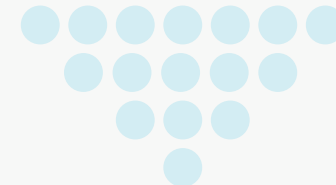


Andrei Atamanchuk has worked in the field of law since 1998. He became a lawyer in 2018 and has been involved as a defence lawyer in politically motivated criminal and administrative cases, including the defence of people recognised by the international community as political prisoners.

*"On the morning of 31 March 2022, KGB officers broke into my home and carried out a house search. I was charged with non-existent offences, after which I was deprived of my liberty for 30 days. The Minsk Bar Association did nothing to help me; instead, it did everything it could to quickly deprive me of the right to practise my profession.*

According to KGB officers, the management of the Bar is directly involved in the persecution of undesirable lawyers. (...)

*I was forced to leave Belarus with my family and move to Lithuania, which granted us legal permanent resident status, offered us free Lithuanian language courses and created all the conditions necessary for our integration into Lithuanian society."*





## PRESENTATION OF THE INTERNATIONAL OBSERVATORY FOR LAWYERS IN DANGER

The International Observatory for Lawyers in Danger (OIAD) is an initiative of the Conseil national des barreaux (France), the Barreau de Paris (France), the Consejo General de la Abogacía Española (Spain) and the Consiglio Nazionale Forense (Italy).

Launched in 2016, the purpose of the OIAD is to defend lawyers threatened in the exercise of their profession and to denounce situations that infringe the rights of the defence. It aims to fit into the landscape of protection mechanisms for lawyers in general and human rights lawyers in particular, by complementing existing mechanisms and working closely with established networks.

By bringing together as many Bars and organisations as possible, the OIAD is establishing itself as a key international player in the defence of lawyers at risk.



## PRESENTATION OF THE BELARUSIAN ASSOCIATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS LAWYERS

Since its creation in April 2023, the Belarusian Association of Human Rights Lawyers (BAHRL) has actively defended lawyers prosecuted for their role in politically sensitive cases.

The organisation, made up of experienced lawyers, represents legal professionals who have been arbitrarily disbarred or prosecuted for their work. These lawyers have often been involved in high-profile cases, including those of Maria Kolesnikova and Sergei Tikhanovsky.

The association represents lawyers threatened by Belarus. It cooperates with international legal organisations to draw attention to the repression of Belarusian lawyers and to improve legal support.

