

BELARUS 2021 HUMAN RIGHTS REPORT

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Belarus is an authoritarian state. The 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. Citizens were unable to choose their government through free and fair elections. Since 1994 Alyaksandr Lukashenka has consolidated his rule over all institutions and undermined the rule of law through authoritarian means, including manipulated elections and arbitrary decrees. All elections after 1994, including the August 2020 presidential election and 2019 National Assembly elections, were not considered free and fair.

The Ministry of Internal Affairs exercises authority over police, but other bodies outside of its control, for example, the Committee for State Security, the Financial Investigations Department of the State Control Committee, the Investigation Committee, and presidential security services, also exercise police functions. The president has the authority to subordinate all security bodies to the president's personal command. Lukashenka maintained effective control over security forces. There were credible reports that members of the security forces aggressively, intentionally, and routinely perpetuated abuses to stifle political dissent and repress human rights defenders, civil society activists, journalists, and others.

Starting in late May, credible media outlets and nongovernmental organizations reported that Belarusian authorities purposefully orchestrated and profited from the entry into the country of thousands of irregular migrants mostly from Iraq, but also from Cameroon, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Syria, and Afghanistan. These migrants often traveled through state-owned or state-affiliated travel agencies in partnership with travel agencies in the origin countries, with the aim of facilitating these individuals' travel overland to enter the European Union. Once the migrants and asylum seekers reached Belarus, authorities facilitated their travel to the borders of the neighboring countries of Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland and encouraged and, in some instances, forced the migrants to attempt irregular border

The law provides workers the right to remove themselves from situations that endanger health or safety without jeopardizing their employment. According to the State Labor Inspection Department of the Labor and Social Welfare Ministry, employees have the right to refuse to perform work if they are not provided with personal protective equipment that directly ensures labor safety. The list of required personal protective equipment was approved by the ministry. In order to refuse to perform assigned work due to a lack of equipment, an employee must inform the employer or an authorized official of the reasons for refusal in writing.

According to the most recent data available, authorities reported 2,042 workplace injuries and 141 deaths in 2019, compared with 2,115 injuries and 144 deaths in 2018.

The same inspectors who have authority over wage and working hour laws are also responsible for enforcing occupational safety and health laws. The State Labor Inspection Department maintained labor hotlines for each region and also provided separate contact details for matters associated with labor inspections, labor protection, and labor violations. The department also maintained a hotline for problems involving the illegal dismissal of workers. The government did not effectively enforce occupational safety and health laws. Penalties for violations were not commensurate with those for other similar crimes.

Informal Sector: Independent experts reported the informal economy constituted up to 30 percent of the total economy, which had a workforce of 4.3 million persons. Labor law does not cover informal workers.