

## Belarus Human Rights Index

<https://index.belhelcom.org/en/>

2024

### Right to Participate in Public Affairs

Expert Commentary

|   |            |      |
|---|------------|------|
| <b>The score:</b>   | <b>1,8</b> |      |
| <i>Including scores by component:</i>                       |            |      |
| • Participation in public affairs in non-electoral contexts | 1,5        |      |
| • The right to vote and be elected                          | 2,8        | -0,1 |
| • Access to public service                                  | 1,1        |      |

A baseline description of the situation regarding the realization of this right is available in the 2019 [overview](#).

When assessing the state of the right to participate in the conduct of public affairs in 2024, Index experts assigned lower scores in certain indicators compared to 2023. **Among the key developments** in 2024 that influenced these scores, experts highlighted the following:

- The electoral year, which included the first-ever “single voting day” in February and the start of the presidential campaign at the end of the year. During this period, arbitrary restrictions on electoral rights not only remained enshrined in legislation, but continued to manifest in widespread and egregious violations in practice;
- The inconsistent practice of public participation in lawmaking, which featured both rare cases of influence on decision-making and negative consequences from regulatory acts adopted without proper public consultation;
- Belarus’s continued rollback of its international obligations, particularly in the area of anti-corruption commitments.

- **Participation in public affairs in non-electoral contexts**

In 2024, citizens’ ability to influence government decisions outside of electoral campaigns remained limited.

While the formal possibility for the public to participate in the review of draft normative legal acts remains in place, actual engagement remains minimal. According to the National Center of Legal Information, a total of 11,514 normative legal acts were published in 2024, including 91 laws. However, on the official public consultation platform for draft legal acts, only 65 draft legal acts were submitted for public discussion during the reporting period – among them, 7 draft laws. For comparison:



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- In 2023: 92 draft legal acts (10 draft laws);
- In 2022: 133 draft legal acts;
- In 2020: 195 draft legal acts.<sup>1</sup>

Experts note a contradictory trend in the extent to which citizens can participate in setting policy agendas and discussing draft laws, programs, and measures. On the one hand, the lack of freedom of expression impedes the ability to collect critical feedback during the development stage of such documents and initiatives, which in turn prevents competent authorities from foreseeing potential negative consequences. On the other hand, as practice demonstrates, authorities may respond reactively<sup>2</sup> to pressing issues – but only if those issues are not overtly “political” in nature, not communicated through so-called “extremist” channels, and so forth. As a result, a system has emerged in which the negative consequences of laws, policies, and measures can only be thoroughly evaluated at the stage of implementation.

The reporting period offered mixed examples: on the one hand, there were continued cases of successful collective petitions submitted by citizens to competent authorities via the petitions.by platform.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, the website and social media accounts of the project were later designated as ‘extremist materials’,<sup>4</sup> creating additional risks of persecution for users and significantly complicating citizen mobilization for submitting collective appeals.

At the same time, persistent issues remain<sup>5</sup> with the “обращения.бел” portal: among other limitations, verification via a Belarusian phone number restricts access for citizens living abroad; not all state bodies are represented in the system; and deadlines for responding to appeals are often violated.<sup>6</sup>

In terms of public information on the grounds, reasons, and consequences of government decisions, experts observe a decline in the volume of information provided. Engagement with alternative information channels is prosecuted under “anti-extremist” legislation. Notably, 2024 marked the first

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<sup>1</sup> [https://forumpravo.by/publichnoe-obsuzhdenie-proektov-npa/forum15/?PAGEN\\_2=9](https://forumpravo.by/publichnoe-obsuzhdenie-proektov-npa/forum15/?PAGEN_2=9);  
[https://belhelcom.org/sites/default/files/11\\_right\\_to\\_take\\_part\\_in\\_the\\_conduct\\_of\\_public\\_affairs\\_2023.pdf](https://belhelcom.org/sites/default/files/11_right_to_take_part_in_the_conduct_of_public_affairs_2023.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> See the late 2024 reversal of mandatory electronic submission of tax declarations for NGOs (paper forms allowed for 2024–2025) and the relaxation of licensing requirements for residential social service providers: <https://www.lawtrend.org/publications/neprodumannost-i-postoyannoe-izmenenie-zakonodatelstva-dopolnitelnye-slozhnosti-dlya-funktsionirovaniya-nko-v-belarusi>

<sup>3</sup> For example, a petition to extend the public consultation period for a 334-page draft Health Code (initially given just 11 days) was successful: the deadline was extended to February 1, 2025 – once again illustrating the system’s selective responsiveness. See: <https://pravo.by/novosti/novosti-pravo-by/2024/december/79829/>; “The authorities are afraid we’ll realize we can influence them”

<sup>4</sup> <https://ecohome.ngo/materialy-petitions-by-vnesli-v-spisok-ekstremistskih-domen-annulirovan/>

<sup>5</sup> Overview of the situation in 2023: [https://belhelcom.org/sites/default/files/11\\_right\\_to\\_take\\_part\\_in\\_the\\_conduct\\_of\\_public\\_affairs\\_2023.pdf](https://belhelcom.org/sites/default/files/11_right_to_take_part_in_the_conduct_of_public_affairs_2023.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> <https://ecohome.ngo/god-s-obrashheniya-bel/>



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known case of criminal — not administrative — prosecution for reposting material labeled as “extremist”.<sup>7</sup> The main available channels remain state-monopolized and fail to provide diversity and quality in the information disseminated.

A wartime information logic was also evident in the coverage of certain matters of public interest. For instance, experts note the lack of clear official information throughout 2024 regarding the actual deployment of the Russian “Oreshnik” missile system on Belarusian territory.

Access to official online resources from abroad also remained restricted. In 2024: i) the official legal information system ETALON-ONLINE was inaccessible outside Belarus (without the use of a VPN); ii) public access to the electronic database of anonymized court decisions was limited — particularly, decisions of courts of general jurisdiction, final first-instance judgments, and the results of appeals and protests against such judgments were no longer available<sup>8</sup>; iii) selective blocking of government websites continued<sup>9</sup>; iv) access to the website of the Social Protection Fund was unavailable during a key reporting period, impeding the submission of required documentation.<sup>10</sup>

The transparency and accountability of decision-making processes at the regional and international levels remain questionable. During the reporting period, Belarus maintained its official course of reorienting toward integration projects outside the Euro-Atlantic space. In July 2024, Belarus became a full member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation.<sup>11</sup> In October 2024, the country obtained BRICS partner status. While these developments were centrally decided without public consultation or civil society engagement, they were widely promoted in official sources as strategic and beneficial.

In 2024, Belarus also suspended until the end of 2026 its participation in a number of double taxation agreements with countries that had imposed sanctions against it.<sup>12</sup>

Following its withdrawal from the Group of States Against Corruption (GRECO)<sup>13</sup>, Belarus formally denounced a package of Council of Europe anti-corruption conventions, including the 1999 Criminal Law Convention on Corruption, the Additional Protocol to the Convention, the 1999 Civil Law Convention on Corruption, and the Agreement between Belarus and the Council of Europe on the privileges and immunities of GRECO representatives and inspection team members.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> [Human Rights in Belarus: Main Trends in Public Policy. May-August 2024](#)

<sup>8</sup> <https://pravo.by/pravovaya-informatsiya/pravovye-akty-po-temam/court-decisions/pravovye-akty/>

<sup>9</sup> See an example involving Gomel state bodies and media: <https://nashaniva.com/ru/343670>

<sup>10</sup> <https://devby.io/news/pu-3>

<sup>11</sup> <https://president.gov.by/ru/events/ucastie-v-sammite-sanhajskoj-organizacii-sotrudnicstva>

<sup>12</sup> <https://pravo.by/document/?guid=12551&p0=C22400164>

<sup>13</sup> <https://pravo.by/document/?guid=12551&p0=H12400348>

<sup>14</sup> <https://pravo.by/document/?guid=12551&p0=H12400348>

Experts also note the absence of any evidence of meaningful consultations with civil society during the preparation of Belarus's next national report for the fourth cycle of the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) – as well as a lack of sufficient public information about the preparation process itself.<sup>15</sup>

Regarding the existence of effective procedures for addressing national and local public issues, in addition to the concerns already noted, experts highlight the first-ever criminal case initiated under Article 193-1 ("Illegal organization of the activity of a public association, religious organization or foundation, or participation in such activity"). Although this article was reintroduced into the Criminal Code in 2022, it had not been enforced in practice until now.<sup>16</sup> The use of this article – in combination with other measures – further complicates the exercise of freedom of association,<sup>17</sup> including for the purpose of engaging in national and local public affairs, especially given the arbitrary liquidation of organizations by the authorities.

The situation regarding the free exchange of information and opinions on state and political matters has not changed significantly. In 2024, Presidential Decree No. 630 of December 5, 1997 ("On Responding to Socially Significant Information") underwent substantial revision. The focus was shifted from requiring officials to respond to critical media reports toward a broader mandate to respond to "socially significant information". Government bodies are now obligated to monitor such information and to take measures to "eliminate violations of the law revealed in critical materials", as well as to "hold the responsible individuals disciplinarily accountable where appropriate".<sup>18</sup> However, the only sources considered worthy of such official attention remain state-run media and government internet resources.

- **The right to vote and be elected**

The year 2024 was marked by two electoral campaigns, which demonstrated how recent regulatory changes in the electoral sphere and related areas were implemented under conditions of intensified repressive pressure.

At the beginning of 2024, elections<sup>\*19</sup> were held<sup>20</sup> for members of the House of Representatives of the National Assembly and local Councils of Deputies. Based on its monitoring of all stages of the campaign,

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<sup>15</sup> Unlike the previous cycle, no such consultations were held:

[https://mfa.gov.by/upload/UPR\\_Belarus\\_National\\_Report.pdf](https://mfa.gov.by/upload/UPR_Belarus_National_Report.pdf)

<sup>16</sup> [Human rights situation in Belarus in 2024](#)

<sup>17</sup> See the overview on the state of freedom of association: <https://index.belhelcom.org/en/>

<sup>18</sup> <https://pravo.by/document/?guid=3961&p0=P39700630>

<sup>19</sup> The early stages of the campaign began in 2023. For expert assessments of the right under review that year, see: [https://belhelcom.org/sites/default/files/11\\_right\\_to\\_take\\_part\\_in\\_the\\_conduct\\_of\\_public\\_affairs\\_2023.pdf](https://belhelcom.org/sites/default/files/11_right_to_take_part_in_the_conduct_of_public_affairs_2023.pdf)

<sup>20</sup> We follow the policy of *Human Rights Defenders for Free Elections*, using the term "election\*" (with an asterisk) to refer to recent campaigns in order to highlight the conditional nature of this term in Belarus, where the fundamental preconditions for free and fair elections – such as freedom of expression, peaceful assembly, association, political participation, and protection from discrimination – are largely absent.



the Human Rights Defenders for Free Elections initiative documented numerous violations of both Belarusian electoral legislation and international standards for elections. Experts concluded that the electoral process was imitative in nature, with all of its stages under total administrative control.<sup>21</sup>

During the reporting period, the initial stages of the seventh presidential election\* campaign also took place, including the formation of election commissions, the nomination of candidates, and candidate registration. The campaign unfolded against the backdrop of a worsening human rights crisis and ongoing repression of politicians, activists, members of previous campaign headquarters and initiative groups, election observers, and ordinary citizens.<sup>22</sup>

The election date was set for January 26, 2025 – six months earlier than expected, and just seven days before the legal deadline for registering initiative groups to nominate candidates. According to experts from Human Rights Defenders for Free Elections, this move reflects the instrumentalization of electoral procedures and manipulation of electoral law.<sup>23</sup>

Throughout the campaign, the independence, fairness, and impartiality of the bodies responsible for organizing and overseeing the elections remained<sup>24</sup> unguaranteed. Experts specifically note the practical impossibility of forming election commissions<sup>25</sup> with the participation of opposition parties, due to the lack of any legally operating opposition political forces in the country.<sup>26</sup>

Moreover, no conditions were in place for full-fledged national or international election observation in accordance with international standards for free and fair elections.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> See the final analytical report of the campaign, as well as reports on PEC formation, nomination and registration of candidates, campaign activities, and the conduct of the Single Voting Day:  
<https://elections2024.spring96.org/en/reports>

<sup>22</sup> [The situation on the eve of the elections\\*2025. The first report of the "Human rights defenders for free elections" campaign](#)

<sup>23</sup> <https://elections2025.spring96.org/ru/news/117563>

<sup>24</sup> See the 2023 component The Right to Vote and to Be Elected:  
[https://belhelcom.org/sites/default/files/11\\_right\\_to\\_take\\_part\\_in\\_the\\_conduct\\_of\\_public\\_affairs\\_2023.pdf](https://belhelcom.org/sites/default/files/11_right_to_take_part_in_the_conduct_of_public_affairs_2023.pdf)

<sup>25</sup> For violations of electoral legislation and international standards in the formation and functioning of election commissions, see reports by Human Rights Defenders for Free Elections:  
<https://elections2025.spring96.org/en/news/117106>, <https://elections2025.spring96.org/en/news/116673>

<sup>26</sup> On the state of freedom of association in 2023, especially in the context of political party re-registration requirements that effectively dismantled the political landscape:  
[https://belhelcom.org/sites/default/files/10\\_right\\_to\\_freedom\\_of\\_association\\_2023\\_0.pdf](https://belhelcom.org/sites/default/files/10_right_to_freedom_of_association_2023_0.pdf)

<sup>27</sup> [Elections\\*2025. Final analytical report on the results of observation of the election of the President of the Republic of Belarus](#)



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Restrictions on both active and passive electoral rights remained in place. The 2022 constitutional amendments<sup>28</sup> further tightened eligibility criteria for presidential candidates: the minimum age requirement was raised, residency requirements were extended, and new restrictions were introduced for individuals holding a foreign residence permit or equivalent document.<sup>29</sup>

In practice, the Central Election Commission (CEC) denied registration to, among others, Dzmitry Hubarevich, the exiled leader of the “For Freedom” movement, citing submission of documents via email – a method not permitted under current legislation.<sup>30</sup> Experts also drew attention to the potentially inconsistent application of the provision<sup>31</sup> prohibiting individuals with past foreign residence permits from running for president. For example, the CEC registered Hanna Kanapatskaya as a candidate,<sup>32</sup> despite indications that she had previously held a foreign residence permit.<sup>33</sup>

During the reporting period, reports emerged of pressure on other potential candidates who had run in the past.<sup>34</sup> Many former presidential candidates, politicians, and activists involved in the 2020 campaign remained in detention (many held incommunicado) or in exile at the time of registration.<sup>35</sup> Citizens abroad who fled the country due to fear of politically motivated persecution continued to be effectively barred from voting.<sup>36</sup>

The 2024 electoral process marked the first presidential election cycle following the 2020 campaign, which triggered a large-scale political crisis. Experts highlight the enduring influence of the repressive apparatus activated in 2020, which, on one hand, resulted in the complete dismantling of the civic and

<sup>28</sup> For further details, see the expert commentary on the assessment of this right for 2022:

[https://belhelcom.org/sites/default/files/11right\\_to\\_take\\_part\\_in\\_the\\_conduct\\_of\\_public\\_affairs\\_2022.pdf](https://belhelcom.org/sites/default/files/11right_to_take_part_in_the_conduct_of_public_affairs_2022.pdf)

<sup>29</sup> See the “Legal Framework” section: [The situation on the eve of the elections\\*2025. The first report of the "Human rights defenders for free elections" campaign](#)

<sup>30</sup> <https://belta.by/special/society/view/neserjeznost-namerenij-tsik-objjasnil-prichinu-otkaza-v-registratsii-dvuh-initsiativnyh-grupp-671767-2024/>

<sup>31</sup> See Article 80 of the [Constitution](#): “Any citizen of the Republic of Belarus by birth, no younger than 40 years of age, with the right to vote, permanently residing in Belarus for at least 20 years immediately before the election, and not currently or previously holding foreign citizenship, a residence permit, or other document granting foreign privileges, may be elected President”.

<sup>32</sup> <https://belta.by/society/view/tsik-zaregistroval-kanopatskuju-kandidatom-v-prezidenty-belarusi-684730-2024/>

<sup>33</sup> <https://nashaniva.com/ru/353910>

<sup>34</sup> [“Dmitriev was told: ‘If anything appears on social media, you’ll go right back to prison’”.](#)

<sup>35</sup> [The situation on the eve of the elections\\*2025. The first report of the "Human rights defenders for free elections" campaign](#); Pavel Sapelko: [“Among the 1,300 political prisoners are former presidential candidates from the last election, all held incommunicado”](#)

<sup>36</sup> Provisions allowing the creation of overseas polling stations were removed from the most recent version of the Electoral Code. Compare with Article 18 of the Code as of June 4, 2015:

[https://belhelcom.org/sites/default/files/11\\_right\\_to\\_take\\_part\\_in\\_the\\_conduct\\_of\\_public\\_affairs\\_2023.pdf](https://belhelcom.org/sites/default/files/11_right_to_take_part_in_the_conduct_of_public_affairs_2023.pdf)



political space – leaving no organizations or associations capable of freely and safely participating in the electoral process, including in the formation of election commissions and the nomination or support of candidates. On the other hand, the ongoing repression – including continued persecution for supporting an alternative candidate in 2020 (up to and including dismissals and barriers to employment due to perceived “disloyalty”<sup>37</sup>) – has, according to some experts, deepened the atmosphere of distrust and restraint among citizens, particularly when there is a risk of their political preferences being identified. Coercive practices aimed at compelling citizens to vote in favor of the incumbent president also persisted.<sup>38</sup>

During the reporting period, experts observed a deterioration in effective efforts to ensure that eligible voters can actually exercise their right to vote. In their view, the introduction of a single voting day could complicate participation – especially in rural areas, where the absence of adequate informational outreach can create additional barriers.<sup>39</sup> Moreover, there was a notable reduction in the number of precinct election commissions, which likely reduced physical access to polling places for voters who had previously relied on small, localized precincts.<sup>40</sup>

With regard to the criterion of regular elections, in addition to concerns surrounding the questionable scheduling of the 2025 presidential election, experts question the new electoral model established by the 2022 constitutional amendments. The merging of local and parliamentary elections into a single voting day under the current system has resulted in an unprecedented electoral gap: in the absence of further constitutional changes, the entirety of 2026, 2027, and 2028 will pass without any electoral events in which citizens can participate.<sup>41</sup>

In terms of voters’ ability to form independent political opinions, the broader repressive climate, severe restrictions on freedom of expression (including heightened risks of administrative and criminal prosecution for interacting with independent media<sup>42</sup>), and the lack of opportunity for free political discussion and opinion formation continue to shape the environment.

Against this backdrop, experts report the continued abuse of administrative and propaganda resources in favor of Alexander Lukashenko, often with no clear line between campaigning and state propaganda, as well as the non-transparent financing of campaign activities supporting his candidacy.

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<sup>37</sup> [The situation on the eve of the elections\\*2025. The first report of the "Human rights defenders for free elections" campaign](#)

<sup>38</sup> <https://elections2025.spring96.org/ru/news/116849>

<sup>39</sup> On the consequences of the new electoral system, see [The situation on the eve of the elections\\*2025. The first report of the "Human rights defenders for free elections" campaign](#)

<sup>40</sup> [Elections\\*2025. Analytical report on the formation of precinct commissions](#)

<sup>41</sup> See the CEC election calendar: <https://www.rec.gov.by/ru/election-schedule-ru>

<sup>42</sup> See the consequences of continued pressure on independent media and their audience through the use of “anti-extremist” legislation in the commentary on freedom of expression (2024): <https://index.belhelcom.org/en/>



Among other examples, experts highlight the “Nado!”<sup>43</sup> flash mob, presented as a spontaneous expression of public support but exhibiting clear signs of being a state-organized event involving elements of coercion, as well as the state-funded “Unity Marathon”, a prolonged campaign that essentially functioned as pre-election promotion for Lukashenka.<sup>44</sup>

Experts also note evidence of opaque financing of the remaining political parties ahead of the presidential election. For instance, one pro-government party was granted a discriminatory preferential access to state-owned or state-affiliated rental spaces, benefiting from a reduced rental coefficient.<sup>45</sup>

The secrecy of the ballot also remains unguaranteed. During the 2024 campaign, a ban on photographing ballots remained in force, further intensifying the atmosphere of tension at polling stations. This tension was compounded by the lack of adequate infrastructure for ensuring voter privacy, especially critical in an authoritarian state prone to exerting pressure on voters – such as the absence of full privacy booths with curtains or comparable mechanisms to guarantee confidentiality of choice, as well as the excessive presence of security and law enforcement personnel at polling stations.<sup>46</sup>

- **Access to public service**

The score for this component remained unchanged. Index experts note no qualitative improvements in ensuring equal access to public service. Throughout the reporting period, filters based on perceived political “loyalty” remained in place. These encompassed a broad range of indicators of potential disloyalty – from information about having signed in support of an alternative presidential candidate in 2020 to the possession of a Polish Card or similar documents by family members.<sup>47</sup>

No significant changes were observed in the criteria or procedures applied in appointments, promotions, temporary or permanent suspensions from office, or in the overall level of politicization of the public administration.

In 2024, a new criminal provision was introduced, establishing a penalty of up to three years of imprisonment for the unauthorized departure from the country by a citizen with access to state secrets, whose right to leave the Republic of Belarus was knowingly and temporarily restricted under legislative acts.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Approximate translation based on context – “He should run for office again”.

<sup>44</sup> [Elections\\*2025. Analytical report on the results of monitoring the election campaigning](#)

<sup>45</sup> <https://pozirk.online/ru/news/103603/>

<sup>46</sup> [The situation on the eve of the elections\\*2025. The first report of the "Human rights defenders for free elections" campaign](#)

<sup>47</sup> For the situation in this component in 2023, see:  
[https://belhelcom.org/sites/default/files/11\\_right\\_to\\_take\\_part\\_in\\_the\\_conduct\\_of\\_public\\_affairs\\_2023.pdf](https://belhelcom.org/sites/default/files/11_right_to_take_part_in_the_conduct_of_public_affairs_2023.pdf)

<sup>48</sup> See the updated version of Article 375-2 of the Criminal Code:  
<https://pravo.by/document/?guid=12551&p0=H12400022>





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