

ANNUAL REPORT ON FAILURES *and Successes*



WHY WE WROTE THIS TEXT

As the year draws to a close, it's usually time to draw the conclusions. For 2023, we want to openly share the challenges and things that didn't work out as we anticipated. This is an attempt to reflect on them and encourage our colleagues and partners to do the same, so that we can get better in the next year.

Let's engage in dialogue and seek solutions together!

Of course, we'll also highlight our successes :)

In our annual report:

- Human Rights Index: we were unprepared for a hole that deep, both in terms of meanings and operationally. This necessitated swift, on-the-spot adjustments.
- Overview of key trends in Belarusian public policy: while we developed a strong product, its domestic promotion has been less successful than anticipated. However, it worked well in the external circles.
- International human rights mechanisms: we noticed that non-human rights organisations show limited interest in utilising these mechanisms.
- Internships for law students: the demand is significant, but executing the internship requires more resources than we initially anticipated.



For various reasons, we couldn't take a group photo of our entire team for this report. Instead, we've used an AI-generated image to convey our feelings to you.

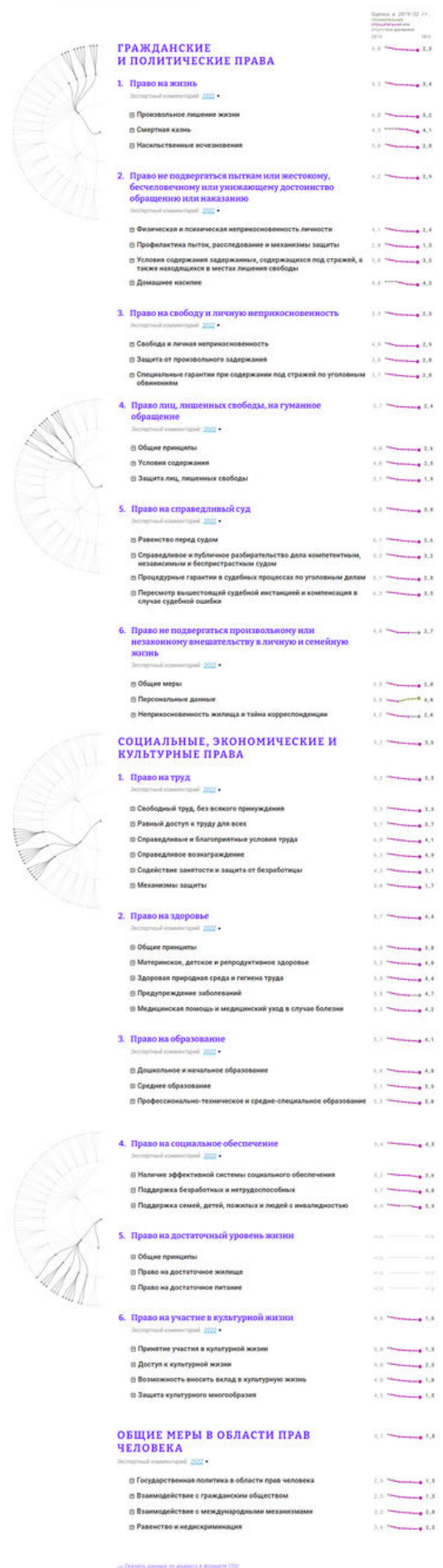
We welcome your feedback, ideas, and suggestions for our team. They can be provided anonymously.

Belarus Human Rights Index

In 2023, we continued working on the Belarus Human Rights Index. It is compiled by a team of civil society experts under the coordination of the Belarusian Helsinki Committee

This index serves three purposes:

- to allow interested professionals to quickly assess the overall human rights situation in Belarus rather than gathering information from scattered sources;
- to demonstrate how the situation is evolving over time;
- the Index reveals the directions of human rights reforms that are needed in our country.



HUMAN RIGHTS INDEX

WE WERE NOT PREPARED FOR A HOLE THAT DEEP – NEITHER WITH RESPECT TO MEANINGS, NOR OPERATIONALLY

What did not work out as anticipated

Our focus was primarily on the conceptual aspects, leaving us quite unprepared for some of the managerial hurdles. What if the frequency of human rights violations increases significantly across all areas, how do we efficiently gather and process this information?

What happens if some of our experts are imprisoned or refuse to collaborate due to fear of persecution, and we need to find replacements?

We had to reorganise our operational processes, which resulted in a delayed release of the Index.

When the Index's methodology was developed in 2018, we did not foresee the depth of the hole we could face. We are now seeing limitations in this methodology: for certain 2022 components, our experts have already assigned the lowest possible scores (the 2023 scores will be published next year). Yet, there's still room for further deterioration of the situation. This year, we clarified our methodology by adding tenths to the assessment scale and discussing what actions to take when a score hits rock bottom.

In 2018, when selecting rights for evaluation, we could not have predicted that certain rights, like freedom of movement – which we omitted from the Index since it seemed secure – would become so severely violated and relevant. We are still deliberating on how to address this.

What worked well

In early 2024, we will release the 2023 evaluation, marking five years of collecting, assessing, and quantifying human rights transformations in the country. This represents a substantial amount of data: annual assessments on specific rights (18) and general measures (4), their components (64), across five years, totaling 321 indicators.

We have translated the Index into English and are actively promoting it to international partners to keep their attention focused on Belarus.

We managed to retain and even slightly expand our expert pool; now we have 42 experts across various fields! Given the challenging period that the Belarusian expert community and civil society at large face, we are grateful for the continued trust and willingness of experts to collaborate with us.

HUMAN RIGHTS INDEX

WE WILL SOON PUBLISH THE DATA COVERING 5 YEARS

By the way, imagine that when we first started developing the Index in 2018, it was a small team of 6 people. Currently, there are over 50 specialists involved in various capacities!

Back then, in 2018, we were looking for the best structure for the Index. Instead of constantly redrawing diagrams on drafts, we used stickers representing different structural parts and placed them on a separate table. Whenever someone had a new idea, they would simply reposition the sticker.

Overview of key trends in Belarusian public policy

In 2023, we launched an overview of key trends in public policy, examined through a human rights lens.

This overview focuses on the most significant changes in three areas:

- general measures: this includes systemic aspects, like legislation, strategies, and policies that generally define the conditions and background for human rights implementation in Belarus;
- law enforcement: specific violations of civil and political rights, as well as in the field of social, economic, and cultural rights;
- key decisions and reactions of international institutions regarding the situation with human rights in Belarus.

We plan to release the next semi-annual review in early 2024. You can subscribe to 'Trends' [here](#).

HUMAN RIGHTS IN BELARUS: KEY TRENDS IN PUBLIC POLICY

**WE HAVE NOT MANAGED TO
PROMOTE THE PRODUCT IN
THE DOMESTIC CIRCLES YET**

What did not work out as anticipated:

Although we've received positive feedback from the expert community, it seems that non-human rights experts in related fields don't utilise our work as much as we anticipated in their activities.

We haven't found a good format of promoting our overview to experts and journalists. A new issue is set to be released in January 2024, and we're still thinking about various strategies for discussing it with our audience.

We lack active ambassadors from the non-human rights expert community who advocate for human rights topics.

HUMAN RIGHTS IN BELARUS: KEY TRENDS IN PUBLIC POLICY

**'TRENDS' HAVE SUCCEEDED
IN THE EXTERNAL CIRCLES**



To capture the attention of the international audience, we've deviated from the usual human rights-associated cornflower blue colour, opting instead for the Viva Magenta. Chosen as the 2023 Colour of the Year by the Pantone Color Institute, Viva Magenta is described as audacious, full of wit, and inclusive of all, welcoming anyone and everyone with a verve for life and a rebellious spirit.

The Belarusian Helsinki Committee employs this colour to draw the world's attention back to Belarus, to remind everyone that we are part of the global process, and the security of our country affects the security of the whole region.

What worked well

We can see that the overview has been effective for diplomats and international organisations, aiding them in gaining a better understanding of the situation in Belarus, including at a strategic level.

We've developed a rather unique product that, together with the Index, allows a broader perspective to assess the current situation and emphasise the most important aspects. This seems particularly valuable to us in an environment where audiences are overwhelmed by a continuous stream of events.

We're generally pleased with the launch of the 'Trends', an idea originally conceived by Aleh Hulak, which hadn't been fully fleshed out at the time of his passing.

International human rights mechanisms

Throughout 2023, we compiled 9 reports and submitted 6 communications to the UN Special Procedures. Additionally, we maintained our collaboration with the OSCE: in partnership with a coalition of Belarusian human rights organisations, we prepared a report under the newly initiated OSCE Moscow Mechanism and submitted information regarding hate crimes committed in 2022.

By the end of the year, under the overall coordination of the Belarusian Helsinki Committee, a coalition of human rights organisations prepared a comprehensive interim report on Belarus' implementation of the recommendations of the third cycle of the Universal Periodic Review. We also continued to emphasise the significance of engaging with international mechanisms among Belarusian CSOs and initiatives. To support this, we provide advisory services and specialised tools for lawyers and managers of civil society organisations, including a reference system on human rights and a calendar detailing deadlines for various interactions with international human rights mechanisms.

What did not work out as anticipated

Belarusian CSOs do not often address international mechanisms independently, despite their unique expertise and insight into rights violations of their target groups.

We recognize that this reluctance is due to a range of factors, including overwhelming workloads, security concerns, and scepticism about the efficacy of international mechanisms. Nevertheless, we believe it is crucial to continue this work.

INTERNATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS MECHANISMS

**NON-HUMAN RIGHTS INITIATIVES
ARE QUITE RELUCTANT TO UTILISE
THESE MECHANISMS**

What worked well

Despite these obstacles, our consultations have enabled several initiatives to engage in submitting information to international human rights bodies (for security reasons, we do not disclose the names of these initiatives).

Пространство для диалога	гражданское общество	право на свободу ассоциаций	сбс	December 31, 2023	
Доклад Специального до	право на свободу ассоциаций	беларусы в изгнании		February 15, 2024	
Выборы и насильственн	насильственные исчезновения	выборы		February 15, 2024	
Центральное значение у	женщины	лица с инвалидностью	социальная защита	сс	April 13, 2024
Альтернативный доклад	запрет расовой дискриминации	дискриминация			July 15, 2024
Доклад для Универсальн	УГО				March 13, 2025

Please note that we maintain a calendar of deadlines for international mechanisms relevant to NGOs and lawyers, as well as a specialised database on human rights standards.

Student Internship

We offer Belarusian law students a three-month online internship opportunity twice a year.

During this program, interns engage with real cases and participate in workshops on topical human rights issues. This internship is demanding, it requires significant commitment from both the interns (8 to 15 hours per week) and the mentors.

This year, we welcomed the 4th intake of students.

What did not work out as anticipated

We assumed that we'd provide interns quality mentoring, and in return, they'd assist with some of our workload through taking on various assignments. While we anticipated certain risks that could impact effectiveness (such as reduced efficiency due to online communication and varying levels of human rights knowledge among interns), we ultimately found ourselves dedicating more resources to the interns than planned, with less immediate return than expected. We now recognize the need to reassess our interaction with interns and adjust our workload accordingly to address this imbalance. Our goal is to educate the interns effectively without causing undue stress for them or ourselves.

The demand for the program remains high, however, it requires us to contribute more than we had planned.

STUDENT INTERNSHIP

What worked well

The internship is in high demand, as evidenced by competition of four applicants per available spot in the latest intake.

Notably, **44% of applicants permanently reside in Belarus**. They are grateful for this opportunity since, according to them, only few organisations are willing to work with individuals from Belarus due to security concerns, which leads to a sense of exclusion.

Feedback has been predominantly positive, with **71% of interns reporting complete satisfaction with the program and 93% indicating they were either 'completely satisfied' or 'rather satisfied'**.

Other activities

Together with the Council of Europe and Belarusian experts, we have started updating the Concept of anti-discrimination legislation and measures for Belarus. We plan to complete this work at the beginning of 2024 and expect to have a ready-made framework for reforms in this area, including the concept of the Law on Equality and Non-Discrimination.

The Belarusian Helsinki Committee has utilised its consultative status with ECOSOC on five occasions, presenting four oral and one written position during the 52nd, 53rd, and 54th sessions of the Human Rights Council.

We have conducted research of the current state of non-formal education in the field of human rights. Together with the Barys Zvozkau Belarusian Human Rights House, we organised a conference with the participation of core and non-core providers of such education. Our main goal was to identify key problems and challenges in this area and to initiate a discussion among Belarusian CSOs engaged in this field. Based on the study's results, we plan to develop our own educational products in 2024.

In 2023, experts from the Belarusian Helsinki Committee extensively interacted with a diverse range of actors involved in developing concepts and reform strategies for a democratic Belarus across various sectors. We consistently emphasised human rights values and assisted in interpreting standards and Belarus' international commitments in this area. For instance, we contributed several valuable human rights perspectives to the Concept of Reparations for Persons Repressed During the Lukashenko Regime and the Prevention of Recurrence of Further Serious Human Rights Violations, prepared by Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya's Office.

In collaboration with partners in the Council of Europe Contact Group on Belarus, we helped organise two training sessions for Belarusian lawyers.

Our lawyers conducted about 300 consultations for individuals, and experts in the human rights-based approach provided almost 20 consultations for non-human rights initiatives.

Afterword

All this work would not have been possible not only without the Belarusian Helsinki Committee team, but also without our friends and partners who have consistently supported us.

So, today we want to say:

To those who may not directly utilise our services but recognize the significance of European values:

nothing will happen without you!

Keep engaging with independent media, have meaningful discussions with your loved ones, and envision and plan for a better future. And please, always be mindful of your digital and psychological safety.

To our colleagues from civil society initiatives and organisations:

you have shown remarkable resilience in not only surviving, but continuing your work. Please, keep going.

We are always here to assist with a human rights-based approach, international mechanisms, and other areas of our expertise:)

To the partners, international mechanisms and the global community:

Act for Belarus! It matters for the region!

Afterword

We also wish to address **the Belarusian authorities**:

Thousands of innocent individuals are – or have been – imprisoned, and hundreds of thousands have fled the country, fearing arbitrary detentions. All of these are shattered destinies.

Even though this has already happened, there is still an opportunity to mitigate the consequences. We urge the Belarusian authorities to cease the repressions, to release and rehabilitate political prisoners, to conduct fair elections, and to start seeking solutions for the current crisis.

To those who are just 'ordinary civil servants' or 'ordinary law enforcement officers' and feel that 'nothing depends on them': try to minimise the harm from your own actions. Slow down and resist executing unlawful orders and instructions. Remember, you are surrounded by innocent people merely exercising their rights.

With you since November 1, 1995 –
the Belarusian Helsinki Committee
www.belhelcom.org