The State of the Legal Profession in Belarus

An Analytical Review, 2024–2026

Belarusian Association of
Human Rights Lawyers

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INTRODUCTION

Against the backdrop of the critical human rights situation in Belarus and the repression that has continued since 2020, some amounting to crimes against humanity, the legal profession is also going through a profound crisis. The domestic legislation governing the practice of law does not meet international standards, and the conditions in which lawyers practise frequently fall short even of the requirements of this imperfect legislation. The situation is compounded by the fact that, over the past few years, the Bar's governing bodies have become effectively embedded in the state administrative system and now take part in carrying out repressive policy against lawyers who do not support the course set by the state. All of this seriously affects lawyers' ability to provide legal assistance, and its quality, in the country.

Since 2020, the Belarusian Bar has been under close scrutiny from international mechanisms, human rights organisations and professional associations of lawyers. During this time several reports have been prepared, a number of events have been held, and numerous statements have been published in support of persecuted Belarusian lawyers. Among other things, in May 2024 the international organisation Human Rights Watch published a 95-page report[1] on the persecution of Belarusian lawyers, and in 2025 the International Day of the Endangered Lawyer was dedicated to the situation in Belarus[2].

A telling illustration of the international attention paid to the Belarusian Bar, and to the role its governing bodies play in the functioning of the repressive system, was the inclusion in December 2024 of Aliaksei Shvakau – at the time chairman of the Belarusian Republican Bar Association (hereinafter, "the BRBA") – on the European Union's sanctions list[3].

1. Human Rights Watch, *'I swear to Fulfill the Duties of Defense Lawyer Honestly and Faithfully': Politically Motivated Crackdown on Human Rights Lawyers in Belarus*, 27 May 2024, available at: https://www.hrw.org/report/2024/05/27/i-swear-fulfill-duties-defense-lawyer-honestly-and-faithfully/politically.
2. https://dayoftheendangeredlawyer.eu/2025-belarus/, https://protect-lawyers.org/en/international-day-for-lawyers-in-danger-2025-the-belarusian-legal-profession-under-pressure/, https://protect-lawyers.org/en/oiad-press-release-preparations-for-the-2025-international-day-for-lawyers-in-danger-focus-on-belarus/.

At the same time, the problems of the Belarusian Bar remain, above all, at the centre of attention of Belarusian lawyers who have been unlawfully deprived of the right to practise law in preceding years. In September 2022, these lawyers presented a report[4] highlighting the most characteristic processes and phenomena that led the authors to conclude that the Bar had been destroyed as an independent institution of civil society. In January 2024, a new report[5] was published, covering the year and a half that had elapsed since the previous study.

This report covers the period from January 2024 to September 2026 and continues the practice of monitoring the situation in the Belarusian Bar, following the structure and methodology of the previous studies. It draws on information from open sources, including state resources, publications of the Bar's governing bodies, materials from human rights organisations, independent media and various civil society initiatives, including the "Right to Defence" project[6], which has for a long time remained one of the principal sources of information on the state of the legal profession in Belarus. In addition, the authors drew on information obtained in the course of their own professional activity and monitoring.

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3. https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=OJ:L_202403175. The reasons for listing were that "in his role as Chairman of the Belarusian Republican Bar Association, Aliaksei Shvakau has been leading and shaping the the Belarusian Republican Bar Association policy of systemic repression against lawyers who represent clients in politically motivated cases or who speak out against abuses by the Lukashenka regime. In his former role as chairman of the Minsk City Bar Association, he also targeted lawyers representing clients in politically motivated cases. He is therefore responsible for the repression of civil society and democratic opposition and activities that undermine the rule of law in Belarus."

4. *The Crisis of the Legal Profession in Belarus: How to Return the Right to Defense,* September 2022, initiated by the Centre for Constitutionalism and Human Rights of the European Humanities University in partnership with the "Right to Defence" project, Human Constanta, and the Polish Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights, available at: https://drive.google.com/file/d/1cGbBv2r6bt5rCg7fOLAmGFoQLUBQQBvx/view.

5. *Belarus: The Crisis of the Legal Profession. Continued Repressions, 2022–2023,* January 2024, initiated by the American Bar Association Center for Human Rights (ABA CHR), the Belarusian Association of Human Rights Lawyers, and the Centre for Constitutionalism and Human Rights of the European Humanities University, in partnership with Lawyers for Lawyers, the International Bar Association's Human Rights Institute (IBAHRI), and the "Right to Defence" project, available at: https://www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/administrative/human_rights/justice-defenders/chr-belarus-legal-profession-continued-repressions-report.pdf.

6. https://defendersbelarus.org/right_to_protection.

1. OBSTACLES TO THE EXERCISE OF THE RIGHT TO DEFENCE

1.1. Obstacles to a lawyer's access to the client

Article 62 of the Constitution of the Republic of Belarus, Article 20 of the Code of Criminal Procedure, and Article 4.1 of the Procedural and Executive Code on Administrative Offences guarantee the right of access to legal assistance, which formally corresponds to Article 14 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. However, domestic legislation does not fully reflect such UN standards as the Basic Principles on the Role of Lawyers (in particular, Principles 7 and 8) and the general comments of the UN Human Rights Committee. As a result, key international guarantees are not secured: prompt access to defence counsel (no later than 48 hours from the moment of detention) and absolute confidentiality of communication with counsel[7].

The norms of Belarusian domestic law do not always work in practice, and state authorities often create artificial, systemic obstacles to lawyers' work[8]. At the initial stage of detention, lawyers routinely encounter a failure to provide information on the detained person's whereabouts and the authority holding them, which deprives defence counsel of the ability to notify that authority in good time that they have taken up the defence and to gain access to the client. Lawyers continue to be restricted in their ability to visit their clients in a temporary detention facility or at the isolation centre for offenders in the city of Minsk.

While a sentence is being served in a correctional institution, the right to meet with a lawyer is often artificially restricted. Under Part 6 of Article 83 of the Penal Enforcement Code, a visit with a lawyer is conditional on a written application from the convicted person themselves. Colony administrations actively use this provision to block

7. General Comment No. 32, Article 14: Right to equality before courts and tribunals and to fair trial, paras 3, 34; General Comment No. 35, Article 9 (Liberty and security of person), paras 33, 35, 58, 59.
8. For a detailed account of obstacles to access to the client, see: *The Crisis of the Legal Profession in Belarus: How to Return the Right to Defense,* pp. 33-41.

visits, claiming that no application has been submitted by the convicted person. Moreover, individuals placed in punishment cells are systematically denied the right to visits from their lawyers on the pretext of being held in such a cell, even though the law provides for no such restriction. This amounts to an example of colony administrations arbitrarily interpreting the legislation.

> *For example, a new criminal case was opened against one female political prisoner who was already serving a sentence in a colony. Before the case could be heard by the court, her lawyer attempted to meet with the client to discuss the defence's position. The colony administration refused to grant the visit, citing the woman's placement in a punishment cell. As a result, the lawyer and the accused were unable to communicate confidentially even by the time of the first court hearing.*

Overall, it must be noted that lawyers' access to detainees and prisoners has not improved since 2020, and in some respects the situation has worsened. A particularly concerning practice that emerged was the deliberate holding of a number of political prisoners incommunicado, which was actively employed between 2023 and 2025. At least 15 political prisoners[9] were subjected to complete isolation, being deprived for prolonged periods, on fabricated pretexts, of any possibility of communicating with the outside world, including with their lawyers[10].

The absence in the legislation of any liability for denying a lawyer access to a client breeds impunity among officials and leads to continuing, systemic violations of the right to legal assistance.

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9. https://www.dw.com/ru/uzniki-v-izolacii-kak-vlasti-belarusi-primenaut-rezim-inkommunikado/a-76411014.
10. As Sergey Tihanovski noted at his first press conference after his release: "Nothing is allowed: no lawyers are allowed, no complaints get out, no letters – nothing gets out.", https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0Kldu3O7EWc. Another former political prisoner, Ihar Losik, said that while held incommunicado he received no letters from his family, which at one point led him to conclude they had all died, https://www.facebook.com/share/p/1AdK9NA85d/?mibextid=wwXIfr.

1.2. Interference with the confidential relationship between lawyer and client

Principle 22 of the Basic Principles on the Role of Lawyers establishes that all communications and consultations between lawyers and their clients within their professional relationship are confidential. The norms of Belarusian legislation likewise guarantee the confidentiality of communication between lawyer and client, yet in practice this guarantee is not observed.

Lawyers are required to keep "case files", in which materials relating to a specific case are stored, including draft complaints and other procedural documents. As part of quality control over the provision of legal assistance, these files may be inspected by the heads of legal advice offices or by other lawyers. In this way, confidential information relating to a client's case may come to be examined by third parties.

Communication between a client and a lawyer does not always take place in the absence of third parties, and conversations in pre-trial detention centres and correctional institutions may be monitored and recorded.

Under Principle 8 of the Basic Principles on the Role of Lawyers and Rule 61(1) of the UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (the Nelson Mandela Rules), meetings between a lawyer and their client may be within sight, but not within hearing, of law enforcement officials. International standards permit only direct visual supervision (*"within sight"*), but not technical video or audio recording. In practice, however, these standards are regularly breached in pre-trial detention centres and colonies. Nor do state authorities conceal the existence of such a practice: as far back as 2021, a conversation between lawyer Natallia Matskevich and her client Sergey Tihanovski in a pre-trial detention centre was recorded and subsequently broadcast on the state television channel ONT[11]. During the period under review, the practice of covert listening to conversations between lawyers and clients has continued. There have been several instances in which bar associations became aware that lawyers were being monitored in pre-trial detention centres, but nevertheless failed to

11. *The Crisis of the Legal Profession in Belarus: How to Return the Right to Defense*, p. 44.

take any action, and lawyers were even subjected to disciplinary proceedings on the basis of material obtained through "covert surveillance".

The existence of covert surveillance measures is a direct violation of the standard of confidentiality of communication between lawyer and client. Moreover, under the case-law of the European Court of Human Rights, an interference with the confidentiality of lawyer–client communications does not necessarily require actual interception or eavesdropping to have taken place; a genuine belief held on reasonable grounds that the conversation was being listened to may be sufficient [12]. In Belarus, where there have repeatedly been confirmed instances of monitoring of conversations between defence counsel and client, and where the possibility of such monitoring in rooms designated for meetings in places of detention cannot be excluded, lawyers are constantly under the threat of covert surveillance, which in itself constitutes state interference with the confidential relationship between lawyer and client.

1.3. The effective denial of the right to defence in cases conducted under the special proceedings

By a law of 20 July 2022, provisions regulating a new procedure – special proceedings – were introduced into the Code of Criminal Procedure of Belarus. This special mechanism for bringing individuals to criminal liability allows criminal cases to be heard *in absentia* and is intended for defendants who are outside Belarus and evade appearing before the authorities conducting the criminal proceedings. Criminal cases brought under this procedure are predominantly politically motivated, and the mechanism itself is used by the authorities to persecute opposition-minded citizens who have been forced to leave Belarus. According to official data from the Investigative Committee of the Republic of Belarus, as of early September 2026, the special proceedings had, since their introduction, been initiated against 187 people [13], and in most cases has already resulted in convictions.

12. *Castravet v. Moldova*, application no. 23393/05, final judgment of 13 June 2007, § 51.
13. https://sk.gov.by/ru/special-production-ru

In practice, a defendant in special proceedings is effectively denied access to the case file, including the charges brought against them. There are many known instances of individuals subject to special proceedings attempting to find out from the court the substance of the charge and to examine the case materials, only for the courts to refuse such requests. Attempts to obtain any information about the case through lawyers appointed as defence counsel likewise proved unsuccessful.

> *In November 2023, it became known that a criminal case had been opened against human rights defender Leanid Sudalenka under Article 361-4 of the Criminal Code (facilitating extremist activity)*[14]*, and on 1 March 2024 special proceedings were initiated in respect of this case. Leanid Sudalenka attempted to contact the lawyer appointed to his criminal case, but the lawyer never got in touch, and a complaint to the bar association about the lawyer's conduct was left without remedy*[15]*.*
>
> *The episode described above is not an isolated case. In a communication dated 18 December 2024*[16]*, UN special mandate holders, addressing the Belarusian authorities, pointed to numerous confirmed instances in which defendants subject to the special proceedings made repeated attempts to contact the lawyers appointed to them (by email, messaging apps and official approaches to bar associations), yet not one of those lawyers ever responded.*

Such conduct is driven by fear of communicating with clients within this procedure. In cases of this kind, lawyers are routinely made to sign undertakings not to disclose information from the pre-trial investigation and court hearings. Appointed lawyers fear that informing the accused of the charge and the case materials in any way

14. https://spring96.org/en/news/115533.
15. https://euroradio.fm/ru/leonid-sudalenko-ne-mozhet-svyazatsya-s-advokatom-po-novomu-ugolovnomu-delu.
16. AL BLR 8/2024.

(should the accused subsequently make that information public) will be treated by the Belarusian authorities as disclosure of investigative data, entailing loss of their status as a lawyer and criminal prosecution of the lawyer themselves[17]. Even though refusing to communicate with the client constitutes a flagrant breach of professional duty, the Bar's self-governing bodies wholly disregard such facts and, to all appearances, encourage this practice. As a result, the state-appointed lawyer becomes a purely nominal figure, performing the formal function of being present at the proceedings, while the accused – with the tacit consent of the Bar – is left entirely without access not only to legal assistance, but even to the possibility of exercising the right to defence on their own.

1.4. Arbitrary detention as a means of removing lawyers from the defence of clients and forcing them out of the profession

Since 2020, more than 50 instances of the arbitrary detention of lawyers have been recorded. In some such cases, the deprivation of liberty lasted several hours and was never formally documented. In others, lawyers were made subject to administrative liability, typically in the form of administrative detention of up to 15 days (sometimes several times in succession). Criminal proceedings were initiated against a number of lawyers[18].

Most lawyers who had been detained subsequently lost the ability to practise law for various reasons. Previous analysis[19] of such cases indicates that the detentions were carried out by law enforcement agencies to create formal grounds for revoking the lawyers' professional status.

In particular, a finding that a lawyer was guilty of an administrative offence was invariably treated by bar associations as amounting to a disciplinary offence, resulting in disbarment. At the same time, the underlying administrative prosecution in most cases arose on spurious

17. Article 407 of the Criminal Code of Belarus provides for criminal liability, in the form of a fine or arrest, for the intentional disclosure of information from an inquiry, a pre-trial investigation, or a closed court hearing.
18. See section 1.5 of this report.
19. *The Crisis of the Legal Profession in Belarus: How to Return the Right to Defense,* pp. 55-57; *Belarus: The Crisis of the Legal Profession. Continued Repressions, 2022–2023*, pp. 10–13.

grounds or was politically motivated (such cases include, for example, being held administratively liable for disseminating "extremist" materials, a category that in practice covers the output of almost all independent media). Nevertheless, the governing bodies of the bar associations gave no assessment either of these or of other circumstances surrounding the detention, confining themselves to the mere fact that an administrative penalty had been imposed on the lawyer.

This practice became widespread from 2022 onward in respect of lawyers involved in politically motivated criminal cases or who had previously publicly expressed their civic or political position. This provides grounds for viewing the practice as a deliberate strategy on the part of the law enforcement agencies, aimed at removing lawyers from particular cases and subsequently stripping them of their professional status.

At the same time, instances had previously been recorded[20] of lawyers being stripped of their status through arbitrary administrative prosecution even in the absence of any political context. Such cases continued to occur during the period under review, including in 2026. This clearly demonstrates how unlawful practices originally developed for political persecution spread into other spheres as well.

There are also known cases in which lawyers were detained outside the framework of any proceedings, or in connection with criminal cases in which the detainees were never given any procedural status at all. Some were questioned as witnesses (even though they were brought to state authorities by force – that is, effectively detained, which is impermissible in respect of witnesses).

Regardless of the outcome of the detention and the further course of the criminal case, the lawyers concerned subsequently lost the possibility to practise. Some were made subject to an extraordinary attestation, failure to pass which became grounds for stripping them of the right to practise. Others, recognising that such consequences were inevitable, voluntarily terminated their membership of the bar association. Because many of the detained lawyers were never made

20. *Belarus: The Crisis of the Legal Profession. Continued Repressions, 2022–2023*, p. 13.

subject to any form of liability, and the overwhelming majority of them did not publicly report the fact of their detention, it is currently difficult to establish with certainty every such case and the circumstances that accompanied it. Nevertheless, a number of episodes have received public attention.

On 28 February 2024, the largest known mass detention of lawyers to date took place: according to human rights defenders, at least 12 people were detained that day[21]*. No public information was released on the grounds, duration or other circumstances of these detentions – including which cases they were connected with. In the following months it became known that a number of lawyers had ceased practising for no apparent reason – many of them, according to available information, having been among those detained on 28 February*[22]*.*

The only case to have received more detailed coverage is that of Halina Parkhimchyk, a lawyer with more than 30 years' experience, against whom criminal proceedings were brought. She was reportedly accused of taking part in a protest in 2020 and of providing financial assistance to victims of repression. [23] *The lawyer was held in a detention facility for a week, after which a written undertaking not to leave the area was imposed on her as a preventive measure. On her release, Halina Parkhimchyk left Belarus.*

Although Halina Parkhimchyk was prosecuted for specific acts attributed to her personally, the very context of her detention – on the same day as 11 other lawyers – leaves no doubt that it

21. https://spring96.org/en/news/114609.
22. The "Right to Defence" project found that, by the end of May 2024, the names of 15 people had disappeared from the lists of practising lawyers, yet no information was published on disciplinary proceedings against them or on any other circumstances that might explain this fact: https://www.defendersbelarus.org/iz-spiskov-advokatov-ischezli.
23. https://www.defendersbelarus.org/2024whatwillstandoutforthehumanrightsandlegalcommunity.

formed part of coordinated action by the security agencies aimed at stripping a number of lawyers of the ability to practise law.

In April 2025, three lawyers were simultaneously detained in Homieĺ , among them the head of a legal advice office. According to the information available, criminal proceedings were opened against each of them on separate, politically motivated cases, linked in particular to taking part in a rally in 2020 and to "facilitating extremist activity"[24]. Two of them were released under a written undertaking not to leave the area, and the further course of their criminal prosecution is unknown, although both were subsequently stripped of their status as lawyers. The third – lawyer Siarhei Khlystou – was remanded in custody and sentenced to imprisonment (the exact term is unknown) under Articles 130 ("Incitement to racial, national, religious or other social hostility or discord") and 361-1 ("Calls for restrictive measures (sanctions) or other action aimed at causing harm to the national security of the Republic of Belarus").[25]

Although the three lawyers were detained in connection with different criminal cases, the fact that action was taken against all three simultaneously gives grounds to believe that their professional affiliation was itself one of the factors behind their prosecution. This is indirectly confirmed by reports that, following these detentions, in May 2025 the KGB carried out inspections of lawyers of the Homieĺ Regional Bar Association at their places of work, after which 6 people disappeared from the association's list of lawyers[26].

24. https://pozirk.online/be/news/139660/.
25. https://gomelspring.org/be/news/11460.
26. https://www.defendersbelarus.org/news/tpost/2a7jvho3k1-6-advokatov-ischezli-iz-spiskov-gomelsko.

It should be noted that neither the BRBA nor the territorial bar associations reacted in any way to these or other instances of lawyers being detained. Thus, professional associations of lawyers offer no assessment of the state's repressive practices and, contrary to the function assigned to them, take no action to protect their members.

1.5. Politically motivated criminal prosecution of lawyers

Since 2020, at least 21 lawyers have been subjected to criminal prosecution on political grounds, including those who had already lost the right to practise law by the time the prosecution began. 15 of them have been recognised as political prisoners[27].

As of September 2026, 6 lawyers remain in detention, all of them recognised as political prisoners:

***Vitali Braginiec**, detained in May 2022 and sentenced on 2 February 2023 to 8 years' imprisonment*[28];

***Yuliya Yurhilevich**, detained in August 2022 and sentenced on 26 July 2023 to 6 years' imprisonment*[29];

***Aliaksei Barodka**, detained in January and sentenced in May 2023 to 6 years' imprisonment*[30];

***Siarhei Khlystou**, detained in April and, no later than August 2025, sentenced to imprisonment (the exact term is unknown)*[31];

27. A political motive can also be discerned in the persecution of other lawyers, but for various reasons unrelated to the assessment of their cases they were not granted the status of political prisoner. This could, for example, be due to a relatively short period in custody: thus, Dzmitry Pihul was detained for three days – the Code of Criminal Procedure did not permit him to be held any longer given the offence with which he was charged; Halina Parkhimchyk was released roughly a week after her detention and left the country before any further restrictions could be imposed.
28. https://prisoners.spring96.org/en/person/vital-brahinec.
29. https://prisoners.spring96.org/en/person/julija-jurhilevicz.
30. https://prisoners.spring96.org/en/person/aljaksei-barodka.
31. https://prisoners.spring96.org/en/person/sjarhei-khlystou. See also section 1.4 of this report.

***Andrei Balmakou**, detained in May 2025 and sentenced on 8 May 2026 to imprisonment (the exact term is unknown)*[32];

***Dmitri Laevski**, taken into custody in the courtroom on 9 September 2026 after the announcement of the verdict sentencing him to 3 years' imprisonment*[33].

Criminal prosecution, like the instances of arbitrary detention described above[34], should be regarded as a means of removing from the profession those lawyers who have not demonstrated loyalty to the current authorities. Such a lack of loyalty may be inferred even from the mere diligent performance of professional duties when representing clients in sensitive cases. At the same time, as the harshest repressive measure, criminal prosecution also serves as an effective means of intimidation, deterring practising lawyers from providing assistance in politically motivated cases and from publicly expressing any disagreement with the current state of affairs.

Instances of the criminal prosecution of lawyers have been recorded, with varying frequency, since 2020, and during the period under review there is no sign of any intention to abandon this practice. Moreover, it cannot be ruled out that the actual number of such instances is higher: many criminal cases become known only a considerable time after the prosecution began – sometimes only after a verdict has already been handed down[35]. All of this indicates that criminal prosecution continues to be used as an instrument of pressure both against individual lawyers and against the legal profession as a whole.

32. https://prisoners.spring96.org/en/person/andrei-balmakou.
33. https://prisoners.spring96.org/en/person/dzmitryi-laeuski. See also section 1.6 of this report.
34. See section 1.4 of this report.
35. For example, the detention of lawyer Natallia Burakouskaya in September 2022 did not become publicly known until August 2024, when she was recognised as a political prisoner – by which time she had already spent almost two years in detention: https://prisoners.spring96.org/en/person/natallja-mikalayeuna-burakouskaja.

1.6. Persecution of lawyers after they have been stripped of the right to practise

The period under review has been marked not only by the continuing violation of the rights of practising lawyers, including criminal prosecution, but also by the persecution of those previously stripped of their status as lawyers in connection with defending political prisoners or publicly expressing their views. The measures taken by the state against lawyers deprived of the right to practise on political grounds show that, because of their past activity, they are seen by the authorities as opponents of the regime and constitute a distinct group persecuted on that basis.

Lawyer Maksim Znak[36], who was serving his sentence in Correctional Colony No. 3, was held incommunicado from February 2023[37]. For more than 34 months – nearly three years – neither his family nor anyone else had any contact whatsoever with Maksim Znak (he was even denied contact with his lawyer, who was at first refused entry to the colony and was later himself detained and stripped of his status as a lawyer[38]). On 13 December 2025, 123 political prisoners were released (according to the Belarusian authorities, as a result of a pardon). That same day, the Belarusian authorities transported 114 of them to the border with Ukraine and handed them over to the Ukrainian side. Maksim Znak was removed as part of this group and has been living in forced exile ever since.

36. In 2020, Maksim Znak was the lawyer for the election campaign of Viktar Babaryka, a prospective presidential candidate, and, after his detention, provided legal assistance to candidate Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya; after the election, Maksim Znak joined the Coordination Council, a civic body set up to help resolve the socio-political crisis in Belarus. In connection with this activity, Maksim Znak was detained in September 2020 and, a year later, sentenced to 10 years' imprisonment.
37. *Belarus: The Crisis of the Legal Profession. Continued Repressions, 2022–2023,* p. 18-19.
38. *Belarus: The Crisis of the Legal Profession. Continued Repressions, 2022–2023,* pp. 12.

Lawyer Anastasiya Lazarenka was detained in June 2022 and sentenced on 11 May 2023 to 6 years' imprisonment[39]*. On 16 September 2026 she – like Maksim Znak before her – was forcibly removed from Belarus to Lithuania as part of a group of 25 political prisoners released that day.*

The Belarusian authorities repeatedly applied the practice of forcibly expelling political prisoners from the country throughout 2025–2026: in this way, at least 230 people[40] *were moved to neighbouring countries. Almost all of them had been recognised as political prisoners, meaning that they had been deprived of their liberty for the peaceful exercise of fundamental human rights and freedoms – conduct that the Belarusian authorities regard as hostile to the State. The fact that lawyers were among the citizens expelled demonstrates that their lawful professional activity (representing clients' interests, defending human rights and democratic principles) and their exercise of freedom of expression and the right to peaceful assembly are viewed as a threat to the current authorities, and that lawyers themselves are placed on a par with the figures most dangerous to the regime within the political opposition and the protest movement.*

Other lawyers whose practice was previously forcibly terminated on one ground or another are also subject to persecution. Since 2024, at least three cases are known of the conviction of lawyers who had been stripped of their status on political grounds.

Katsiaryna Zhautanoha, stripped of her licence in 2021, was detained in 2024 and sentenced in 2025 to 1 year's imprisonment for inciting hostility (Article 130 of the Criminal Code); by the time the sentence was passed, she had already

39. https://prisoners.spring96.org/en/person/anastasija-lazarenka.
40. https://spring96.org/en/news/120555, https://spring96.org/en/news/121179.

effectively served the term imposed and was released in the courtroom[41]*. Aliaksei Kerol, disbarred in 2021 after being held administratively liable for taking part in an "unauthorised mass event", was in 2026 sentenced to restriction of liberty without being sent to an open-type facility for "assisting extremist activity" (Article 364-1 of the Criminal Code)*[42]*. The articles under which both former lawyers were convicted are used by the authorities for politically motivated prosecution. At present there is insufficient data to state that the sentences were directly linked to their previous work as lawyers, although the very fact of their former status as lawyers may itself have been an additional factor behind their prosecution.*

The most telling example of the persecution of former lawyers is the criminal case against Dmitri Laevski[43]*. In 2020–2021 he defended the politician Viktar Babaryka and lawyer Maksim Znak, and in July 2021, immediately after the verdict against Viktar Babaryka was handed down, he was disbarred for statements he made in closing argument in that case*[44]*. On 9 September 2026 the Minsk City Court sentenced Dmitri Laevski to 3 years' imprisonment on charges of "assisting extremist activity" (Article 361-4 of the Criminal Code) and "discrediting the Republic of Belarus" (Article 369-1 of the Criminal Code). The grounds for his criminal prosecution were interviews Dmitri Laevski had given to independent Belarusian media back in 2021–2023. In those interviews he commented on the criminal cases against Viktar Babaryka and Maksim Znak and on the persecution of lawyers, including his own disbarment – that is, he spoke on legal matters directly connected with his own legal practice. The sentence against*

41. https://prisoners.spring96.org/en/person/kacjaryna-zhautanoha.
42. https://nashaniva.com/ru/388046.
43. https://spring96.org/en/news/121110.
44. *The Crisis of the Legal Profession in Belarus: How to Return the Right to Defense*, p. 65.

Dmitri Laevski should therefore be regarded as a continuation of the persecution of a lawyer for his professional activity and for defending clients in politically motivated criminal cases.

The conviction of people who had already once been subjected to repression for their work as lawyers intensifies the chilling effect across the entire legal profession. It demonstrates to lawyers that defending political prisoners and publicly expressing one's position is not confined to disciplinary measures within the Bar and may carry far more serious consequences. Moreover, as the case of Dmitri Laevski plainly shows, such consequences may materialise even several years later.

Further confirmation that lawyers remain a focus of attention for the security agencies even after they have ceased to practise (whatever the grounds) is provided by the previously documented[45] and still continuing the practice of subjecting former lawyers to enhanced checks when crossing the state border of the Republic of Belarus.

State persecution is not confined to former lawyers who remain in the country – it has acquired a transnational character and also affects those who continue human rights work in exile.

In 2023, lawyers who had been stripped of the right to practise and forced to leave Belarus established the Belarusian Association of Human Rights Lawyers (BAHRL), with the aim of preserving the professional community of lawyers, informing the public about the situation in the Belarusian Bar, promoting the rule of law and the exercise of the right of access to justice and the right to defence.

On 18 August 2025, by decision of the KGB, the association was designated an "extremist formation"[46], and six former lawyers known for defending political prisoners were named as persons

45. *Belarus: The Crisis of the Legal Profession. Continued Repressions, 2022–2023,* p. 18.

involved in it[47]*. This list included lawyers who neither were nor are members of BAHRL, among them Dmitri Laevski. It is known that searches have been carried out against some of the lawyers included on the list, or against their relatives.*

Given that BAHRL's focus is the Belarusian Bar, and that the association's members continue to provide assistance to persecuted citizens, its designation as an "extremist formation" should be regarded as aimed at suppressing the activity of the legal community in exile.

Besides the individuals named by the KGB as participants in the Belarusian Association of Human Rights Lawyers, other lawyers who have been stripped of the right to practise and have left Belarus are also subject to transnational persecution. According to the wanted-persons database of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Russian Federation, which also includes persons placed on wanted lists by the Republic of Belarus[48], the following former lawyers have been placed on wanted lists: Alena Shynkarevich, Alvina Minhazava, Viktar Matskevich, Andrei Atamanchuk, Mikhail Kiryliuk and Maryja Kolesava-Hudzilina – all of them known as defenders of political prisoners and of persons subjected to administrative persecution for political activity. Alvina Minhazava has, in addition, been named as a member of an "extremist formation" – the Free Belarus Center, an organisation providing legal assistance to Belarusians in Poland – while Alena Shynkarevich's personal Instagram account has been designated "extremist material". Although in the cases listed the persecutory

46. In the Republic of Belarus, anti-extremism legislation is applied arbitrarily, serving as an instrument for the political persecution of activism and dissent. Various civil society organisations, independent media outlets and even loosely connected groups of citizens have been designated as "extremist formations" or "extremist organisations". Human rights defenders, journalists, and civic and political activists face criminal prosecution for a wide range of activity classified as "extremism". This misuse of legislation has repeatedly been assessed in the reports of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Belarus (A/78/327, A/HRC/59/59) and of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (A/HRC/52/68, A/HRC/55/61).

47. Dzmitry Lepretar, Natallia Matskevich, Tatsiana Lishankova, Uladzimir Pylchanka, Maryja Kolesava-Hudzilina, Dmitri Laevski.

48. Although there is no official confirmation, there is every reason to believe that this database includes citizens whom Belarus has placed on the CIS interstate wanted list.

measures may relate not to these individuals' past work as lawyers but to their current activity, it should be stressed that this current activity is itself of a legal character and, in a certain sense, constitutes a continuation of their work as lawyers.

1.7. Restrictions on lawyers' freedom of expression and freedom of association

Lawyers' right to freedom of expression is an essential guarantee of their professional independence and of their participation in the protection of human rights. Like other citizens, lawyers are entitled to freedom of expression, belief and assembly. In particular, they shall have the right to take part in public discussion of matters concerning the law, the administration of justice, and the promotion and protection of human rights (Basic Principles on the Role of Lawyers, Principle 23).

In Belarus, however, public statements by lawyers – including those concerning violations of their clients' rights – frequently become grounds for disciplinary liability, up to and including disbarment, and in some cases even for imprisonment[49]. The practice of persecuting lawyers for expressing their views has been expanding markedly since 2020 and has affected the majority of lawyers stripped of the right to practise.

In 2021 the requirements governing lawyers' public statements were also significantly tightened at the level of the rules themselves. In particular, paragraph 65(4) of the Rules of Professional Ethics for Lawyers[50] (as amended by the Ministry of Justice on 30 September 2021 without consultation with the legal profession) provides that, when communicating information concerning specific cases involving legal disputes between organisations and individuals, as well as investigative and other procedural actions, a lawyer must not make unfounded judgments or draw conclusions that are not supported by precise facts and the materials of the case. Such stringent requirements on lawyers' public statements unduly restrict their right to freedom of expression.

49. See section 1.6 of this report.
50. https://www.advokat.by/media/doc/W22137239_1634245200.pdf.

The practice of applying restrictions on freedom of expression continued during the period under review, as illustrated, in particular, by instances in 2025 in which lawyers were held disciplinarily liable over social media posts.

> *In the first case, a lawyer was subjected to disciplinary sanction over TikTok posts in which he described a court decision in a civil case as "incomprehensible" and expressed the view that judicial acts were unlawful and unjust, which the bar association's council treated as fostering "a negative attitude towards the courts". The characterisation of the lawyer's statement as "unfounded" and "unsupported by precise facts" indicates that the disciplinary proceedings were in fact used to suppress public assessment of the court's actions.*
>
> *In the second case, a lawyer was given a disciplinary sanction in the form of a warning for posting a video on Instagram in which she shared her opinion on the course of the pre-trial investigation in a criminal case in which she was acting as defence counsel. It was claimed, in particular, that she had "made unfounded statements unsupported by precise facts and materials, expressed personal opinions, made remarks of an unprofessional and unqualified character, and failed to observe a businesslike manner".*

In both episodes, the characterisation of the lawyers' conduct raises legitimate doubts as to the lawfulness and proportionality of the restriction placed on freedom of expression.

The amendments to the Rules of Professional Ethics, combined with disciplinary practice, have created an atmosphere of total self-censorship among lawyers. Any public criticism of the actions of law enforcement bodies or of court decisions carries a high risk of disciplinary sanctions, up to and including subsequent disbarment. As a result, the overwhelming majority of lawyers' public statements avoid sensitive public topics and are largely confined to a recitation of legal provisions.

Lawyers' freedom of association in Belarus is likewise significantly restricted and remains under tight state control. The creation of independent associations, including professional ones, within the country has been impossible since 2020, and the existing bar associations, together with the bodies established within them – such as the Young Lawyers' Council or the trade union committee – are entirely subordinate to the Ministry of Justice.

The Belarusian authorities also seek to restrict freedom of association and the ability to speak out even for those who have already been stripped of their status as lawyers and are abroad, as well as to prevent practising lawyers from using any alternative platforms to express their views.

In June 2024, the website and Telegram channel of the "Right to Defence" project were, by decisions of Belarusian courts, added to the list of "extremist materials". In July 2025, the project's Instagram account was added to this list as well.

In April 2024, the Telegram channel of the Belarusian Association of Human Rights Lawyers was designated "extremist material". When, in August 2025, the association was designated an "extremist formation"[51]*, the resources of "Right to Defence" – its website defendersbelarus.org, its Telegram channel and its email address – were listed, without any justification, as the association's information resources, which effectively criminalises the project itself and creates the risk of criminal liability for anyone cooperating with it.*

The designation of information resources as "extremist materials", and of the Association as an "extremist formation", demonstrates the state's policy of blocking any independent activity and views within the legal community, including outside the Republic of Belarus.

51. See section 1.6 of this report.

2. DISCIPLINARY PROCEEDINGS AND RE-ATTESTATION AS A MEANS OF REPRESSION AGAINST LAWYERS

Since 2020, at least 56 lawyers[52] have been disbarred on political grounds through disciplinary proceedings. Most such instances, in which a political motive is clearly apparent, relate to the period before 2024.

Data on disciplinary practice in 2024–2026 show a sharp fall in the overall number of disciplinary sanctions imposed during the period under review compared with the peak figures for 2023. In 2023, 87 instances of disciplinary liability in the form of a reprimand or a warning were recorded, together with 14 instances of disbarment; in 2024 there were 14 instances of disciplinary liability, including 3 disbarments; in 2025 there were 14 instances of disciplinary liability, including 2 disbarments. In the first eight months of 2026, a further 5 people were disbarred. This trend does not indicate any easing of pressure or any restoration of the Bar's independence. The decline in numbers directly reflects the outcome of a systemic "purge" of the legal community: the repression of previous years created an atmosphere of fear, and the mere risk of disbarment forces lawyers into self-censorship.

It cannot always be said with certainty that disbarments during the period under review were political in character, but there are known instances of lawyers being arbitrarily subjected to disciplinary liability on purely formal grounds.

A lawyer was held disciplinarily liable for sending a lawyer's request to the Administration of the President; the formal pretext was that this state body was not authorised to provide the information requested. Under the Law "On the Bar and the

52. According to the "Right to Defence" project, 51 lawyers have been disbarred on political grounds: https://defendersbelarus.org/disciplinary_persecution_2020. The authors of this report have information on a larger number of such cases.

Practice of Law in the Republic of Belarus", a lawyer is entitled to request references, certificates and other documents needed in connection with the provision of legal assistance from state bodies and other organisations, which are obliged to issue such documents or copies of them in the manner prescribed. Given that legislation cannot contain an exhaustive list of all the information various agencies are required to provide, holding a lawyer liable for the mere fact of sending such a request indicates an attempt to restrict the lawyer in gathering evidence and exercising their professional powers.

At least one lawyer was held disciplinarily liable in a manner contrary to the presumption of innocence:

A lawyer was disbarred for committing an act incompatible with the status of a lawyer. The bar association regarded the fact that he had been charged with offences of lesser gravity as evidence of such an act. In other words, he was stripped of the right to practise law before a court had established his guilt in the criminal proceedings.

A lawyer may be stripped of their status not only through the imposition of disciplinary sanctions, but also as a result of regular and extraordinary attestations, which the Ministry of Justice continues to use as a means of arbitrarily revoking licences. In total, between 2024 and August 2026, the Ministry of Justice of the Republic of Belarus took 23 decisions to terminate licences to practise law: 11 of them in connection with the termination of bar membership by way of disciplinary proceedings, and 12 on the grounds of "the lawyer's inability to perform their professional duties owing to insufficient qualification". Lawyers with more than 25–30 years of professional experience have on a number of occasions been found "insufficiently qualified" as a result of such attestations.

A telling example is the case of Volha Savich – a lawyer with 25 years' experience and a Candidate of Legal Sciences (a postgraduate research degree in the post-Soviet academic system) who taught at Belarusian State University from 2001 to 2023. From 2023, Volha Savich was a lecturer in the Department of Prosecutorial Supervision at the "Institute for the Retraining and Advanced Training of Judges, Prosecutors, and Court and Justice-System Staff of the BSU"[53]*. In 2026, following an attestation, the Qualification Commission under the Ministry of Justice found her "insufficiently qualified" to practise law.*

Thus, having completed the phase of mass disbarments in 2020–2023, the authorities – whether through the Ministry of Justice or through the Bar's own governing bodies – continue to make use of various disciplinary procedures (including re-attestation) to exert selective pressure on lawyers, fostering an atmosphere of enforced silence and loyalty within the legal community.

53. https://web.archive.org/web/20251114150215/https://brka.by/lawyers/savich-olga-dmitrievna/.

3. THE BAR'S INTEGRATION INTO THE SYSTEM OF STATE ADMINISTRATION AND IDEOLOGY

3.1. The integration of bar associations into the system of state administration

As noted in previous reports[54], in Belarus, the Bar has become totally institutionally dependent on the Ministry of Justice and the executive authorities. As a result of repeated legislative amendments, the Bar's self-governing bodies have completely lost their independence: key leadership positions – the chairperson and members of the council, and the heads of legal advice offices – are filled solely in agreement with the Ministry of Justice, and the public and informational agenda of the bar associations entirely mirrors the rhetoric of the Ministry and state media. As a result, bar associations have turned from an institution for protecting lawyers' rights into a tool of ideological control and a means of demonstrating loyalty to state policy.

Information about the meetings of the Belarusian Republican, regional and Minsk City bar associations for the period 2024-2026 confirms the Bar's subordination to the state and the complete alignment of its actions with the Ministry of Justice. The Bar's self-governing bodies are under continuous external oversight, and their key reporting-and-election procedures take place with the direct participation, and under the supervision, of officials from state authorities.

Throughout 2024–2026, the annual reporting-and-election conferences in the Minsk City and all regional bar associations, as well as the meetings of the BRBA Council, were traditionally held with the participation of representatives of the Ministry of Justice: the Minister[55], the head of the Department for the Bar and Licensing of Legal Activity[56], and their deputies[57]. One expanded meeting of the BRBA in January 2024 was also attended by the Deputy Head of the

54. *The Crisis of the Legal Profession in Belarus: How to Return the Right to Defense,* pp. 81-83; *Belarus: The Crisis of the Legal Profession. Continued Repressions, 2022–2023*, pp. 26-31.
55. https://t.me/brka_news/4156?single.
56. https://t.me/brka_news/10071.
57. https://t.me/brka_news/7452, https://t.me/brka_news/4075.

Presidential Administration, Volha Chuprys[58]. In addition, the Minister of Justice has repeatedly visited various legal advice offices "to familiarise himself with the work of organisations under the Ministry of Justice"[59].

The systematic presence of Ministry of Justice representatives at meetings where the leadership of bar associations and the BRBA Council is elected clearly demonstrates the degree of control exercised over personnel processes. Officials do not merely observe the course of the conferences, but actively set the direction of the Bar's activity: they assess lawyers' work, set out strategic tasks, call on lawyers to be "involved in the public life of the state"[60], and urge them to follow ideological guidelines both in their professional activity and outside it[61].

At the same time, the public rhetoric of the Bar's own representatives increasingly resembles that of state officials, fostering the perception of the Bar as part of the state administrative system. For example, while serving as chairman of the BRBA, Aliaksei Shvakau stated that "*the corps of advocates* has, with all due sense of responsibility, embraced and is *executing the instructions of the Head of State* set out in the Concept of the Legal Policy of the Republic of Belarus."[62] At the same time, training sessions are organised for lawyers, at which they discuss presidential directives on strengthening executive discipline and the fundamentals of the ideology of the Belarusian state[63].

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58. https://t.me/brka_news/4158.
59. https://t.me/brka_news/11338, https://t.me/brka_news/5448.
60. https://minjust.gov.by/press/news/advokatura_i_litsenzirovanie_yuridicheskoy_deyatelnosti/podvedeny_itogi_raboty_advokatov_vitebskogo_regiona_za_2025_god_/, https://minjust.gov.by/press/news/advokatura_i_litsenzirovanie_yuridicheskoy_deyatelnosti/irina_stepuro_prinyala_uchastie_v_otchetno_vybornoy_konferentsii_chlenov_grodnenskoy_oblastnoy_kolle/, https://minjust.gov.by/press/news/advokatura_i_litsenzirovanie_yuridicheskoy_deyatelnosti/zamestitel_ministra_yustitsii_irina_stepuro_prinyala_uchastie_v_podvedenii_itogov_raboty_gomelskoy_o/, https://minjust.gov.by/press/news/advokatura_i_litsenzirovanie_yuridicheskoy_deyatelnosti/irina_stepuro_prinyala_uchastie_v_otchetno_vybornoy_konferentsii_chlenov_minskoy_gorodskoy_kollegii_/.
61. https://minjust.gov.by/press/news/advokatura_i_litsenzirovanie_yuridicheskoy_deyatelnosti/irina_stepuro_prinyala_uchastie_v_otchetno_vybornoy_konferentsii_chlenov_grodnenskoy_oblastnoy_kolle/.
62. https://t.me/brka_news/4163.
63. https://t.me/brka_news/8301

3.2. The introduction of ideological propaganda and displays of political loyalty in the activity of the Bar's self-governing bodies

The Bar's dependence on the state is clearly reflected in the fact that the bar associations' information resources have begun actively promoting current state narratives and openly setting themselves against opponents of the authorities. Whereas these resources previously published only Bar news and materials on professional legal topics, the situation changed radically after 2020: the bar associations began regularly reposting material from other channels containing derogatory language and insults directed at the opposition and opposition-minded citizens (for example, the terms "zmahary"[64] and "runaways"[65]), while also openly displaying political loyalty to the current regime.

The most striking example of this process is the activity of the Young Lawyers' Council of the Belarusian Republican Bar Association (YLC). The structure's official Telegram channel was set up in October 2022[66] and, from the moment it was launched, has broadcast in line with the state agenda. Whereas at first the channel confined itself to reposting material from official state resources, it has since become a fully-fledged platform for promoting state ideology, regularly reposting material from some of the most notorious and aggressive propaganda channels. Reposts from the "Pul Pervogo" channel[67] regularly appear on the Bar's resources: reports on Aliaksandr Lukashenka's speeches[68], foreign trips[69] and visits[70], official visits, and other events involving him[71]. Alongside this, YLC channel reposts materials on Aliaksandr Lukashenka's biography, emphasising the length and effectiveness of his time in power and designed to foster a positive image of him[72].

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64. The Belarusian word "zmahar" ("змагар" - "fighter") is not in itself pejorative. Since 2020, however, it has been used by representatives of the authorities and pro-government media as a derogatory term for opponents of the current government and participants in the protest movement.
65. The word "runaways" is used in pro-government media to describe opposition-minded citizens who have been forced to leave Belarus under threat of criminal prosecution.
66. https://t.me/smabrka.
67. "Pul Pervogo" – the main Telegram channel of Aliaksandr Lukashenka's press service, https://t.me/pul_1.
68. https://t.me/smabrka/7400, https://t.me/smabrka/7168.
69. https://t.me/smabrka/8890.
70. https://t.me/smabrka/8945.
71. https://t.me/smabrka/9055, https://t.me/smabrka/9138 .

There are also materials in which a positive assessment of Aliaksandr Lukashenka is accompanied by disparaging characterisations of his political opponents[73].

The degree of the Bar's political engagement becomes most pronounced during election campaigns: this was observed in the run-up to the single voting day of 25 February 2024[74], as well as ahead of the presidential election of 26 January 2025. "Matters relating to the electoral campaign" became one of the main topics at the reporting-and-election conferences held by lawyers during these periods, with the state representatives taking part in them and openly calling on lawyers to take an active part in the election campaign[75], describing this as "the professional duty of every lawyer"[76]. The same topics were subsequently discussed at meetings of heads of legal advice offices and at meetings within the offices themselves[77].

Lawyers' public legal education with citizens during pre-election periods was adapted to the current political agenda: the key themes of lawyers' presentations were not civil and political rights, but rather liability for "extremist" activity, breaches of electoral legislation and the rules governing mass public events[78].

Ahead of the 2025 election, lawyers organised free consultations at the public reception offices of the Republican Public Association "Belaya Rus"[79], where citizens were simultaneously invited to sign in support of nominating Aliaksandr Lukashenka as a presidential candidate[80].

72. "Today is a special day – the birthday of a man who has done more for Belarus than anyone else": https://t.me/brka_news/11354.
73. "Belarusians on social media thank Batka ["the father"] and the Belarusian security forces for crushing the "white-red-white" revolt!": https://t.me/brka_news/11305.
74. 25 February 2024 was the single voting day for elections to the House of Representatives of the National Assembly and to local councils of deputies.
75. https://t.me/brka_news/4102.
76. https://t.me/brka_news/4173.
77. https://t.me/brka_news/6636.
78. https://t.me/brka_news/4054, https://t.me/brka_news/4228, https://t.me/brka_news/6829.
79. A public association oriented towards supporting Aliaksandr Lukashenka.
80. https://t.me/brka_news/6685.

Furthermore, a number of lawyers, including leaders of bar associations, took part in the ideological campaign "Nado!" ["It needs to be done!"], calling on Aliaksandr Lukashenka to run for another term[81].

On polling days themselves, the YLC's Telegram channel ran a campaign encouraging participation in the election, accompanied by the publication of photo reports of lawyers at polling stations[82].

The YLC's weekly project "Right to Choose" became a tool for promoting the government's agenda. Although formally presented as an educational initiative, in covering matters of electoral law, the project systematically focused on explaining administrative and criminal liability for breaching the rules on mass public events, taking part in unauthorised actions, and breaching anti-extremism legislation.

As part of the "Right to Choose" project, the YLC began direct media cooperation with the Main Directorate for Combating Organised Crime and Corruption (GUBOPiK). This body plays a key role in political repression, regularly uses disproportionate force against detainees (including lawyers), and records and publishes on its Telegram channel "GU BAZA" so-called "confession videos", in which detainees are forced to admit guilt. The YLC and GUBOPiK produced two joint videos[83], after which the YLC reposted material from GU BAZA, which noted ironically that "the zmahary ['the fighters', referring to the political opposition] have taken note" of the joint work between the security agency and lawyers.[84]

81. https://t.me/smabrka/6359, https://t.me/smabrka/6578 The campaign was launched after the publication of an interview with Aliaksandr Lukashenka in which he said he would run for office if the Belarusian people said it was *nado* ("necessary", in the sense of "it needs to be done"). Following the interview, videos began appearing online in which people from various organisations and professional fields took turns saying the word "Nado!", sometimes addressing it directly to Aliaksandr Lukashenka.
82. https://t.me/smabrka/3786, https://t.me/smabrka/3788, https://t.me/smabrka/7387.
83. https://t.me/guBAZA, https://t.me/smabrka/7038.
84. https://t.me/smabrka/7227.

The YLC regularly reposts material from the propaganda channel "ZhS Premium"; one such post concerned the Belarusian Association of Human Rights Lawyers[85] and contained insults directed at independent lawyers.

On their Telegram channels, bar associations regularly disseminated news and video reports produced by state television and pro-government YouTube channels, including reports on politically motivated criminal cases (concerning the German national Rico Krieger, sentenced to death[86], and Kalinouski Regiment fighter Vasil Verameichyk, who was extradited to Belarus[87]), and on the criminal prosecution of citizens who made donations to funds assisting victims of police violence and political prisoners[88].

Other propaganda material was also disseminated, in particular an "investigative film" by the state channel ONT entitled "Demons: How They Want to Seize Belarus", published in a post headed "The West's Goal Is to Invade Belarus and Seize It!"[89], as well as the film "Someone Else's Sky", which, without the consent of the people featured in it, portrays in an exclusively negative light the lives of Belarusian emigrants who left the country due to persecution[90].

The ideologisation of the Bar is also apparent in its participation in state holidays with a pronounced political subtext. Bar associations have become obligatory participants in events such as the anniversary of the October Revolution and the Day of the Soldier-Internationalist. Particular attention is paid to National Unity Day[91], observed on

85. https://t.me/smabrka/6248.
86. https://t.me/smabrka/5336
87. https://t.me/smabrka/7332
88. https://t.me/smabrka/8021.
89. https://t.me/brka_news/6616
90. https://t.me/smabrka/7854.
91. National Unity Day is a holiday established in 2021 under the banner of the "reunification" of Western and Eastern Belarus in 1939. At the same time, this date is linked to the start of the Soviet invasion of territories that were then part of Poland, which was followed by repression against the population of Western Belarus.

17 September. For two years in a row, in 2024[92] and 2025[93], Bar self-governance bodies organised a large-scale ideological flash mob entitled “Unity of the Bar” to mark the occasion.

The Bar has also been drawn into the so-called investigation into the genocide of the population of Belarus during the Great Patriotic War, initiated by the Office of the Prosecutor General in 2021. This criminal case, presented as aimed at restoring "historical justice", is plainly ideological in character and is used to promote a narrative of hostility on the part of Western countries towards Belarus.

In February 2024, the BRBA decided to provide legal assistance to victims in this case at the expense of the territorial bar associations[94]. In 2026, lawyers collectively attended, as members of the public, a court hearing in the case of one of the accused, stressing the significance of the proceedings "not only from a professional point of view", but also "from the point of view of historical truth and patriotic education"[95]. At the same time, the conduct of lawyers appointed as defence counsel in such proceedings for long-deceased defendants may have little to do with providing an actual defence. Thus, lawyer Aliaksandr Hambaleuski himself, in closing argument, discussed the cruelty shown by his client, suggesting that it might have been connected with his father's German origin[96].

Taken together, all of these facts show that the self-governing bodies of the Bar have completely lost their independence, actively participate in the ideological indoctrination of the population, and publicly support the repressive actions of the security agencies and of the current authorities. This practice directly violates Principles 14 and 24 of the Basic Principles on the Role of Lawyers, under which lawyers shall act freely, seek to uphold human rights and adhere to professional ethics, while professional associations must be self-governing and must protect the interests of their members.

92. https://t.me/smabrka/5888?single, https://t.me/smabrka/5877.
93. https://t.me/smabrka/9983, https://t.me/smabrka/10038.
94. https://brka.by/news/advokaty-okazhut-besplatnuyu-yuridicheskuyu-pomoshch-v-svyazi-s-genotsidom-naseleniya-belarusi/.
95. https://t.me/brka_news/9929.
96. https://t.me/brka_news/9422.

4. THE PROBLEM OF ACCESS TO LEGAL ASSISTANCE

As a result of the processes that have taken place in the legal profession in recent years, the number of lawyers at the start of the period under review had fallen significantly compared with 2020, when there were more than 2,200.

On the one hand, this was caused by large numbers of lawyers ceasing to practise. The amendments made in 2021 to the Law "On the Bar and the Practice of Law in the Republic of Belarus" played a significant role: all organisational forms of legal practice were abolished except one, and lawyers may now practise only in legal advice offices. These working conditions forced many lawyers to leave the profession – above all, those who specialised in commercial cases and business support.

As a result of criminal and administrative prosecution, as well as the arbitrary use of disciplinary procedures, at least 150 lawyers[97] have been stripped of their status. Besides those forcibly removed from the profession, the repressive practices and the general atmosphere of fear undoubtedly also influenced the decisions of some practising lawyers to leave the Bar of their own accord.

On the other hand, the evident lack of independence, the threats and intimidation, the constant state oversight, and the repressive role played by the Bar's self-governing bodies have, overall, significantly diminished the prestige of the profession, which in turn has resulted in an insufficient influx of new lawyers.

As a result, at the start of 2024, there were 1,603 registered lawyers – roughly six hundred fewer than in 2020 – with the downward trend observed year on year throughout this period. This problem has also reduced the availability of legal assistance, especially in district centres. In March 2023, the "Right to Defence" project recorded 8 legal advice offices with no lawyers practising there[98].

97. https://defendersbelarus.org/lawyers-persecution-2020.
98. https://www.defendersbelarus.org/kity-na-kotorych-derjitsa-rajonnaja-advokatura.

Even at that time, the Bar's governing bodies and the Ministry of Justice openly acknowledged the decline in the number of lawyers as a problem[99]. In 2024–2026, at reporting conferences and various meetings, the "personnel question" and ensuring access to legal assistance continued to be described as priority tasks for the Bar[100].

The Ministry of Justice sought to address the problem of providing citizens with legal assistance by introducing new requirements for the minimum number of lawyers in legal advice offices, established by Resolution No. 16 of 5 April 2024. A comparison[101] of the new standards with those previously in force (Ministry of Justice Resolution No. 180 of 13 August 2014) shows that, although the overall nationwide minimum required number of lawyers was increased from 1,313 to 1,454[102], for many advice offices the minimum was, on the contrary, reduced – bringing the required figures closer to the actual ones (although even allowing for this, the required minimum is not met everywhere). Nevertheless, the new standards formally make it possible to report compliance with the established norm.

Bar associations were replenished with new lawyers both from university graduates and practitioners from other fields. Among those admitted to the Bar continued[103] to be former officers of the security agencies (including former KGB and GUBOPiK officers), the Prosecutor's Office and the courts, who had taken part in the state repression of recent years[104]. The professional qualities of these new members of the Bar give reasonable cause for concern.

99. *Belarus: The Crisis of the Legal Profession. Continued Repressions, 2022–2023*, pp. 33-34.
100. https://t.me/brka_news/4079, https://t.me/brka_news/7175, https://t.me/brka_news/10079.
101. https://www.defendersbelarus.org/optyk_illusion.
102. It should be noted that the figure of 1,313 in 2014 related only to legal advice offices, given that lawyers also practised individually and within bureaux; the 2024 figure of 1,454, by contrast, represents the minimum total number of lawyers nationwide, since no organisational forms other than legal advice offices now exist.
103. *Belarus: The Crisis of the Legal Profession. Continued Repressions, 2022–2023*, pp. 34-35.
104. https://www.defendersbelarus.org/who-became-an-attorney-in-2024, https://www.defendersbelarus.org/kto-stal-advokatom-2025.

Those who became lawyers in 2024 include: Yahor Kronda[105]*, who had previously worked in the Prosecutor's Office and served as the public prosecutor in the "round-dance case" in Brest; Mikalai Staradubtsau*[106]*, who had previously worked as a senior detective in the GUBOPiK unit of the Mahilioŭ Regional Executive Committee's Internal Affairs Department; Ivan Protski*[107]*, who had previously held the post of deputy prosecutor of the Centraĺny district of Minsk and appeared as public prosecutor in politically motivated cases, among others.*

In 2025, Krystsina Asran was admitted to the Bar, having previously held various posts in the Prosecutor's Office of the Frunzienski district of Minsk and having supported the prosecution in court, including in politically motivated cases[108]*. Mikita Belavusau*[109]*, who had previously been an assistant prosecutor in the city of Polack and had appeared as public prosecutor in politically motivated cases, also became a lawyer.*

As a result of the measures taken, at the end of 2024 an increase in the overall number of lawyers – by 5 people (to a total of 1,605) – was recorded for the first time since 2020[110]. This figure did not change over the course of 2025. The downward trend was thus halted, but no growth was achieved[111]: the number of lawyers still differs only slightly from the minimum recorded at the start of 2024. According to the register of lawyers published on the Ministry of Justice website[112], as of early September 2026, there were 1,619 registered lawyers, of whom 38 had had their practice suspended. Although there are no longer any

105. https://bgmedia.site/society/brestskiy-prokuror-egor-kronda-stal-advokatom, https://brka.by/lawyers/kronda-egor-vladimirovich/.
106. https://www.defendersbelarus.org/who-became-an-attorney-in-2024.
107. https://prolaw.by/, https://www.defendersbelarus.org/who-became-an-attorney-in-2024.
108. https://www.defendersbelarus.org/tpost/h44187avg1-a-prosecutor-involved-in-political-trial.
109. https://www.defendersbelarus.org/kto-stal-advokatom-2025, https://www.pvestnik.by/v-prokurature-polockogo-rajona-sluzhat-kak-opytnye-tak-i-molodye-sotrudniki/.
110. https://t.me/brka_news/7479.
111. https://www.defendersbelarus.org/howhasaccesstolegalaidchangedinbelarusin2024, https://defendersbelarus.org/dostupnost-pomoshi-2026.
112. https://www.minjust.gov.by/directions/advocacy/advocacy/.

legal advice offices without a single lawyer, as of 1 June 2026, 56 offices had only one lawyer working in them[113], which plainly does not ensure the ability to provide legal assistance within the relevant administrative-territorial unit under the current model of free legal aid[114]. At the same time, the number of lawyers relative to the population of the Republic of Belarus remains critically low. Yet the state takes no effective measures to ensure the availability of legal assistance, placing this obligation instead on the Bar itself. Fundamental legislative change in this sphere – and, above all, an end to repressive practices – is still not regarded by the state as a means of improving access to legal assistance.

113. https://defendersbelarus.org/dostupnost-pomoshi-2026.
114. *The Crisis of the Legal Profession in Belarus: How to Return the Right to Defense*, pp. 94-98. This model is itself the subject of legitimate criticism; however, at present, in the absence of substantial reform of the Bar as an institution, no alternative to it exists.

CONCLUSIONS

The information presented in this report shows that the situation in the Belarusian Bar has not fundamentally changed over the past two and a half years. It is regrettable to note that most of the observations and conclusions made by the authors of previous reports remain valid today.

During the period under review, no legislative amendments were adopted to secure guarantees for the practice of law. The obstacles and restrictions noted previously persist to this day; however, amid the total suppression of freedom of expression and the designation of most independent media and human rights organisations as "extremist", information about violations of lawyers' rights is becoming known to civil society ever less often. In their own public statements, lawyers avoid criticising the existing system and confine themselves to relatively "safe" topics.

The harshest forms of repression, including arbitrary detention and criminal prosecution, have continued to be applied against lawyers. The period under review saw the largest-ever mass detention of lawyers. A relatively new trend in this context is the persecution of former lawyers, including transnationally, which is broadly consistent with the wider practice of persecuting individuals located outside Belarus. At the same time, the most telling cases show that lawyers are a targeted group for state repression, and that their professional activity – even where it ceased many years ago – continues to be perceived by the state as a source of potential threat.

The ideological component in the work of bar associations became significantly more pronounced, contributing to the further entrenchment of repressive mechanisms within the Bar and its integration into the state apparatus. Since 2020, the leadership of the BRBA has changed substantially, yet its internal processes have remained unchanged. This means that the current state of the Bar is not the result of the actions of particular individual leaders, but a consequence of the institutional model that has taken shape.

No positive trends could be identified during the period under review. Under present conditions, there are no grounds to believe that the practice of law in Belarus can be carried out independently and effectively, or that the guarantees of the right to legal assistance can be properly secured.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Extensive recommendations for changing the situation in the Belarusian Bar were set out in the 2022 report[115]. They remain relevant today. At the same time, in the current circumstances, their full implementation in the short term appears unlikely. This report therefore identifies the measures of primary importance for beginning to restore the right to defence in Belarus:

1. Release all lawyers arbitrarily deprived of their liberty in connection with the exercise of their professional activity or the exercise of fundamental rights and freedoms, including lawyers previously stripped of the right to practise; end the criminal prosecution of lawyers based on the exercise of their professional activity or of fundamental rights and freedoms; revoke other unlawful restrictions applied to lawyers, including their designation as participants in "extremist formations"; ensure the full rehabilitation of lawyers unlawfully subjected to sanctions by the state.

2. Reinstate lawyers who were disbarred and stripped of their licences for the lawful exercise of their professional activity or the exercise of fundamental human rights and freedoms.

3. Ensure that lawyers are able to perform all of their professional functions without intimidation, hindrance, harassment or improper interference.

4. Amend legislation to prevent the arbitrary detention of lawyers and to establish effective safeguards against unlawful and unjustified detention.

115. *The Crisis of the Legal Profession in Belarus: How to Return the Right to Defense*, pp. 103-108.

5. Establish effective mechanisms to secure guarantees for the practice of law, including mechanisms for examining instances of interference with lawyers' professional activity and for holding those responsible to account.

6. Revoke the powers of the Ministry of Justice to regulate the Bar, end its interference in the work of the Bar's self-governing bodies, and guarantee their full independence.

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