

## Belarus: Human rights situation remains bleak

Belarus is the only European country where the death penalty is still applied. Opposition politicians have disappeared, the President has stifled all forms of budding protests with violence; and authorities continue to harass human rights activists and independent journalists. Despite the softening in EU-Belarus ties and the newly lifted sanctions, the overall human rights situation under President Lukashenko's autocratic rule has yet to improve.

### A human rights 'black hole' in the Eastern Partnership

Geographically, Belarus may well be situated in the [centre of Europe](#), but its human rights record has qualified it as a '[black hole](#)' on the European map. Since President Alexander Lukashenko assumed [iron-fisted](#) control in 1994, human rights violations have soured Belarus's relations with the EU. An EU-Belarus Partnership and Cooperation Agreement was signed in 1995, but ratification has been [frozen](#) since 1997 due to the country's political situation, characterised, among other things, by persistent violations of electoral standards in the presidential elections (not least in 2010) and repeated crackdowns on civil society, political opposition and independent media.

While Belarus is covered by the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), the European Commission [says](#) that Lukashenko's policies 'prevent the EU from offering Belarus full participation in the Eastern Partnership'. The EU first imposed [sanctions](#) against the Belarusian regime in 2004, in response to the disappearance of four opposition activists. Since then, restrictive measures have been imposed in connection with human rights violations and crackdowns on peaceful demonstrators around votes in 2004, 2006, 2010 and 2012. At the same time, the EU has sought to strengthen ties with Belarusian civil society by launching [negotiations](#) on visa facilitation and readmission agreements in 2014 and a [Mobility Partnership](#) in 2015.

#### *The EU rewards release of political prisoners by lifting sanctions*

However, EU-Belarus ties visibly improved ahead of the October 2015 presidential elections. On 28 July 2015, the EU and Belarus held a [dialogue](#) on human rights in Brussels. Lukashenko's release of six political prisoners (amongst others [Mikola Statkevich](#), the opposition's presidential candidate in the December 2010 election) in August 2015 was [hailed](#) as 'a long-sought step forward' by the EU's High Representative/Vice President, Federica Mogherini, and Commissioner for ENP and Enlargement Negotiations, Johannes Hahn. Despite allegations that Lukashenko habitually treats political prisoners as a '[bargaining chip](#)' for normalising ties with the EU, the Council of the EU in October 2015 temporarily [lifted](#) sanctions on Lukashenko, 169 other Belarusian officials and three entities. Reflecting the new approach to engage rather than isolate Belarus in the context of the Ukraine crisis, as a result of which Minsk [hosted key Ukraine-related peace talks](#), EU Foreign Ministers in February 2016 [decided](#) to end these sanctions definitively as of 1 March, citing the 'improving EU-Belarus relations'. The arms embargo and the sanctions related to four individuals listed in connection with the unresolved disappearances of four people (see above) will be extended for a year.

### Europe's only country which still uses capital punishment

Despite the lifted sanctions, Belarus's human rights situation leaves plenty of room for improvement. Belarus remains the only European country that still applies the death penalty. The last known death sentences were [carried out](#) in 2014, when at least three men were executed, according to [Amnesty International](#). On 5 January 2016, the Minsk Regional Court issued this year's [first death sentence](#) to Henadz Yakavitski, who had been convicted of murder. On 16 February 2016 – one day after the EU decided to lift sanctions – the Minsk Regional Court handed down its [second death sentence](#) of 2016 to Sergei Khmelevsky. In response, the European External Action Service [stated](#) that the EU opposes the death penalty, a 'cruel punishment', and urged Belarus to join a global moratorium 'as a first step towards the abolition of death penalty'.



According to the Belarusian [Criminal Code](#), executions are carried out by firing squad. In [practice](#), the condemned offender is shot into the back of the head. All executions are treated as a state secret, the dates and times are not reported, and there are no annual statistics available. However, [Penal Reform International](#) (PRI), an NGO promoting fair criminal justice, reports that the number of death sentences in Belarus has dropped sharply since the country [introduced](#) life imprisonment as an alternative to the death penalty in 1998. In 2012, Belarus created a parliamentary working group on the death penalty, a move that the Special Rapporteur on Belarus of the UN Human Rights Council (HRC), Miklós Haraszti, welcomed as ['promising'](#). However, according to the 2015 HRC report on Belarus, there has been no progress since then.

## Political prisoners and freedom of the press

*Despite lifted sanctions, authorities continue 'systematic harassment'*

On 9 February 2016, Miklós Haraszti [took stock](#) of the 'dismal' human rights situation in Belarus since the October 2015 presidential elections and the partial suspension of EU and US sanctions. Although the regime refrained from violence during the elections (which earned Lukashenko his fifth consecutive presidential term), Haraszti deplored the continued 'systematic harassment of those who attempted to practice their individual, civil, political, and other rights'. For example, the released political prisoners [remain](#) on 'preventative watch lists', enabling police to continue harassing them. One of them, Mikola Statkevich, and three other opposition leaders were fined for organising an October 2015 commemoration of victims of Stalin-era repressions. Haraszti also criticised Minsk's repeated rejection to register human rights organisations, amongst others, 'For Fair Elections' and [Viasna](#), on 'flimsy' administrative grounds.

### *Freedom of the press*

Belarus ranks 157th out of 180 countries in the [2015 World Press Freedom Index](#) by *Reporters sans frontières* (RSF), below some of the world's most [fragile states](#) such as South Sudan and Chad. Lukashenko retains a tight grip on the media. In December 2014, amendments to the Law on Mass Media were adopted without public debate, allowing the [Ministry of Communication](#) to block public access to websites without a judicial review. Moreover, RSF says that leading independent media organisations are banned from publishing or broadcasting in Belarus, and are thus forced into exile. Since their reporters inside Belarus are routinely denied accreditation, the authorities can readily indict them for cooperation with unregistered foreign media. Some 28 fines were imposed on this basis in 2015. In another case that attracted global attention, Belarusian journalist Pavel Dabravolski was [arrested](#), brutally beaten and given a fine of €420 for filming police beating two youth activists during a court trial for a graffiti case on 25 January 2016.

## What results will the lifted sanctions produce?

Will the EU's new approach to Belarus engender a move towards [European values](#) – including democracy and respect for human rights – in the country? [Commenting](#) on the lifted sanctions, Mogherini recognised that the situation in Belarus was not 'rosy'. Others have voiced open concern that the endemic human rights problems in Belarus would remain unchanged, [warning](#) that Belarus could use the EU as an instrument to reduce its dependence on Russia, without delivering any real changes. Human rights watchdog, Freedom House, [accused](#) the EU of 'unaccountably rewarding' Lukashenko by ending sanctions without Minsk having made 'any meaningful improvements in its abysmal human rights record'. Belarusian opposition leader Andrei Sannikov, who ran for president in 2010 and now lives in exile in Poland, [called](#) the decision to lift sanctions 'a very clear signal to the dictatorship that it can continue with its practices'.

The European Parliament is actively engaged in supporting human rights in Belarus. The EP awarded the [Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought](#) in 2004 to the [Belarusian Association of Journalists](#), and in 2006 to opposition leader [Alexander Milinkevich](#), who was jailed after running for president. In a [2012 resolution on freedom of expression](#) in Belarus, MEPs deplored the arrest of Polish journalist Andrzej Poczobut, found guilty of defaming President Lukashenko.

In a [February 2012 resolution on the death penalty](#) in Belarus, the EP condemned the 2011 death sentences on Dzmitry Kanavalau and Uladzislau Kavalyou. The two men were [executed](#) in March 2012. In a [September 2015 resolution](#), MEPs urged Belarus 'to join a global moratorium on the execution of the death penalty as a first step towards its permanent abolition', calling on Minsk to ensure respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. Currently, Belarus does not take part in the activities of the [Euronest Parliamentary Assembly](#) (consisting of the European Parliament delegation and the delegations of the Eastern European Partners, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine) 'due to political reasons'. However, Belarusian members will be welcomed once 'political requirements' have been fulfilled, Euronest states on its website.