



Environmental organisations and activists in Belarus during the socio-political crisis

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An analytical review

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For security reasons, several experts chose to remain anonymous.

Political prisoner photographs sourced from the Viasna Human Rights Center website, prisoners.spring96.org.

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Introduction

Until 2020, the environmental movement was one of the most actively developing sectors of civil society in Belarus. Public interest in exercising environmental rights has increased steadily, and activists' expertise has grown alongside the number of environmental organisations. The events of August 2020 — namely, the rigging of the presidential election, the unprecedented protests and followed repressions — have fundamentally altered the situation. The state campaign to suppress civil society resulted in dissolving of hundreds of NGOs, including some of the oldest environmental organisations, such as APB/BirdLife Belarus and Ecohome. The mechanisms of interaction between the public and the state, developed over many years and aiming to address and pre-

vent local environmental problems and to protect citizens' interests at all levels, were dismantled.

However, despite ongoing repression, people within the country continue to address environmental issues, albeit often in private and through personal contacts and trusted networks.

Organisations and experts who were forced to leave Belarus are inventing and adapting to new working formats. They are monitoring the environmental situation in the country, engaging in international advocacy and striving to preserve the expert community in exile.

This review focuses on the situation faced by environmental organisations and activists in Belarus amid a prolonged socio-political crisis.

General context

Belarus gained independence in 1991 following the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The Soviet legacy largely shaped the country's subsequent development. During the Soviet period, independent public organisations did not really exist; instead, structures created and controlled by the Communist Party functioned.

The situation changed at the beginning of the 1990s: democratisation and state independence created opportunities for civil society development. Independent organisations and initiatives, including environmental ones, began to emerge.

Since Aliaksandr Lukashenka came to power in 1994, the state has consistently restricted civil society's activities. Organisations have been deregistered, opportunities for international cooperation have been limited, access to foreign and domestic funding has been restricted, and criminal liability has been introduced for activity on behalf of an unregistered organisation. This kind of harassment was mainly directed at organisations primarily working in the field of civil and political rights, such as the human rights organisation Viasna and Legal Assistance to the Population, among others.

Despite their differences, environmental organisations actively interacted with one another, conducting joint awareness-raising campaigns, implementing projects, and participating in discussions on topical environmental issues. The Forum of Environmental NGOs was held every two years, providing a platform for coordinating positions

and discussing pertinent issues. Environmental organisations have initiated many joint activities with authorities, such as Car-Free Day, Earth Hour, and clean-up campaigns. Examples of successful advocacy practices include using all available legal avenues to influence environmentally significant decision-making and lobbying for changes to environmental legislation and law enforcement practices. Environmental organisation experts served on working groups under the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environmental Protection. Public Coordination Environmental Councils were also a significant mechanism for interaction with the state, providing a platform for NGOs and state authorities to discuss environmental issues.

At the same time, politically sensitive issues such as the construction of Belarusian Nuclear Power Plant near Astravets and a lead battery factory near Brest, both of which sparked widespread public protests, were decided at the Presidential Administration level. This meant that there were no real mechanisms in place to influence changes to these decisions.

At the same time, environmental NGOs' professional and expert potential was strengthened through participation in international projects and programmes, and public interest in environmental issues grew.¹ People actively participated in public consultations and environmental assessments, as well as organising public campaigns. Non-governmental organisations took part in drafting legislation and pursued litigation to protect the public interest.

¹ "EcoNGOs in 2015-2020: Tendencies and achievements it is important to preserve", in *Civic society in Belarus 2015-2021*, p. 99, <https://www.eedc.org.pl/documents/Civil-Society-in-Belarus-2015-2021.pdf>

1. Persecution of environmental activists before 2020

Even before 2020, there were cases of persecution for environmental activism in Belarus, despite relatively constructive interactions with the authorities. Most instances were related to the organisation of unauthorised mass events, such as rallies, pickets, meetings and marches. These events are actually a form of exercising the public's right to participate in making environmentally significant decisions. Although legislation provides for public consultations on projects with significant environmental impact, these consultations are limited to providing information and receiving feedback. They do not provide an opportunity to influence the executive authority's decisions. Activists held public events to convey their positions, influence

decision-making, or express their opinions. The law requires a permit, which the authorities rarely grant. This meant that rallies and marches were unauthorised, and the participants and organisers were prosecuted.

For example, in 2016, [local activist Vitold Ashurak](#) was fined for staging a protest to draw attention to the deteriorating environmental situation in Biaroza, home to the Neman Glass Factory. Participants in the Minsk Critical Mass bicycle rally were also detained that year.²

Systematic persecution was directed at activists involved in long-term environmental campaigns.

1.1. Anti-nuclear campaign

The construction of Belarusian Nuclear Power Plant in Astravets, 50 kilometres from the Lithuanian border has caused great concern among civic activists due to numerous violations of engineering standards and legislation. This has led to the emergence of an anti-nuclear campaign. Throughout the campaign, its participants were regularly subjected to pressure and repression, and defamatory information was disseminated about them in state-controlled media outlets.

For example, on October 9, 2009 — the day of the public consultations on the environmental impact assessment report for the NPP project — the Russian nuclear physicist Andrei Ozharovsky was arrested and detained for seven days on charges of disorderly conduct.

On July 18, 2012, the day Russia Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev was visiting Minsk, anti-nuclear campaign activists went to the Embassy of Russia to deliver an open letter concerning violations relating to the construction of the nuclear power plant. They were stopped from doing so. Tatsiana Novikava, Andrei Ozharovsky and Iryna Sukhy were detained, as well as Mikhail Matskevich, a human rights defender who came to assist them. Subsequently, the court imposed administrative detention of 5 days on T. Novikava, 3 days on M. Matskevich, a fine on I. Sukhy, and 10 days of detention on A. Ozharovsky. Subsequently, he was deported from Belarus and banned from entering the country for 10 years as being a Russia citizen.

2 “Minsk: Court sentences Critical Mass cycling event arrestee to 2 years in jail”, <https://udf.name/english/politics/146755-minsk-court-sentences-critical-mass-cycling-event-arrestee-to-2-years-in-jail.html>

Activists Mikalai Ulasevich and Ivan Kruk from Astravets were repeatedly detained, and their homes were searched. Information materials opposing the construction of the NPP were seized during searches.

On April 26, 2013, before the start of the annual Chornobyl March³ commemorating the victims of the accident, anti-nuclear campaign activists were detained preventively to stop them from participating. The detainees were released after the march had finished.

The systematic persecution of anti-nuclear activists was the subject of a communication regarding Belarus's non-compliance with the Aarhus Convention, specifically concerning the prohibition of the persecution of individuals exercising their rights under the Convention.⁴ It was the first case before the Compliance Committee to focus entirely on protection from such persecution. In 2017, the Meeting of the Parties recognised⁵ that Belarus had violated Article 3, paragraph 8 of the Convention, which prohibits the punishment, persecution or harassment of environmental activists for exercising their rights under the Convention.

1.2. Campaign against the construction of a battery factory near Brest

Construction of the iPower battery factory near Brest began in 2017. Local people were concerned about the potential environmental and public health impacts of the heavy metals (e.g. lead) used in production. Furthermore, the public was not adequately consulted during the decision-making process for the factory's construction, and numerous complaints were made about the project itself. As a result, a protest campaign emerged that lasted for more than two years.

Activists took various steps to defend their rights and draw attention to the factory's construction.

A total of 325 applications to hold rallies were submitted, but only one was successful. In response, residents began organising weekly

meetings in Brest's central square on Sundays at noon, ostensibly to feed pigeons.⁶ For more than two years since March 2018, city residents gathered in the central square every Sunday to feed the pigeons and discuss the news, thus demonstrating their negative attitude towards the project. Activists were subjected to systematic administrative detentions and substantial fines for participating in these meetings. The number of detainees amounted to at least 67.⁷ There were also rallies against the construction of the factory in other Belarusian cities. Almost 40,000 people have signed a petition opposing the construction.

The launch of the factory was originally scheduled for August 2018, but was postponed several times. Construction was suspended by the City Executive

³ Chornobyl March (bel. "Charnobylski Shliakh") is an annual mass procession held to commemorate the anniversary of the Chornobyl accident (April 26, 1986), which is one of the most tragic events in modern Belarusian history. This event has been held every year since 1989 to raise awareness of the consequences of the disaster and of the authorities' withholding of information about it.

⁴ [ACCC/C/2014/102 Belarus](#)

⁵ [Decision VI/8c of the Meeting of the Parties on compliance by Belarus with its obligations under the Convention](#)

⁶ In Belarus, it is permitted to feed pigeons and other city birds in public places.

⁷ "How Brest ecoactivists are persecuted during the protest: Facts and figures", <https://ecohome.ngo/how-brest-ecoactivists-are-persecuted-during-the-protest-facts-and-figures/>

Committee in 2019. Amid ongoing protests and rising social tensions, in June 2020, President Lukashenka met with locals and promised to hold a referendum on the factory's construction. However, the referendum was never held, and the organisers were denied permission to register an initiative group to conduct it. The enterprise started operating in 2021.

Throughout the period of protests (2017–2020), residents, activists and human rights defenders, as well as journalists, were subjected to various forms of harassment and pressure, including fines, official warnings, extrajudicial arrests (including preventive arrests), administrative detentions, criminal prosecution, defamation and threats. The company brought a SLAPP suit⁸ against the Ecohome NGO and activists, who previously had filed a lawsuit to ban the construction of the factory. In this way, the company sought reimburse-

ment for its inflated legal standing costs, which the court granted only partially.

Ecohome informed⁹ the Aarhus Convention Compliance Committee of the persecution of the Brest activists. When assessing the implementation of the Meeting of the Parties' decision, the Committee noted that "Belarus has not yet taken sufficient measures <....> to ensure that members of the public are not harassed, penalised, and persecuted for exercising their rights in conformity with the Convention".¹⁰ In May 2020, a separate communication concerning violations of the Convention provisions during the construction of the battery factory was submitted to the Committee. This communication referred to violations of the right to participate in environmentally significant decision-making. However, the Committee did not finalise its consideration of the communication, as Belarus withdrew from the Aarhus Convention in 2022.

⁸ A strategic lawsuit against public participation (SLAPP) is a lawsuit that seeks to intimidate and suppress public activism rather than protect actual rights that have been violated.

⁹ Decision VI/8c concerning Belarus: Additional information related to para. 7 of Decision; [Chronology](#).

¹⁰ [First progress review of the implementation of decision VI/8c on compliance by Belarus with its obligations under the Aarhus Convention](#), paras 53–85.

2. 2020: The political crisis and its implications for the environmental sector

On August 9, 2020, the sixth presidential election was held in Belarus. According to official data from the Central Election Commission, Aliaksandr Lukashenka won the election yet again. The public questioned the credibility of the election results, which led to widespread peaceful protests across the country. The protesters' agenda expanded from reviewing the result of the presidential election to include social and economic issues. Environmental activists who took part in mass gatherings also raised issues relating to nuclear power, the rule of law, and public participation in environmentally significant decision-making.

The authorities dispersed the protests with disproportionate brutality and launched a large-scale crackdown on their participants. This included mass detentions, the administrative and criminal

prosecution of protesters, pressure on political opponents and individuals, the suppression of civil society, the closure of independent media outlets, the dissolution of NGOs, and the adoption of legislation aimed at legitimising repression. Against this backdrop, several environmental organisations distanced themselves from government agencies and focused instead on supporting civil society initiatives.

Repression against civil society also intensified in 2022, when Belarus supported Russia's military aggression against Ukraine, in response to society's rejection of the state's position. Even passive complicity in war is unacceptable, such as providing the aggressor with infrastructure. The environmental community also note that military action causes irreparable environmental damage.

3. Legislative restrictions

From 2021 onwards, Belarus introduced legislative changes and law enforcement practices aimed at using anti-extremism legislation to suppress public participation.

Against the backdrop of the mass dissolution of previously registered organisations, criminal liability for establishing and participating in unregistered organisations was **reinstated**.

Article 193-1¹¹ of the Criminal Code of the Republic of Belarus came into force on January 22, 2022, introducing liability for the activities of unregistered or previously dissolved NGOs. Participation in the activities of such an organisation may result in a fine, detention under arrest or imprisonment of up to two years. Article 423-1 of the Criminal Code also provides for punishment for failing to comply with court decisions on dissolution, prohibiting activities or using symbols of extremist organisations. This can result in a fine, deprivation of the right to hold certain positions, detention under arrest, restriction of freedom, or imprisonment for up to three years.

The re-registration of political parties **took place in 2023**. The Ministry of Justice required lists of party members containing their full names, dates of birth, citizenship, places of residence, places of work or study, and contact phone numbers. The Belarusian Green Party refused to submit such lists for security reasons. As a result, the Supreme Court dissolved it on July 27, 2023. Among other restrictions, a rule was introduced stating that party members cannot be permanent residents of countries outside the Republic of Belarus.

Following the crackdown of 2020-2021, which resulted in many social activists leaving the country, the following legislative changes were enacted to limit their rights in 2022-2023:

Special proceeding¹² allow criminal cases to be initiated and trials to be conducted, and a judgment to be passed against citizens of the Republic of Belarus who are absent from the country. Defendants cannot participate online.

The possibility of **termination of citizenship** — including citizenship acquired by birth — for individuals located outside Belarus, if a final court decision has been issued against them confirming participation in extremist activity or causing serious harm for interests of the Republic of Belarus.

Since 2023, Belarusian consular offices abroad **have not been issuing new passports or renewing expired ones**.¹³ Also, the range of administrative procedures that can be carried out through the consulate has been significantly reduced. For instance, certification of powers of attorney has been discontinued.

A significant trend in law enforcement practice and legislation is the **widespread use of the terms “terrorism” and “extremism”**. Any organisation or group of individuals may be declared an extremist entity by the Ministry of Interior or KGB, and interacting with them is a criminal offence. Similarly, courts classify web resources as extremist materials — both those linked to such entities and any others, including officially oper-

¹¹ Between 2005 and 2019, Belarus criminalised activities carried out on behalf of unregistered organisations. At least 18 people were convicted under this law during this period. The article was removed from the Criminal Code in July 2019, with administrative liability replacing it.

¹² The Act on Amendments to the Criminal Procedure Code of the Republic of Belarus dated July 20, 2022 No. 199-Z introduced a new Chapter 49-3, “Special Proceedings”. Amendments have also been made to other articles of the Criminal Procedure Code, with regard to special proceedings.

¹³ Decree of the President of the Republic of Belarus No. 278 of September 4, 2023 “On the Procedure for Issuing Documents and Performing Notarial Acts”.

ation that diverges from the official position of Minsk.

Article 19.11 of the Republic of Belarus's Code of Administrative Offences provides for liability for the distribution, manufacture, storage or transportation of information products that contain calls to extremism or that are included on the National List of Extremist Materials. Penalties include a fine, community service or administrative detention for up to 15 days, as well as the confiscation of a phone or other device. In practice, this liability is imposed for various reasons, including sending links to publications designated as extremist in chat rooms and private messages, publishing or reposting such materials on social media, and subscribing to social media channels that have been recognised as disseminating extremist materials, and even the presence of related screenshots in a phone's gallery. Administrative liability can be imposed for sharing content even before it has been recognised as extremist.

Interacting with "extremist entities" can result in criminal prosecution:

Creation of, or participation in, an extremist entity (Article 361-1 of the Criminal Code): in practice, participation may include the administration of chat rooms, subscribing to web resources, and interacting with chatbots. Any form of cooperation with the entities, or even minimal facilitation of their activities, may be interpreted as "participation". The maximum penalty is seven years of imprisonment.

Financing of extremist activity (Article 361-2 of the Criminal Code): any donation, in any form — whether money, cryptocurrency, or the transfer of goods — to organisations on the list of extremist entities may be considered financing of extremist activity. The maximum penalty is eight years of imprisonment.

Facilitating extremist activity (Article 361-4 of the Criminal Code): This includes sending information and media materials to extremist web resources and organisations, providing interviews and expert commentary, performing tasks, and offering any other form of assistance. The maximum penalty is seven years of imprisonment.

In practice, these articles of the Criminal Code have a retroactive effect.

4. Persecution of environmental activists

4.1 Administrative arrests and detentions

During the mass peaceful protests of 2020–2021, environmental rights activists were among those subjected to administrative arrests. Among them: **Viktar Fianchuk**, ornithologist and former head of APB/BirdLife Belarus (15 days in detention), **Irina Sukhy**, representative of the Green Network (5 days in detention), **Marina Dubina**, director of Ecohome (15 days in detention), **Dzmitry Bibikau** from the Minsk Urban Platform (12 days in detention), **Dzianis Tushynski**, activist of the Green Watch and member of the Belarusian Green Party (subjected to administrative detention three times), **Dzianis Kobruseu** from City for Citizens (15 days), **Anastasiya Zakharevich**, journalist for the Green Portal (7 days in detention), **Alena Dubovik**, Ecohome activist (15 days in detention), among others.

On April 26, 2021, the anniversary of the Chernobyl accident, the Green Party's leader, **Dzmitry Kuchuk**, was detained in his office. The reason was an interview with Euroradio, in which he said that he “planned to go for a walk that day”. The court found this to be an invitation to participate in an unauthorised mass event and sentenced Dzmitry to 15 days of administrative detention. Before that, the Green Party had applied to hold

the Chernobyl March, but their application was rejected.

On December 22, 2021, local activist **Aliaksandr Dziamchuk** attempted to prevent the felling of 300-year-old oak trees in Akhova village, Pinsk District, by climbing one of the trees. He was detained and given a 15-day administrative detention sentence. This was later extended by a further 15 days. Following his release from administrative detention, Dziamchuk was dismissed from his position as director of the Akhova Community Centre.

In February 2022, **Alena Mirashnichenka**, an animal rights activist from Orsha who runs a charity helping stray animals, was summoned in connection with the initiation of an administrative case. Upon arriving at the police station, she was detained. The reason given was an invitation to the opening of a cat shelter that she had shared in a Viber community. The court classified this as a serious administrative violation intended to “destabilise the situation in society and the state”, and sentenced Mirashnichenka to 15 days of administrative detention.

4.2 Criminal persecution, political prisoners

On the beginning of May 2026 the actual number of political prisoners in Belarus was 848¹⁴.

The overall number of political prisoners since the start of presidential elections in 2020 is 4 619. At least 20 are known to have been involved in envir-

14 According to data from the Human rights centre Viasna: prisoners.spring96.org/en

onmental activism¹⁵. The real number of them may be higher.

Five people are currently serving prison sentences:¹⁶



[Stsiapan Latypau](#), an arborist, sentenced to 8 and half years in prison;



[Yauhen Rubashka](#), an environmental activist, sentenced to 5 years in prison, a sentence which was later extended by one year;



[Artsiom Salavei](#), an environmental activist, sentenced to 5 years in prison, a sentence which was later extended by one year;



[Stanislau Taspayeu](#), a local environmental activist from Miadzel, sentenced to 4 years in prison and is in poor health.

The following individuals completed their full prison sentence and were released:

— [Siarhei Piatrukhin](#) and [Aliaksandr Kabanau](#), who campaigned against the construction of a battery factory in Brest, sentenced to 3 years in prison;

— [Viktar Fianchuk](#), an ornithologist and former director of APB/BirdLife Belarus, sentenced to 2.5 years in prison;

— [Pavel Nazdra](#), a Green Watch activist, sentenced to 2 years in prison;

— [Sviatlana Karol](#), a former chairwoman of VeloGomel and cycling advocate, sentenced to

1.5 years in prison;

— [Aliaksandr Bialou](#), a Food Not Bombs and the Kalilaska charity project activist. He was sentenced to 5 years in prison, which was later extended by six months.

A sentence of home confinement was imposed on three individuals:

— [Sniazhana Inanets](#), a journalist who covered environmental topics, among others (2-year sentence);

— [Ihar Khmara](#), a local historian and cycling advocate (2.5-year sentence);

— [Maksim Puchynski](#), deputy director of the Minsk Bicycle Society (2.5-year sentence).

The following individuals were released and forcibly removed from Belarus in 2025:

— [Dzmitry Kuchuk](#), the chairman of the Belarusian Green Party, sentenced to 6 years in prison;

— [Yauhen Merkis](#), urbanist and journalist, sentenced to 4 years in prison;

— [Andrei Kuznechyk](#), cycling advocate and journalist, sentenced to 6 years in prison.

Released on a pardon in 2024:

— [Hanna Skryhan](#), ex-head of the Mahilou branch of the international association Ecoproject, sentenced to 2 years in prison;

— [Barys Kuchynski](#), an activist, sentenced to 2 years in prison.

¹⁵ Publication by the NGO Ecohome — ecohome.ngo: [Current situation review: Environmental activism and repression in Belarus](#).

¹⁶ The name of one of the political prisoners has been withheld for security reasons.



Death of a political prisoner while in detention

Vitold Ashurak was a social and environmental activist from Biaroza, Lida District. He played an active role in addressing the environmental issues in his town. For example, he opposed the

production of glass wool at the local factory and drew attention to the discharge of untreated wastewater into the Dzitva River, which resulted in a fish die-off.

He was detained in September 2020 for participating in protests and was subsequently sentenced to five years in prison. He was recognised as a political prisoner.

He died in custody on May 21, 2021 under unclear circumstances. According to the official version, the cause was cardiac arrest, but the political prisoner's relatives stated that he had previously had no health problems. Vitold Ashurak was the first political prisoner to die in a Belarusian prison following the 2020 protests.

To commemorate him, May 21 was designated the Day of Solidarity with Political Prisoners in Belarus.

4.3 Searches

On September 6, 2020, a search was conducted at the home of **Irina Sukhy**, an anti-nuclear activist and representative of the Green Network. Subsequently, the searches were carried out twice more. On September 3, 2021, they were conducted by officers of the State Security Committee as part of a criminal case (Iryna's status in the case and the subject of the investigation are unknown). On December 10, 2021, the searches were carried out by officers of the Main Directorate for Combating Organised Crime and Corruption.

On October 5, 2020, **Dzianis Kobruseu**'s home was searched. Kobruseu is the coordinator of the City for Citizens campaign and an urbanist. Police seized his devices.

On May 18, 2021, **Dzmitry Bekalyuk**, an activist involved in the campaign against the construction of a battery factory near Brest, was searched, and a criminal case was opened against him for document forgery. The activist claimed that the criminal prosecution was an attempt to put pressure on

him in connection with his three-year campaign against the construction of the battery factory.

On July 16, 2021, a search was conducted at the home of **Marina Dubina**, the director of Ecohome, under Articles 293 and 342 of the Criminal Code (inciting mass riots and organising actions that disrupt public order).

On August 31, 2021, environmental protection specialist and ornithologist **Viktar Fianchuk** was searched.

On September 3, 2021, searches were carried out at the homes of **Yanina Melnikava**, the editor of the Green Portal, and **Natallia Herasimava**, an environmental activist. They were both taken to the Investigative Committee for questioning and subsequently detained for 72 hours in connection with a criminal case. After this period expired, they were released under a non-disclosure agreement.

On March 30, 2023, the homes of activists who had been collecting signatures opposing the construction of a new cocoa bean processing plant at

the Kommunarka factory in Minsk were searched. No one was detained following the searches.

4.4. Other forms of pressure: dismissals, warnings, interrogations

Environmental activist and Green Party member **Dzianis Tushynski** was **dismissed** from his position as a lecturer of International Relations Faculty at Belarusian State University following administrative detention related to his participation in the 2020 protests.

On April 22, 2021, the Brest Prosecutor's Office issued an **official warning** to Brest human rights activist **Raman Kisliak** regarding an interview he gave to *Deutsche Welle* about the referendum on the battery factory. According to the prosecutor's office, Kisliak's remarks could provoke public tension and protests. The warning referred to Articles 342 of the Criminal Code ("Organisation or preparation of mass riots"), 369 ("Insulting a public official"), and 24.23 of the Code of Administrative Violations ("Violation of the procedure for organising or holding mass events").

On May 20, 2021, the Investigative Committee summoned at least four activists from the initiative group opposing the construction of a battery factory near Brest for **questioning**, including **Kanstantsin Astapuk**, **Yury Kalko**, and **Dzianis Malyshenka**.

Ryhor Tsiarentsyeu, chairman of the organisation Earth Time, said that he had received several informal invitations from representatives of the State Security Committee to meet for **intimidation talks**.

A separate practice has emerged: pressure and harassment of the relatives of activists who have left the country. They are searched and interrogated in an attempt to induce them to cooperate and obtain information about the whereabouts and activities of those who have left.

4.5 Pressure on journalists and bloggers covering environmental issues

On June 12, 2023, employees of the *Ranak* TV channel were detained [in Svetlahorsk](#). The official reason given was a subscription to the "Svetlik Svetlogorsk" Odnoklassniki group, but this group was not included on the list of extremist materi-

als. Another version claims that the reason for the detention was a report on the explosion at the Svetlahorsk Pulp and Paper Mill, which killed three people.

5. Pressure on and dissolving of environmental organisations

In 2020, repression took the form of sporadic searches, arrests, administrative detention and criminal prosecutions of individual activists and representatives of environmental organisations. An unprecedented campaign to suppress civil society began in 2021. This involved revisions and searches of organisations' offices and their leaders' residences, as well as arrests, interrogations and criminal proceedings.

Since spring 2021, the activities of non-governmental organisations, including environmental NGOs, have been inspected by the registration authorities, the Department of Financial Investigation, the State Control Committee, and the Economic Crime Unit.

The practice of registration authorities requesting documents from organisations was widespread. Initially, the requests were formulated in a rather general way, making it impossible for organisations to comply. It was unclear what documents the state authorities expected to receive or what form and scope the information was supposed to take. As a result, providing documents in a manner that did not meet these expectations was interpreted as a failure to comply with legal requirements. The scope of the requested documents was extensive and often exceeded the supervisory body's competence, interfering with the organisations' internal affairs.



80+

forcibly dissolved



60+

chosen to self-dissolve

5.1 Dissolving of environmental organisations

The purpose of revisions was not to identify and eliminate violations, but to provide a formal basis for termination. Following the inspections, violations would be recorded, and the registration authority would file a petition to a court, which would approve the dissolving. At the same time, the legislation provides less radical measures, even in cases of actual violations. The sanction of dissolving that was applied was “neither reason-

able nor proportionate”, as reflected in the Aarhus Convention Compliance Committee's assessment of the pressure and dissolution of Ecohome.¹⁷

The dissolution also affected organisations that deliberately avoided politics and actively cooperated with local authorities by implementing joint projects. Projects focusing on animal welfare and sustainability education have also been affected.

¹⁷ Supplementary report of the Compliance Committee on compliance by Belarus, October 15, 2021, https://unece.org/sites/default/files/2021-10/ECE_MP.PP_2021_61_E.pdf, para. 51

To date, more than 80 environmental organisations have been forcibly dissolved or are in the process of dissolution in Belarus.¹⁸

Among the dissolved organisations are the Centre for Environmental Solutions, APB/BirdLife Belarus, Ecohome, Bahna, Minsk Cycling Society, VeloGrodno, Nerush, Education for Sustainable Development Association, the Green Movement environmental institution, Center for the Study of Environmental Innovations, Bureau of Urban Solutions (Minsk Urban Platform), the SEIVAS animal protection institution, and Let's Clean the World Together, among others.

Below are some formal reasons given for dissolving environmental organisations:

In the statement of dissolving claim of the Bahna NGO, it was alleged that the organisation had “politicised its activities” and “supported protest movements”. Additionally, it was alleged that members of the organisation “actively participate in Telegram groups whose activities are recognised as illegal in the territory of Belarus”.

The statement of claim did not provide any facts in support of the above allegations.

The dissolving of the VeloGrodno NGO was attributed to violations and errors in document management. Having examined the organisation's documents, the Justice Department of the Hrodna Regional Executive Committee filed a lawsuit to dissolve the organisation without allowing it to correct the errors and violations found.

The lawsuit filed against the environmental organisation APB/BirdLife Belarus claimed that the organisation was “carrying out extremist activities aimed at destabilising the socio-political situation in the country under the guise of volunteering to save birds on the territory of Belarus”. Moreover, it was alleged that “in its publications, the organisation publicly promotes the idea of maintaining protest activity among the population by using the phrase ‘Birds with the people’, as well as publishing destructive photographs and calling for actions that grossly disrupt public order”.

5.1.1. Dissolving of the Ecohome NGO

In July 2021, the Ministry of Justice conducted an unannounced inspection of the environmental non-governmental organisation Ecohome.¹⁹ The organisation was required to provide an extensive package of documents within a short timeframe. A number of the requests were formulated in vague terms — for example, the demand to provide a list of the organisation's members. It later emerged that the Ministry expected not only a list of names, but also the residential addresses, telephone numbers, and places of work of the organisation's members. However, these requirements had not been specified in the request. Ecohome complied with the requirements.

However, on July 13, 2021, it received a warning for alleged violations relating to the registration of its legal address and an incomplete list of its members. The Ministry of Justice also cited interaction with organisations not registered in Belarus as grounds for the penalty. Alongside the warning, the Ministry issued a requirement to eliminate discrepancies in the provided documentation.

On July 16, 2021, the Investigative Committee searched the home of director Marina Dubina and the organisation's office under criminal articles concerning the organisation of mass riots and actions that disrupt public order.

¹⁸ According to [monitoring data](#) from the human rights organisation Lawtrend, 1,240 NGOs in Belarus had been forcibly dissolved by early May 2026.

¹⁹ Detailed chronology of the persecution of Ecohome and its liquidation, [ecohome.ngo/chronology-eng](#).

Ecohome appealed against the warning issued to the organisation. However, on July 26, 2021, the Ministry of Justice filed a dissolution action in court due to the organisation's failure to comply with the requirements set out in the warning.

On August 31, 2021, the Supreme Court ruled in favour of the Ministry of Justice's request to dissolve the organisation.

At the VII Meeting on October 21, 2021, the Parties to the Aarhus Convention recognised the dissolution of Ecohome as an instance of the persecution and harassment of NGOs. They required Belarus to reinstate the organisation by December 1, 2021. As this requirement was not met, Belarus has been subject to the suspension of special rights and privileges under the Aarhus Convention since February 1, 2022. In response, Belarus announced its withdrawal from the Convention.

5.2 Voluntary dissolution of organisations

In addition to forced dissolution through the courts or at the discretion of the registering body, the authorities of many organisations were subjected to targeted pressure to induce them to cease their activities. In some cases, this was limited to informal intimidation meetings; in others, it was accompanied by direct threats of criminal prosecution or other forms of pressure.

In the context of ongoing repression, several organisations decided to cease operationing as

they deemed it impossible to continue their activities. At the same time, many of them avoid publicly disclosing the pressure they and their representatives have faced, including informal intimidation meetings, interrogations, and other forms of influence.

To date, 60 environmental organisations have chosen to self-dissolve.²⁰

5.3 Searches

Between July and September 2021, searches were conducted at the residences and offices of the organisation's leaders as part of an investigation into criminal cases under Articles 293 and 342 of the Criminal Code of the Republic of Belarus (mass riots and organisation of actions that grossly disrupt public order).

A search was carried out at the Centre for Environmental Solutions office on July 20, 2021. The office was sealed off, and the employees' equipment was seized. The following day, July 21, the decision was made to forcefully dissolve the organisation.

On August 31, 2021, searches were carried out at the offices of APB/BirdLife Belarus.

²⁰ According to [monitoring data](#) from the human rights organisation Lawtrend, 782 NGOs in Belarus had voluntarily dissolved by the beginning of May 2026.

5.4 Designating organisations as extremist entities

On October 17, 2022, the State Security Committee recognised the **Ecohome** NGO as an extremist entity and added it to the List of Organisations, Entities and Individual Entrepreneurs Involved in Extremist Activities.

On July 30, 2025, the KGB designated the **Green Network** as an extremist entity. (The designation also included the Instagram account “Green Portal”, the Telegram channel “Green Portal”, the Telegram channel “Ecohome”, the Telegram group “Ecochat”, and others.)²¹

Recognising an organisation as an extremist entity does not require a court decision; a decision by the Ministry of Internal Affairs or KGB is sufficient. Neither the text nor the reasons for these

decisions are published. The procedure for issuing such decisions is not transparent, which undermines the principle of effective justice by preventing scrutiny of the grounds on which they are made and by limiting the ability to appeal them.

Belarusian legislation criminalises the creation, participation in, financing of, and facilitation of activities of an extremist entity. The interpretation of these concepts is extremely broad. In effect, any interaction with a designated extremist entity can be seen as facilitating extremist activity. This forces environmental activists and initiatives seeking to exercise their environmental rights to avoid contact with such organisations, out of fear of criminal prosecution.

5.5. Defamation

Since 2020, state media and pro-government TV channels have systematically discredited environmental organisations and their representatives. Activists and organisations are labelled as “destructive structures”, “traitors”, “henchmen of the West” and “foreign collaborators”. At the same time, environmental activities are presented as a cover for political opposition and an attempt to undermine state stability.²²

Defamation against environmental activists was also recorded before 2020. In May 2018, unidentified individuals circulated fake documents on social media claiming that activists opposing the

construction of a battery factory near Brest were receiving foreign funding. Around the same time, the website “Enemies of Brest” appeared, publishing insulting and defamatory material about Brest residents and activists. Defamatory materials were also published against anti-nuclear activists.

In the state newspaper *SB. Belarus Segodnya*, organisations such as Ecohome, Centre for Environmental Solutions, and Ecoidea were accused of using environmental issues to spread anti-government propaganda and to disguise political opposition activity. Some materials personally targeted Marina Dubina, the director of

²¹ List of Organisations, Entities and Individual Entrepreneurs Involved in Extremist Activities. The official list is published on the website of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Republic of Belarus and is updated regularly, <https://mvd.gov.by/ru/news/8642>

²² The article “Subversive Network” (in Russian) explains how and why propagandists discredit NGOs. See ecohome.ngo/podryvnaya-set

Ecohome, and Irina Sukhy, an anti-nuclear activist and representative of the Green Network. Environmental and urbanist projects were interpreted as a means of promoting an “anti-regime

agenda”, and the Aarhus Convention was described in publications as a cover for the activities of foreign agents of influence.

6. Media activity

The independent media in Belarus have been shut down. Many of them, especially the regional outlets, have since ceased operations altogether. Multiple editorial offices have moved abroad and now operate from there. Most of these teams were later recognised as extremist entities, and their web resources were deemed extremist materials. This severely limits the ability to raise awareness about environmental issues and share information with the broader audience. Interacting with web resources designated as extremist can lead to administrative or criminal liability. Administrative sanctions may apply, for example, for reposting or sharing a link, while criminal liability may arise for activities such as giving an interview to or writing a commentary for such a publication. Therefore, users from Belarus do not have safe access to the media.

Among the web resources recognised as extremist are a number of environmental information resources. These include the Green Portal, a Belarusian environmental information platform (a Telegram, Threads and Instagram account and a VKontakte community); the environmental organisation Ecohome (a Telegram channel and a website); the Green Phone initiative, which provides consultations on environmental issues (a website, a Telegram bot, Instagram and Facebook

accounts and a VKontakte page); the Telegram chat groups “Ecochat: Finding Solutions to Environmental Problems” and “Green Chat”; the awareness-raising and educational project Mikrazelyanina (TikTok account); the Belarusian Young Greens (Instagram account); and the Belarusian Greens — BGP (Facebook community).²³ And also the website and social media pages of the petitions platform [Petitions.by](https://petitions.by). Environmental activists and initiatives were hesitant to publicly raise environmental issues on their own behalf for security purposes. They used this site to write requests and create petitions instead.

Restrictions on access to environmental websites in Belarus:

In 2021, the Ministry of Information of Belarus blocked access to the website of the environmental organisation Ecohome.

On September 14, 2022, the Ministry of Information restricted access to the website greenbelarus.info - the Green Portal, for Belarusian users.

23 National List of Extremist Materials, <https://mininform.gov.by/ru/extrim-material-ru>

7. Withdrawal of Belarus from international environmental agreements

On July 18, 2022, Aliaksandr Lukashenka signed Decree No. 247, which withdrew Belarus from the Aarhus Convention — the UNECE Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-Making, and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters.

The decision was prompted by the application of the most stringent measures against Belarus at the VII Meeting of the Parties in October 2021. The dissolution of the Ecohome NGO was recognised as the persecution of the public for exercising their rights under the Convention. Belarus was therefore recommended to reinstate the organisation's registration. Failure to comply with the Meeting of the Parties' decision by February 1, 2022 would result in the loss of rights and privileges under the Convention. The Belarusian government believed that the Convention bodies had displayed a "biased and discriminatory attitude", which is why Belarus did not fulfil the recommen-

dation and soon decided to withdraw from the international treaty.

The UN experts gave a negative assessment of Belarus's withdrawal from the Convention whose goal was to assist the public to exercise their right to a healthy environment.

On August 17, 2023, the Republic of Belarus withdrew from the **Bern Convention** — the Council of Europe's treaty for the protection of European wildlife and natural habitats.

This decision was made because Belarus's rights as a full party to the Convention were restricted due to its complicity in Russia's war against Ukraine. The Belarusian delegation considered these actions to be in violation of international law. They left the Meeting in protest and subsequently decided to withdraw from the Convention. The country was a Party to the Convention since 2013.

8. Activities opportunities for environmental sector after 2020

The Belarusian environmental sector underwent a complete transformation after 2020 due to political developments and limited opportunities for action. Within the country, few activists and environmental organisations that remain opt for non-public activities, relying on personal contacts and trust, or work under the guise of commercial or educational projects. Meanwhile, pro-state organisations have almost entirely replaced public environmental organisations on state platforms, significantly narrowing the opportunities for public control over environmental policy.

Several organisations and activists who were forced to leave Belarus continue to carry out activities aimed at Belarusian audience online and support initiatives abroad, such as engaging with the Belarusian diaspora in Lithuania, Poland and Georgia, holding clean-up events, film screenings on environmental topics, and Chornobyl March demonstrations,²⁴ and implementing educational and information campaigns.

Exiled groups focusing on Belarus have primarily engaged in monitoring environmental issues, international advocacy, and awareness-raising work.

Belarusian environmental initiatives in exile seek to address current challenges, bearing in mind the limitations of activities in the country. Despite the difficult and constrained environment, the sector continues to adapt. New activity areas have emerged in response to current challenges. For example, the [Green Belarus Alliance](#) is developing a reform strategy for the future, while the [Ukraine War Environmental Consequences Working Group \(UWEC\)](#) is highlighting the impact of the war in Ukraine on the region's ecology.

The pressure on activists in Belarus and abroad remains high. While environmental activism was previously considered relatively safe in Belarus, people are now afraid to sign petitions or send appeals to state bodies on their own behalf. They try not to draw attention to environmental problems and avoid public contact with state bodies, NGOs and independent media representatives. Such caution is warranted: several independent media outlets and NGOs have been designated as extremist entities, and interacting with them may result in administrative or criminal persecution.

²⁴ Following the events of 2020, it became impossible to hold the Chornobyl March in Belarus due to ongoing repression. This tradition is maintained by the Belarusian diaspora abroad, with annual commemorative processions and events held in Vilnius, Warsaw and other cities on the relevant dates.

Conclusion

Belarus has witnessed a gradual, widespread suppression of civil society. Ongoing repression, changes in legislation and law enforcement practices, as well as an expansive interpretation of “extremism”-related concepts, have created a situation in which any form of civic engagement involves serious risks — including politically neutral activities such as environmental activism, which represents the exercise of the constitutional right to a favourable environment.

The shutdown of civil society organisations has deprived the general public of access to experts and resources, limited their ability to defend their rights, and restricted their access to free information through independent media. Belarus’s withdrawal from international environmental agreements has further restricted the ability to protect rights through international mechanisms.

Even so, people continue to defend their environmental rights at home, making the most of the limited space for activism that remains.

Narrowing public control over environmental policy inevitably affects the quality of decision-making and the ability to identify and prevent environmental problems promptly. This, in turn, threatens the safety of the environment, food and drinking water, posing a threat to public health.

The Soviet government hid the truth about the Chernobyl accident forty years ago. If this information had been disseminated promptly, many casualties and tragedies could have been avoided.

The work of environmental activists and environmental human rights defenders aims to ensure that this does not happen again, even if it means facing pressure and harassment from the state.