



## **Monitoring of the situation with freedom of association and the status of civil society organizations in the Republic of Belarus**

**February 2024**

The situation regarding the freedom of associations and the status of Belarusian NGOs in February 2024 did not undergo significant changes. All are also recorded facts of searches, detentions, summons to "conversation", initiation of administrative and criminal cases, use of legislation on countering extremism as a tool of pressure on CSOs and activists, including initiation of criminal cases in connection with donations to solidarity funds and other structures.

The liquidation of non-governmental organizations in Belarus doesn't stop. As of the end of February 2024, no less than 981 non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are in the process of forced liquidation, either through lawsuits filed for compulsory dissolution in court or by being forcibly removed from the Unified State Register of Legal Entities and Individual Entrepreneurs (USR). The number of organizations that decided on self-liquidation is at least 582 as of the end of February. Consequently, the losses in Belarus's civil sector since the post-election period of 2020 amount to no less than 1,563 institutionalized forms of NGOs, including civic associations, professional unions, political parties, foundations, non-governmental institutions, associations, and religious organizations. This is 30 organizations more than in the previous monitoring period (January 2024).

On March 4, the deadline for public associations to bring their statutes in line with the new requirements of the law "On Public Associations" ends. At the same time, the number of public associations that have gone through the procedure of amending their statutes and registration of those changes is small at the moment.

A whole series of court rulings regarding the "IneedHelpBy initiative case" (a social project of product assistance for those who have suffered from political repression and are in a difficult financial situation) have been issued under Art. 24.15(2) of the Code of Administrative Offenses (use of foreign unpaid assistance for implementation of terrorist and other extremist activities or other actions prohibited by law). Dozens of judicial processes (according to the Human Rights Center "Viasna" in total, at least 100) have been held or will be held in March across Belarus.

The Rossotrudnichestvo (Russian cooperation) agency opens the fourth Russian center of culture and science "Russian House" in Belarus (in Hrodna).

As of February 29, 2024, there are 1407 people recognized as political prisoners in Belarus, currently held in places of detention.

### **Forced liquidation of non-governmental organizations<sup>1</sup>**

As of February 29, 2024, according to [the monitoring conducted by Lawtrend](#), there have been 981 NGOs in the process of forced liquidation, including lawsuits filed by registering authorities for liquidation or being forcibly excluded from the Unified State Register of Legal Entities and Individual Entrepreneurs (USR).

Most of the liquidation lawsuits that were recorded during the monitoring period were filed against republican public associations. There was only one case of filing a claim against a local public association in the Homiel Regional Court. The nature of the activities of the liquidated associations is still very different: sports, charity, social and educational, injured investors, joint home ownership, cultural and business cooperation, Belarusian-Turkmen friendship, and search association. This is 18 organizations more than in the previous monitoring period.

### **Non-governmental organizations deciding on self-liquidation**

The process of NGOs independently deciding on liquidation continues. As of February 29, 2024, according to [the monitoring conducted by Lawtrend](#), there have been 582 NGOs (civil associations, foundations, institutions, and political parties) in which the authorized body or founders have decided to liquidate.

During the monitoring period, decisions on independent liquidation were made to public associations (charitable, sports, cultural activities), foundations and institutions.

As before, the decision on self-liquidation is primarily due to pressure on the members and employees of NGOs, an unfavourable legal environment, and the overall socio-political situation in the country. The practice of putting pressure on specific NGOs by authorities to make an independent decision on liquidation continues.

### **The usage of anti-extremism legislation as a form of pressure on CSOs**

Legislation on countering extremism and combating terrorism continues to be actively used as a tool of pressure on civil society organizations and public activists. The following practices continue:

- recognizing information products of associations, including initiatives posted abroad, as “extremist materials”;
- expanding the lists of citizens, organizations, formations, and individual entrepreneurs involved in extremist activities;
- criminal cases are being initiated and sentences are being passed related to the organization and participation in extremist formations, as well as in their financing.

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<sup>1</sup> The monitoring only records cases of forced liquidation and self-liquidation of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and quantitative data does not include government institutions or republican state-public organizations. Consumer cooperatives and other organizational and legal forms of NGOs besides public associations, foundations, private institutions, religious organizations, and associations are also not taken into account.

During the monitoring period, [extremist materials were replenished among others with](#) the account “europeanbelarus” on the social network “Instagram”, the Telegram channels “Tradycyja” (“Tradition”), “BAJ Belarusian Association of Journalists”, the group “Coordination Council” on the social network “Facebook”.

The practice of calling those who donate to solidarity funds and other structures for conversations with the KGB and forcing them to transfer large sums of money to special accounts, mainly for state social infrastructure facilities, continues unabated. [According to information from the Chairman of the Investigative Committee](#), the amount of paid “charitable donations” (in connection with the financing of extremist activities) at the end of last year has already exceeded 37 million rubles.

At the same time, according to By\_Help, there are already several criminal cases initiated for state treason against people who donated to ByPol or regularly and to many other relief funds, after they transferred the required amount of money.

On February 29, a trial against Aliaksandr Ziyazetdzinau has started. Aliaksandr was already convicted in the fall of 2022, under Part 1 of Art. 361-2 (financing extremist activities) to three years of imprisonment for transferring cryptocurrency to BYPOL. Alexander transferred a large amount of money to the accounts of medical institutions “to compensate for damages”, but he will be re-tried under Part 1 of Art. 361-2 (financing extremist activities) and Part 2 of Art. 290-1 (financing of terrorist activities) on newly discovered cases of cryptocurrency transfers.

In order to suppress civil solidarity, the authorities are trying to destroy all initiatives to help those affected by repression. Moreover, both the initiatives themselves and their activists, as well as the people who receive assistance, are subject to pressure. Lawtrend’s monitoring for the previous month indicated mass searches and detentions related to the INeedHelpBy initiative (a social project for food assistance to those who have suffered from political repression and are in a difficult financial situation), recognized as an extremist formation.

According to the Human Rights Center “Viasna”, at least 275 people were persecuted. In addition to initiating criminal cases against some of the defendants in the case under Art. 361-1 (participation in an extremist formation) and Art. 361-4 (promotion of extremist activities), administrative cases under Part 2 of Art. 24.15 of the Code of Administrative Offenses (use of foreign gratuitous assistance to carry out terrorist and other extremist activities or other actions prohibited by law) have been initiated on a massive scale against recipients of assistance.

Dozens of trials (according to the Human Rights Center “Viasna”, a total of at least 100) have taken place or will take place in March throughout Belarus. In the cases considered, large fines were imposed on the recipients, and the assistance was recognized as subject to confiscation, including by collecting its monetary equivalent. [According to the court](#), having received assistance, people “created a threat of harm to state and public interests, expressed in the public deliberately unlawful legitimization of the actions of individuals who have committed offences and crimes, including by

giving them the pseudo-status of “political prisoners,” illegally neutralizing the consequences of bringing them to responsibility.”<sup>2</sup>

The Investigative Committee has initiated a criminal case against representatives and participants of the initiative “Personnel Reserve for a New Belarus” (recognized as an extremist formation) under Part 3 of Art. 361-1 of the Criminal Code (creation or participation in an extremist formation).

### **Administrative and criminal prosecution of the leadership and members of civil society organizations, and activists.**

The activities of all sports public associations against which lawsuits have been filed to suspend their activities have been suspended.

The practice of detaining public activists continues. Thus, a public activist from Homiel, Vasil Palyakou, was sentenced to administrative arrest under Art.19.11 of the Code of Administrative Offenses (distribution of extremist products) for the third time in a row and has been imprisoned for more than 30 days.

From the search database of the Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs, it became known that human rights activists of the Human Rights Center “Viasna” Natallia Satsunkevich, Leanid Sudalenka, Ihar Kaziamierchyk, Marya Tarasenska, Dzmitry Salayou, Hrodna human rights activist Uladimir Khilmanovich, Viciebsk human rights activists Pavel Levinau and Iryna Tretstsiakova were put on the wanted list in Belarus.

Due to the performance of their professional activities, human rights defenders continue to serve prison sentences:

- the coordinator of Viasna Volunteer Service Marfa Rabkova (sentenced to 14 years and 9 months in a general regime colony, listed as involved in terrorist and extremist activities);
- Viasna volunteer Andrey Chapiuk (sentenced to 5 years and 9 months in a medium security prison, listed as involved in terrorist and extremist activities);
- Viasna chairman and Nobel laureate Ales Bialiatski (listed as involved in extremist activities, sentenced to 10 years of imprisonment in a colony under high security conditions);
- Viasna Board member and FIDH Vice-President Valiantsin Stefanovich (listed as involved in extremist activities, sentenced to 9 years of imprisonment in a colony under high security conditions);
- Lawyer, coordinator of the campaign "Human Rights Defenders for Free Elections", Uladzimir Labkovich (listed as involved in extremist activities, sentenced to 7 years of imprisonment in a colony under high security conditions);

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<sup>2</sup> Here are other examples of court decisions on similar cases (in Russian) – <https://pravo.by/pravovaya-informatsiya/bank-sudebnykh-resheniy/document/1876445>, <https://pravo.by/pravovaya-informatsiya/bank-sudebnykh-resheniy/document/1901291>

- human rights defender Nasta (Anastasiya) Loika (included in the list of persons involved in terrorist and extremist activities; sentenced to 7 years of imprisonment in a correctional colony of the general regime).

In places of deprivation of liberty, other representatives of civil society organizations continue being held, for example,

- members of the Coordination Council Maxim Znak (included in the list of individuals involved in terrorist activities, sentenced to 10 years of imprisonment), Marya Kalesnikava (included in the list of individuals involved in terrorist activities, sentenced to 11 years of imprisonment),

- public figure, founder of the "Flying University" Uladzimir Matskevich (included in the list of individuals involved in extremist activities, sentenced to 5 years of imprisonment),

- expert of the analytical group of the Agency for Humanitarian Technologies, coordinator of the "Flying University," senior analyst at the Center for European Transformation Tatsiana Vadalazhskaya (included in the list of individuals involved in extremist activities, sentenced to 2 years and 6 months of restricted freedom with placement in an open-type correctional facility ("chemistry")),

- member of the Council and co-founder of the School of Young Public Administration Managers Sympa, expert of the research project Bipart Tatsiana Kuzina (included in the list of individuals involved in terrorist and extremist activities, sentenced to 10 years of imprisonment),

- founder and editor of the expert community website "Our Opinion," head of the expert monitoring group "Belarus in Focus" Valeryia Kastsyuhova (included in the list of individuals involved in extremist activities, sentenced to 10 years of imprisonment),

- co-chair of the association "Tell the Truth", and former presidential candidate Andrey Dzmitryeu (included in the list of individuals involved in extremist activities, sentenced to 1.5 years in a colony),

- founder of Symbal.by, Pavel Belavus (included in the lists of individuals involved in terrorist and extremist activities and sentenced to 13 years in a high-security correctional facility),

- art manager Uladzimir Bulauski (included in the list of individuals involved in extremist activities and sentenced to 2 years in a general regime colony),

- former leader of the crowdfunding platforms Ulej and MolaMola, Eduard Babaryka (included in the list of individuals involved in extremist and terrorist activities, sentenced to 8 years in a high-security colony),

- Pavel Mazheika, a cultural figure and Hrodna activist who headed the "City Life Center" (sentenced to 6 years of imprisonment in a high-security colony, included in the list of individuals involved in extremist activities).

[According to Solidarity](#), an organization of trade union leaders and activists who were forced to leave Belarus, currently, there are 42 trade union activists and leaders of democratic trade unions

imprisoned in Belarus. Thus, leaders and activists of Belarusian independent trade unions are being held in places of detention:

- Aliaksandr Yarashuk, Chairman of the Belarusian Congress of Democratic Trade Unions (sentenced to 4 years of imprisonment, included in the list of individuals involved in extremist activities).

- Andrey Khanevich, Chairman of the primary organization of the Belarusian Independent Trade Union at OJSC "Hrodna Azot" (included in the list of individuals involved in extremist activities, sentenced to 5 years of imprisonment).

- Aliaksandr Mishuk, Chairman of the Independent Trade Union at "Belaruskali" (included in the list of individuals involved in terrorist activities and extremist activities, sentenced to 2 years and 6 months of imprisonment).

- Henadz Fiadynich, Head of the Independent Trade Union of Radioelectronics Industry Workers (sentenced to 9 years of imprisonment in high-security conditions, included in the list of individuals involved in extremist activities).

- Vasil Berasniew, Leader of the Orsha Independent Trade Union of Radioelectronics Industry Workers, acting Chairman of the Trade Union of Radioelectronics Industry Workers (sentenced to 9 years of imprisonment in high-security conditions, included in the list of individuals involved in extremist activities). Vasil has serious health problems.

- Vatslau Areshka, Activist of the Trade Union of Radioelectronics Industry Workers (sentenced to 8 years of imprisonment, included in the list of individuals involved in extremist activities).

- Artsiom Zharnak, Chairman of the primary trade union organization of the Free Metalworkers Union at MAZ (included in the list of individuals involved in terrorist activities, sentenced to 4 years of imprisonment).

- Maksim Senik, Activist of the Belarusian Independent Trade Union at OJSC "Hrodna Azot" (sentenced to 4 years of imprisonment).

Mikhail Hromau, Secretary of the liquidated Free Metalworkers Union was sentenced to 2 years and 6 months of restricted freedom without placement in an open-type correctional facility (probation / "home chemistry").

Vital Chychmarou, Head of the primary trade union organization of the Free Metalworkers Union was sentenced to 3 years of restricted freedom without placement in an open-type correctional facility (probation / "home chemistry").

At the end of January, after serving his sentence (2 years), the representative of the Green Watch initiative, Pavel Nazdrya (included in the list of those involved in extremist activities), was released.

On February 15, as part of a special proceeding, a verdict was passed on the founders and former members of the organization of former security forces BYPOL, recognized as a terrorist formation, Aliaksandr Azarau, Matsvey Kupreichyk, Ihar Loban, Andrei Astapovich, Uladzimir

Zhyhar and Aleh Talerchyk under 13 criminal articles of the Criminal Code with a punishment of 11 to 25 years of imprisonment and a fine totalling more than 350,000 euros. Aliaksandr Azarau was also accused of “treason to the state” (Article 356 of the Criminal Code).