

BELARUS 2014 HUMAN RIGHTS REPORT

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Belarus is an authoritarian state. The country's constitution provides for a directly elected president who is head of state, and a bicameral parliament, the national assembly. A prime minister appointed by the president is the nominal head of government, but power is concentrated in the presidency, both in fact and in law. Since his election as president in 1994, Aliaksandr Lukashenka has consolidated his rule over all institutions and undermined the rule of law through authoritarian means, including manipulated elections and arbitrary decrees. All subsequent presidential elections, including the one held in 2010, were neither free nor fair and fell well short of international standards. The 2012 parliamentary elections also failed to meet international standards. Civilian authorities, Lukashenka in particular, maintained effective control over security forces.

The most significant human rights problems continued to be: citizens were unable to change their government through elections; in a system bereft of checks and balances, authorities committed abuses; and persons remained imprisoned on politically motivated charges, while the government failed to account for longstanding cases of politically motivated disappearances.

Other human rights problems included abuses by security forces, which reportedly mistreated suspects during investigations and in prisons. Prison conditions remained extremely poor. Authorities arbitrarily arrested, detained, and imprisoned citizens for criticizing officials, participating in demonstrations, and other political reasons. The judiciary suffered from political interference and a lack of independence; trial outcomes often appeared predetermined, and trials were conducted behind closed doors or in the absence of the accused. Authorities continued to infringe on the right of privacy. The government restricted civil liberties, including freedom of speech, press, assembly, association, and religion. The government seized printed materials from civil society activists and prevented independent media from disseminating information and materials. The government continued to hinder or prevent the activities of some religious groups, at times fining them or restricting their services. Official corruption in all branches of government remained a problem. Authorities harassed human rights groups, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and political parties, refusing to register many and then threatening them with criminal prosecution for operating without registration. Violence and discrimination against women were problems, as was violence against children. Trafficking in persons remained a problem. There was

discrimination against lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) persons; persons with disabilities; Roma; ethnic minorities; persons with HIV/AIDS; and those who sought to use the Belarusian language. Authorities harassed and at times dismissed members of independent unions from employment in state-owned enterprises, severely limiting the ability of workers to form and join independent trade unions and to organize and bargain collectively.

Authorities at all levels operated with impunity and failed to take steps to prosecute or punish officials in the government or security forces who committed human rights abuses.

Section 1. Respect for the Integrity of the Person, Including Freedom from:

a. Arbitrary or Unlawful Deprivation of Life

During the year there were no reports that the government or its agents committed arbitrary or unlawful killings. The Investigations Committee examines killings and other abuses committed by security forces.

b. Disappearance

There were no developments in the reportedly continuing investigations into the 2000 disappearance of journalist Zmitser Zavadski and the 1999 disappearances of former deputy prime minister Viktor Hanchar, former interior minister Yuri Zakharanka, and businessman Anatol Krasouski. There was evidence of government involvement in the disappearances, but authorities continued to deny any connection with them. On October 3, a senior Investigations Committee officer informed Yuri Zakharanka's mother that by law it is impossible to apply the statute of limitations unless a suspect is identified and charged, and thus the case of her son could not be closed. The committee refused Zakharanka's mother request to study case materials, citing that it is only possible upon completion of the preliminary investigation. Human rights advocates argued that the law does not criminalize enforced disappearances by state agents or by those acting with the authorization, support, or acquiescence of the state.

c. Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment

The law prohibits such practices. Nevertheless, the Committee for State Security (KGB), riot police, and other security forces, often unidentified and in plain

clothes, continued to beat detainees occasionally. Security forces also reportedly mistreated individuals during investigations. During arrests police occasionally beat criminal suspects and citizens.

Human rights advocates, opposition leaders, and activists released from detention facilities continued to report maltreatment and other forms of physical and psychological abuse of suspects during criminal and administrative investigations.

Observers reported a few isolated cases of hazing of new army recruits, including beatings and other forms of physical and psychological abuse, although less so than in previous years due to the government's increased prosecution of offenders. On April 3, a senior Defense Ministry official stated that 26 servicemen were identified as engaging in hazing incidents in 2013 compared with 134 in 2003. In 2011 the Prosecutor General's Office stated that military leaders and prosecutors were taking "effective measures" to prevent deaths, injuries, and incidents of hazing in the army.

Prison and Detention Center Conditions

Prison and detention center conditions remained poor and in many cases posed threats to life and health.

Physical Conditions: According to local activists and human rights lawyers, there were shortages of food, medicine, warm clothing, and bedding as well as inadequate access to basic or emergency medical care and clean drinking water. Ventilation in cells and overall sanitation were poor, and authorities failed to provide conditions necessary for maintaining proper personal hygiene. Prisoners frequently complained of malnutrition and low-quality uniforms and bedding. Some former political prisoners reported psychological abuse and being forced to share a cell with violent criminals. The law permits family and friends to bring detainees food and hygiene products and to send them parcels by mail, but this was occasionally not allowed.

As of October, authorities reported that, of the approximately 29,000 persons incarcerated nationwide, a 5 percent increase compared to October 2013, approximately 23,000 were adult inmates in penal colonies (prisons), while 599 were adult inmates in the highest-security prisons (with very limited privileges), and 152 were minors in juvenile penal colonies. Authorities incarcerated approximately 5,500 persons in pretrial detention and other facilities. The number of persons held in a form of internal exile (khimiya) was not available. Persons

sentenced to khimiya were allowed to work outside detention facilities but were required to return to prison barracks, where they lived under strict conditions and supervision.

There were isolated reports that police placed underage suspects in pretrial detention facility cells together with adult suspects and former convicts. Juvenile prisoners were held separately from adults at juvenile penal colonies, arrest houses, and pretrial holding facilities. In general, conditions for female and juvenile prisoners were slightly better than for male prisoners.

Overcrowding of holding facilities and prisons continued to be a problem, although an amnesty reduced the number of inmates. Ministry of Internal Affairs officials dismissed reports of overcrowding.

In April 2013, human rights defender Aleh Volchak filed a complaint with the UN Human Rights Committee about dehumanizing conditions at a short-term holding facility in Minsk. He served several sentences at the facility and cited overcrowding; poor ventilation and lighting; lack of beds, bedding, and toiletries; and damp and germ-infected walls. A number of activists who served short-term detentions across the country during the year voiced similar complaints, including being allowed to shower only three times during a 25-day detention.

According to human rights NGOs and former prisoners, authorities routinely abused prisoners and in isolated cases beat or tortured them to death. For example, in August 2013, the administration of pretrial holding facility No.1 in Minsk informed the family of 21-year-old Ihar Ptichkin that Ptichkin had died in detention of a heart attack. Authorities had previously sentenced Ptichkin to three months in prison for driving with a suspended license. According to human rights monitoring groups and his family, Ptichkin suffered tooth pain and requested medical assistance, which was denied. When Ptichkin's cellmates protested, a prison riot force reportedly beat Ptichkin, which allegedly led to his death. Ptichkin's family recorded extensive bruises and injuries to his body. After his family filed a number of complaints, the Investigations Committee launched an investigation, including another medical examination of Ptichkin's death. Authorities subsequently charged a prison medical worker with negligence that resulted in Ptichkin's death and continued the investigation. On July 1, authorities announced that Ptichkin was not subjected to maltreatment by jail officers. They stated that while in detention he reportedly developed a mental disorder aggravated by his drug and alcohol abuse and subsequently died in the medical unit. On

December 12, Ptichkin's mother reported that authorities completed a preliminary investigation. The investigation continued at year's end.

In September 2013, authorities at a Mahilyou prison placed prisoner Pyotr Kuchura in a punishment cell, according to his wife and human rights monitoring reports. Reportedly, prison authorities began pressuring Kuchura and limiting his family visits after they attributed to Kuchura and his wife a human rights website publication about illegal money soliciting from inmates and other violations of inmates' rights. When Kuchura used the toilet and sink in the punishment cell, the water mixed with a large amount of chlorine about which prison authorities did not inform him. Kuchura, who had a chronic heart condition, suffered major poisoning but prison administration delayed moving him to a different cell. His wife subsequently filed a complaint, citing torture in the punishment cell as well as other cases of medical negligence. While a number of complaints and requests for an investigation into the poisoning were denied during the year, authorities recognized the fact of the poisoning, citing excessive chlorine vapor in the cell, and ordered a separate forensic examination, which was not conducted. In August, Kuchura was reportedly questioned by an investigator who ordered an examination of his health, and authorities again refused Kuchura's request for a criminal investigation in September.

Credible sources maintained that prison administrations employed other inmates to intimidate political prisoners and compel confessions. They also reported that authorities neither explained nor protected political prisoners' legal rights and excessively penalized inmates for minor violations of the prison rules. For example, in February 2013 political prisoner and former presidential candidate Mikalai Statkevich reportedly told his wife that to pressure him to sign a pardon request for release, the prison administration attempted to place a "specially trained and aggressive former security officer known for abusing and beating cellmates" into his cell. In March, Statkevich requested that prison administration place him in a solitary cell to avoid "any provocation" in fear of his own safety. On June 2, Statkevich's wife reported that prison administration classified him as a person "inclined to being violent and escaping from prison," which resulted in additional supervision and more frequent inspections by prison officers. Separately, Statkevich's father filed a request with police seeking to identify and prosecute an author of an anonymous letter that he received on September 8. The letter contained explicit language threatening the lives of Statkevich, his spouse, and father, and stating that Statkevich would be killed upon his release.

Corruption in prisons was a serious problem, and observers noted that parole often depended on bribes to prison personnel or a prisoner's political affiliation.

Former prisoners reported limited access to medical care, unqualified medical personnel, and cursory medical exams that hid more serious medical ailments. Consequently, observers believed tuberculosis, pneumonia, HIV/AIDS, and other communicable diseases were widespread in prisons. On March 24, a senior tuberculosis control officer reported that tuberculosis infection in prisons exceeded the national average by 6.5 times, and the death rate from tuberculosis among inmates was 1.3 times above the national average. The Ministry of Internal Affairs reported that, as of the end of 2012, 836 prisoners suffered from active tuberculosis. Authorities continued their practice of isolating certain prisoners, particularly inmates with HIV/AIDS and foreign citizens. According to official data, at the end of 2010, there were 1,098 inmates with HIV/AIDS, who accounted for 15 percent of the total reported number of persons with HIV/AIDS in the country.

Administration: Recordkeeping on prisoners was adequate and overseen by the Department of Corrections under the Ministry of Internal Affairs.

Authorities used several alternatives to prison sentences for nonviolent offenders. The most common alternative sentences included partial house arrest, restrictions on freedom of movement, and khimiya (internal exile, see above). In 2012 an official with the Investigation Committee reported that the number of individuals, especially first-time offenders for nonviolent crimes, who received alternative sentences during the period January through March 2012 was six times higher than for the same period in 2011.

Authorities claimed to have conducted annual or more frequent investigations and monitoring of prison and detention center conditions. Human rights groups, however, asserted that such inspections, even if they did occur, lacked any credibility given the absence of an ombudsman and the inability of human rights advocates to visit prisons or provide consultations to prisoners.

Prisoners and detainees had limited access to visitors, and denial of meetings with families was a common punishment for disciplinary violations. Authorities often denied political prisoners meetings with families as a means of pressure and intimidation or, in some cases, repeatedly delayed their scheduled meetings.

Although the law provides for freedom of religion, and there were no reports of egregious infringements, authorities generally prevented prisoners from holding religious services and performing ceremonies that did not comply with prison regulations. A number of prisons had designated Orthodox facilities, and authorities generally accepted requests from prisoners of other faiths and denominations to invite clergy. Prison authorities maintained some additional restrictions on the religious practice of political prisoners. For example, Malady Front activist Eduard Lobau's permitted meetings with and confessions to a Catholic priest were always monitored by a prison officer, and some of Lobau's letters to the priest reportedly did not reach the addressee.

Former prisoners credibly reported that prison officials often censored or did not forward their complaints to higher authorities, and that prison administrators either ignored or selectively considered requests for investigation of alleged abuses. Prisoners also reported that prison administration frequently refused to provide them with copies of responses to their complaints, which further complicated their defense. Complaints could result in retaliation against prisoners who spoke out, including humiliation, death threats, or other forms of punishment.

Independent Monitoring: Until October authorities did not permit independent monitoring of penal institutions; however, one prison-monitoring group was allowed to visit several institutions in November but did not issue a report during the year. Despite numerous requests to the Ministries of Internal Affairs and Justice, government officials continued to refuse to meet with human rights advocates or approve requests to visit detention facilities. In December the unregistered human rights NGO Vyasna released a report on prison conditions based on independent monitoring. In April 2013 Vyasna released a report on penal system legislation and the treatment of prisoners across the country. In October 2013 the prison-monitoring organization Platforma released a report on prison conditions in the country. Human rights advocates based their reports on analyses of legislation, including the protection of freedoms and human rights in prisons, practices of application and enforcement of laws, and information provided by former prisoners, defense lawyers, and families.

d. Arbitrary Arrest or Detention

The law limits arbitrary detention, but the government did not respect these limits. Authorities continued to arrest individuals for political reasons and to use administrative measures to detain political activists before, during, and after protests and other major public events.

Role of the Police and Security Apparatus

The Ministry of Internal Affairs exercises authority over police, but other bodies outside of its control, for example, the KGB, the Financial Investigations Department of the State Control Committee, the Investigation Committee, and presidential security services also exercise police functions. The president also has the authority to subordinate all security bodies to his personal command. Impunity among law enforcement personnel remained a serious problem. Individuals have the right to report police abuse to a prosecutor, although the government often did not investigate reported abuses or hold perpetrators accountable.

Arrest Procedures and Treatment of Detainees

By law police must request permission from a prosecutor to detain a person for more than three hours, but police usually ignored this procedure and routinely detained and arrested individuals without warrants. Authorities may hold a criminal suspect for up to 10 days without filing formal charges and for up to 18 months after filing charges. Under the law prosecutors, investigators, and security service agencies have the authority to extend detention without consulting a judge. Detainees have the right to petition the court system regarding the legality of their detention, but authorities frequently suppressed or ignored such appeals.

Arbitrary Arrest: During the year authorities routinely detained or arrested dozens of individuals, including opposition figures, members of the independent media, social media activists, and civil society activists, for reasons widely considered to be politically motivated. Authorities used administrative measures to detain political activists before, during, and after planned demonstrations and protests as well as other public events. In October the human rights organization Vyasna released a report on the government's use of arbitrary detention of activists to harass, intimidate, and disrupt their activities.

On March 2, police detained at least 30 opposition and civil society activists and independent journalists for organizing and reporting on a demonstration to protest the reported deployment of Russian troops in Ukraine. Authorities sentenced three opposition activists, including former political prisoner Zmitser Dashkevich, to 12 days in jail for allegedly resisting police. Police released the other protesters without charge.

On March 6, a court in Minsk sentenced European Belarus opposition activist Maksim Viniarski to 15 days in jail for protesting Russian military activities in Ukraine on March 5. On March 7, authorities separately sentenced Movement “For Freedom” activists Artsiom Liava and Ales Marchanka to five days in jail each for staging a similar protest in front of the Russian Embassy. On March 11, Homyel-based democratic activists Zmitser Karashkou and Stanislau Bula received 15 days in jail for also demonstrating in front of the Russian Embassy. All were charged with holding unsanctioned demonstrations.

On March 26, following a government-sanctioned annual March 25 Freedom Day demonstration, authorities sentenced two European Belarus activists, Aliaksandr Blizniuk and Maksim Viniarski to 5 and 15 days in jail respectively for allegedly resisting police. On March 25, authorities briefly detained at least seven more activists but subsequently released them all without charge.

On April 26, following a government-sanctioned Chernobyl commemoration march, authorities detained several opposition activists and sentenced them to jail terms. Authorities sentenced Dzianis Karnou, Aliaksandr Kurbaskin, Aliaksandr Stukin, Valery Tamin, opposition youth activists, and Leanid Smouzh, an activist from Stoubtsy, to 20 days in jail for participating in the march. Authorities sentenced Vladimir Novikov, a Russian citizen, and Nikolai Kolas, an entrepreneur from Dziarzhynsk, to 15 days in jail each on similar charges.

Authorities sentenced Yuri Rubtsou, an activist from Homyel, to 25 days in jail for participating in the march and wearing a T-shirt imprinted “Lukashenka, Go.” Additionally, a court in Minsk sentenced former political prisoner Aliaksandr Frantskevich to 25 days in jail for allegedly resisting police and using foul language. Authorities detained Frantskevich as well as some other activists, including Aliaksandr Stepanenko, Vladimir Sergeyeu, Ilya Dabratvor, Maksim Viniarski, and Zmitser Dashkevich, prior to the demonstration and sentenced them for up to 25 days in jail to prevent their participation.

Prior to and during the May 9-25 ice hockey world championship in Minsk, authorities detained and sentenced at least 42 democratic and youth activists to up to 25 days in jail. The human rights organization Vyasna stated that the authorities used these preventive detention measures to prevent any opposition protest. Additionally, police announced that they detained more than 350 prostitutes and a number of homeless persons during the championship.

On September 12, following his detention on September 11 ahead of the Minsk city day festivities weekend, authorities jailed youth activist and former political prisoner Pavel Vinahradau for 15 days. In addition to charges of allegedly using obscenities in public, the court fined Vinahradau 1.5 million rubles (\$140) for violating police supervision requirements. During the year Vinahradau served several short-term sentences. Also on September 12, authorities sentenced Vinahradau's associate Yahor Viniatski to 15 days in jail.

Pretrial Detention: Authorities may hold a criminal suspect for up to 10 days without filing formal charges. Prior to being charged, the law provides detainees with no access to their families or to outside food and medical supplies, both of which are vital given poor conditions. Police routinely held persons for the full 10-day period before charging them.

Police often detained individuals for several hours, ostensibly to confirm their identity; fingerprinted them; and then released them without charges. Police and security forces frequently used this tactic to detain members of the democratic opposition and demonstrators, to prevent the distribution of leaflets and newspapers, or as a pretext to break up civil society meetings and events.

On September 12, police briefly detained 25 individuals, including two Belsat TV journalists, at a public showing of Richard LaGravenese's movie *Freedom Writers* in central Minsk. All were released three hours later without charge after an identification check.

Amnesty: An amnesty, which aimed to reduce the prison population, began in June and was completed on December 29. Under the amnesty, the government released 2,027 convicts from prison, including at least 41 minors, and reduced by one year the sentences of 2,494 persons. Ales Byalyatski, chair of the human rights NGO Vyasna, was released under the amnesty.

e. Denial of Fair Public Trial

The constitution provides for an independent judiciary, but authorities did not respect judicial independence. Observers believed corruption, inefficiency, and political interference with judicial decisions were widespread. Courts convicted individuals on false and politically motivated charges brought by prosecutors, and observers believed that senior government leaders and local authorities dictated the outcomes of trials. In a televised statement on December 19, Lukashenka dismissed accusations that "officials phone [in] and dictate convictions," but

claimed he intervened in court decision making when he deemed it necessary “to impose harsher penalties on bastards.”

According to the human rights monitoring organization Platforma, prosecutors wielded excessive and imbalanced authority because they may extend detention without the permission of judges. They also noted a power imbalance between the prosecution and the defense. Defense lawyers were unable to examine investigation files, be present during investigations and interrogations, or examine evidence against defendants until a prosecutor formally brought the case to court. Lawyers found it difficult to challenge some evidence because technical expertise was under the control of the Prosecutor’s Office. According to many defense attorneys, this power imbalance persisted throughout the year, especially in politically motivated criminal and administrative cases. Criminal defendants were exonerated in very few cases during the year.

Under a law amended in April 2012, bar associations are independent, and licensed lawyers can establish private practices or bureaus, but they remained subordinate to the Ministry of Justice. All lawyers must be licensed by the ministry and renew their licenses every five years. Although previously the law prohibited attorneys from engaging in private practice, private legal companies were allowed to provide legal assistance and advice to private companies and represent their clients in economic courts.

During the year there were no new disbarments, but no debarred lawyers had their licenses restored. The Justice Ministry previously accused lawyers defending politically motivated detainees of distorting information about the investigations of their clients, their state of health, and their conditions of detention. In 2012 the ministry announced that all licensed lawyers, excluding junior staff, had to pass extraordinary performance reviews to renew their licenses. The law authorizes the ministry to advise lawyers and bar members on whom to elect as chairpersons.

Trial Procedures

The law provides for the presumption of innocence. Nevertheless, the lack of judicial independence, the practice of state media to report on high-profile cases as if guilt were already certain, and widespread practices of limiting the right of self-defense frequently placed the burden of proving one’s innocence on the defendant.

The law also provides for public trials, but authorities occasionally closed trials and frequently held them in judges’ offices, where attendance was severely limited.

Judges adjudicate all trials; there is no system of trial by jury. For the most serious cases, two civilian advisers assist the judge.

The law provides defendants the right to attend proceedings, confront witnesses, and present evidence on their own behalf, but authorities did not always respect these rights.

The law provides for access to legal counsel for detainees and requires that courts appoint a lawyer for those who cannot afford one. Most judges and prosecutors were not fluent in Belarusian and rejected motions for interpreters. The law provides for the right to choose legal representation freely; however, a presidential decree prohibits NGO members who are lawyers from representing individuals other than members of their organizations in court. The government's earlier disbarment of attorneys who represented political opponents of the regime limited defendants' choice of counsel in high-profile political cases. The government's actions further forced lawyers to limit their contacts with media and refrain from public comments regarding their clients' cases.

Those charged in connection with the December 2010 demonstrations had access to lawyers, but authorities did not allow any of these detainees to meet in private with their lawyers at holding facilities. Some lawyers openly stated in 2011 that authorities obstructed them from seeing clients in connection with the 2010 demonstrations.

Courts often allowed statements obtained by use of force and threats of bodily harm during interrogations to be used against defendants.

Defendants have the right to appeal convictions, and most defendants did so. Nevertheless, appeals courts upheld the verdicts of the lower courts in the vast majority of cases, including in all criminal cases connected with post-election demonstrations.

Political Prisoners and Detainees

Local and international human rights organizations reported several different lists of political prisoners in the country. These included individuals serving prison time or with restrictive parole conditions at year's end. The independent human rights monitoring NGO Vyasna reported there were six political prisoners in the country. Government officials publicly denied the existence of what they referred to as "so-called political prisoners" and denied that they received harsher treatment

in detention facilities. Many of those pardoned reported pressure to sign pardon requests, and most were subsequently unable to exercise some civil and political rights.

Several prominent prisoners served out their sentences in full during the year, including Mikalai Autukhovich and Eduard Lobau. Following their release, they were unable to exercise their full civil and political rights. They continued to face restrictions on their freedom of movement and were subjected to police supervision. For example, on September 19, a Minsk court reinstated preventive supervision on Dashkevich after lifting it on September 10. Dashkevich was subjected to an enforced curfew and could not move from his place of residence, among other restrictions. Following his release a court in Hrodna ordered preventive supervision for Autukhovich for a period of 16 months. He was not permitted to travel outside the city without official permission, among other restrictions. In July authorities permitted Autukhovich to visit Minsk for medical treatment following an appeals process. At a hearing in jail in November, a judge ordered police supervision over Lobau, which was enforced upon his release on December 18. In violation of the law, authorities failed to notify Lobau's defense lawyer of the hearing date.

Prominent prisoners, including former presidential candidate Mikalai Statkevich, reportedly faced mistreatment and pressure in jail. For example, despite a chronic digestion condition, on June 1, prison officials ceased providing Mikalai Dziadok with a special diet, which they previously permitted. On November 20, prison authorities brought new charges against Dziadok for violating prison rules, which remained pending at year's end. Dziadok was a convict in the so-called anarchist case, convicted of "malicious hooliganism" and sentenced to four years and six months in connection with Molotov cocktail attacks on the Russian Embassy and other facilities in Minsk. In a separate case, prison administration placed Dziadok's alleged accomplice, Ihar Alinevich, another convict in the so-called anarchist case serving an eight-year sentence, in a punishment cell for three consecutive 10-day terms in September-October for various alleged violations of prison regulations, including for refusing "to clean public places," a job that in the unofficial Belarusian prison hierarchy might have led to his being ostracized by other inmates.

On June 21, officials released Ales Byalyatski, chairman of Vyasna, on amnesty after he served almost three years of a four-and-one-half-year prison sentence. He had been convicted on politically motivated tax evasion charges related to his human rights activities.

Ales Mikhalevich, a former presidential candidate charged in a criminal case related to the 2010 postelection demonstration, remained abroad, where he fled in 2011. In 2013 authorities notified Mikhalevich that he could be informed of the status of his case only in person.

During their court hearings, defendants in politically motivated cases reported threats against associates and family members to compel testimony against them, as well as pressure to sign confessions. Leading local human rights groups, including Vyasna and the Belarusian Helsinki Committee (BHC), either recognized these individuals as prisoners of conscience or noted serious due process violations that required at the very least a retrial.

Authorities also maintained control over some of those prisoners who already had been released. For example, in August 2013 authorities sentenced Uladzimir Yaromenak, an activist of the Young Front opposition movement and former political prisoner, to three months in jail on charges of violating preventive supervision restrictions. He served his three-month sentence, and authorities released him on March 11. Authorities then ordered police supervision for five years. Paval Vinahradau, who served at least 65 days in jail during the year, continued to be under police supervision.

Prison authorities often confiscated and censored mail correspondence of political prisoners, reportedly to exert pressure by further isolating prisoners and limiting their contacts with families and associates. Ihar Alinevich's mother reported that authorities blocked correspondence and subsequently informed prisoners that "no one cares about them outside of the prison walls."

Civil Judicial Procedures and Remedies

The law provides that individuals can file lawsuits seeking damages for a human rights violation, but the civil judiciary was not independent and was rarely impartial in such matters.

f. Arbitrary Interference with Privacy, Family, Home, or Correspondence

The law prohibits such actions, but the government did not respect these prohibitions. Authorities used wiretapping, video surveillance, and a network of informers that deprived persons of privacy.

By law persons who obstruct law enforcement personnel in the performance of their duties can be penalized or charged with an administrative offense, even if the “duties” are inconsistent with the law. “Obstruction” could include any effort to prevent KGB or law enforcement officers from entering the premises of a company, establishment, or organization; refusing to allow KGB audits; or denying or restricting KGB access to information systems and databases.

The law requires a warrant before, or immediately after, conducting a search. Nevertheless, some activists believed the KGB entered their homes unannounced. The KGB has the authority to enter any building at any time, as long as it applies for a warrant within 24 hours after the entry.

Security forces continued to target prominent opposition and civil society leaders with arbitrary searches and interrogations at border crossings and airports. For example, on February 14, border officials detained for four hours Andrei Bandarenka, chairman of the human rights monitoring organization Platforma, upon re-entering the country from Lithuania. Officers confiscated 30 copies of his organization’s annual report on prison monitoring and human rights violations. On December 4, authorities searched at length United Civic Party deputy chair Vasil Paliakou at the airport in Minsk before a flight to Warsaw. On December 28, authorities removed him from a Minsk-bound train and searched him as he was crossing the Lithuanian-Belarusian border. Paliakou was released without incident.

While the law prohibits authorities from intercepting telephone and other communications without a prosecutor’s order, authorities routinely monitored residences, telephones, and computers. Nearly all opposition political figures and many prominent members of civil society groups claimed that authorities monitored their conversations and activities.

The law allows the KGB, the Ministry of Internal Affairs, special security services, financial intelligence personnel, and certain border guard detachments to use wiretaps. Wiretaps require the permission of a prosecutor, but the lack of prosecutorial independence rendered this requirement meaningless.

The Ministry of Communications has the authority to terminate the telephone service of persons who violate their telephone contracts, and such contracts prohibit the use of telephone services for purposes contrary to state interests and public order. Cellular telephone providers are banned from selling cellular telephone cards to customers who do not produce their passports or to foreigners who are not registered with local migration services.

Authorities continued to harass family members of NGO leaders and civil society and opposition activists through selective application of the law.

Section 2. Respect for Civil Liberties, Including:

a. Freedom of Speech and Press

The constitution provides for freedom of speech and press. Nevertheless, the government did not respect these rights and enforced numerous laws to control and censor the public and the media. Moreover, the state press propagated views in support of Lukashenka and official policies, without giving room for other critical voices.

Freedom of Speech: Individuals could not criticize Lukashenka and the government publicly or discuss matters of general public interest without fear of reprisal. Authorities videotaped political meetings, conducted frequent identity checks, and used other forms of intimidation. Authorities also prohibited wearing masks, displaying unregistered or opposition flags and symbols, and displaying placards bearing messages deemed threatening to the government or public order.

For example, on March 31, police detained prominent poet Slavimir Adamovich for an identification check. Adamovich was wearing a white-red-white opposition ribbon and a yellow-blue ribbon in solidarity with Ukraine. Police released him without charge.

On July 3, a court in Minsk sentenced two activists, Aleh Korban and Uladzimir Siarheyev, of the unregistered opposition youth group Alternatyva, to 10 days in jail for purportedly putting up a sign reading “For an Independent Belarus” at a subway station in Minsk. Police arrested the two at Korban’s residence, and authorities held hearings behind closed doors. Korban was rearrested and again sentenced to 10 days in jail on August 12 for posting white-red-white flags in a town near Minsk. On August 5, authorities sentenced another Alternatyva activist, Aleh Kerol, to 10 days in jail on similar charges.

On September 19, a court in Minsk sentenced youth activists, Nastassia Dol and Zmitser Latushkin, to six and five days in jail, respectively, for organizing a movie showing in an underground crossing in central Minsk the previous day. Authorities convicted both on the charges of allegedly using foul language and

resisting police. Police detained at least 28 other individuals in connection with the movie showing but released all others without charge.

In November 2013 authorities arrested Yury Rubtsou, a member of the Independent Union of Electronic Industry Workers, during a government-sanctioned commemoration event at the Kurapaty Forest massacre site, and sentenced him to three days in jail for wearing a T-shirt bearing anti-Lukashenka slogans. Upon his release authorities re-arrested him for wearing the same T-shirt and rereleased him only after removing the shirt. Authorities detained Rubtsou a number of times during the year. For example, upon his release on May 21 after a 25-day term in jail, authorities re-arrested Rubtsou and sentenced him to five days in jail in Homyel. Rubtsou defied police threats to stop wearing a T-shirt saying “Lukashenka Go” and in protest refused food in detention.

On August 3, Rubtsou told the press that authorities opened a criminal investigation against him for purportedly insulting the judge at closed hearings on April 28. On September 16, at the first hearing of this case, the “insulted” judge testified that Rubtsou called him “a scum” and threatened him. Three other witnesses, including two police officers and a court secretary, confirmed the judge’s testimony from what transpired at the closed hearing. On October 6, the court charged Rubtsou with insulting the judge under the criminal code and sentenced him to 30 months of restricted freedom, “khimiya.” The court reduced the sentence to 18 months based on a current amnesty law. Rubtsou’s appeal was rejected on November 21. He began serving his sentence on December 22.

On October 9, police detained 14 Ukrainian and 11 Belarusian soccer fans during and after a match in Barysau. The fans had been chanting pro-Ukraine, pro-Belarus, and anti-Putin slogans. A court convicted 12 Ukrainians and sentenced several to jail and fines. The court charged one with using fascist symbols and the others for profanity. Authorities released all detained Ukrainian fans after the Ukrainian government voiced its concern. The court also fined 12 Belarusians on similar charges.

On December 1, authorities in Vitsebsk fined independent journalist Kastus Mardzvintsau and Belarusian Christian Democracy (BCD) activist Tatsiana Sevyarynets three million rubles (\$280) and 3.75 million rubles (\$350) respectively, on charges of allegedly holding an unsanctioned demonstration on November 5. On November 28, independent journalists Alena Stiapanava and Zmitser Kazakevich received a penalty of three million rubles (\$280) each and BCD activist Alena Shabunia a penalty of 2.7 million rubles (\$250) on similar

charges. On December 3, a local court sentenced Petr Biarlinau, a passer-by who joined the activists for a photo, to three days in jail and Pavel Levinau, a local human rights advocate, to a fine of 3.75 million rubles (\$350) on December 17. At court hearings a police officer testified that investigators studied online photos of all defendants holding self-made paper birds and paper cages and posing in front of graffiti on a building in Vitsebsk portraying birds flying out of cages. An officer testified that the group planned this event in advance, which equated it to a demonstration.

The law also limits free speech by criminalizing actions such as giving information to a foreigner about the political, economic, social, military, or international situation of the country that authorities deem false or derogatory.

Press Freedoms: Government restriction of press freedom limited access to information and often resulted in self-censorship by the media. State-controlled media did not provide balanced coverage and overwhelmingly presented the official version of events. Appearances by opposition politicians on state media were limited to those required by law during election campaigns. In 2012 official censorship further limited them during the parliamentary election, and limited information was available in the state-run press about the local elections. Authorities warned, fined, detained, and interrogated members of the media. Under the law the government may close a publication after two warnings in one year for violating a range of restrictions on the press. Additionally, regulations give authorities arbitrary power to prohibit or censor reporting. The Information Ministry can suspend periodicals or newspapers for three months without a court ruling. The law also prohibits the media from disseminating information on behalf of unregistered political parties, trade unions, and NGOs.

During the 2012 parliamentary election campaign, state-controlled media outlets censored speeches by democratic opposition candidates, a step back from the 2010 presidential elections, when authorities allowed candidates to appear live. During the year candidates in local elections did not have opportunities to publish any materials in state-controlled media.

The Information Ministry continued to deny registration to many independent media outlets. In spite of the lack of registration, independent media, including newspapers, magazines, and internet news websites, sought to provide independent coverage of events. They operated, however, under repressive media laws, and most faced discriminatory publishing and distribution policies, including limiting access to government officials and press briefings, controlling the size of press

runs of papers, and raising the cost of printing. During the year the government confiscated independent and opposition newspapers and seized leaflets and other materials deemed to have been printed illegally. For example, on September 25, a higher court in Mahilyou denied an appeal filed by a local opposition activist, Ihar Barysau, to challenge his 4.5-million ruble (\$420) fine for allegedly violating the media law. Courts earlier convicted Barysau of transporting and illegally disseminating 11,000 copies of various printed media, including the local newspaper *Nash Mahilyou*, and the opposition Social-Democratic party's bulletins, *A Social Democrat*, that police confiscated from him on July 16. Authorities also often fined distributors of independent press publications.

On May 12, the information ministry issued a warning to the independent newspaper *Svobodnye Novosti Plus* for publishing information deemed detrimental to public interests and creating a negative portrayal of the World Ice Hockey Championship held in Minsk. The claim referred to a May 6 article stating that none of Russia's players in Minsk had played at the Sochi Olympic Games.

State-owned media, which were extremely biased and served largely as a propaganda arm of the regime, dominated the information field and maintained the highest circulation through generous subsidies and preferences. There was no countrywide private television. The state-owned postal system, Belposhta, and the state-owned kiosk system, Belsayuzdruk, continued to refuse to deliver or sell numerous independent newspapers that covered politics.

Although authorities continued to allow the circulation of *Narodnaya Volya* and *Nasha Niva*, two independent national newspapers, through state distribution systems, they remained subject to restrictions on the number of copies allowed to circulate and to financial penalties.

Several independent newspapers, including *Vitsyebki Kuryer*, printed materials in Russia because domestic printing presses (almost all of which were state-owned) refused to print them. Other independent newspapers, such as *Salidarnasc*, *BDG*, and *Bobruyski Kuryer*, disseminated internet-only versions due to printing and distribution restrictions.

International media continued to operate in the country, but not without interference and prior censorship. Euronews and the Russian channels First Channel, NTV, and RTR were generally available, although only through paid cable services in many parts of the country and then with a lag time that allowed the removal of news deemed undesirable by authorities. At times authorities

blocked, censored, or replaced their international news programs with local programming. Satellite broadcasts from other countries, including Poland and Lithuania, could be received in parts of the country, usually along the border.

Violence and Harassment: Authorities continued to harass and detain journalists routinely.

Security forces continually hampered efforts of independent journalists to cover demonstrations and protests in Minsk and across the country. For example, on March 2, authorities briefly detained six independent journalists who covered an opposition demonstration to protest reported deployment of Russian troops in Ukraine. Authorities released all without charge after an identification check.

Harassment of local and foreign journalists was also common. The Belarusian Association of Journalists reported that during the year authorities charged at least 14 journalists or had them stand trial for cooperating with an unaccredited foreign media outlet. For example, on May 23, the Foreign Ministry refused official accreditation to Viktor Parfianenka, a Hrodna-based freelance journalist writing for various foreign media broadcasting in the country. This was his sixth accreditation denial.

On September 16, police searched Mahilyou-based independent journalist Aliaksandr Burakou's apartment as well as his parents' apartment. Officers seized several computers and hard drives. Authorities subsequently opened a civil case against Burakou for the "illegal production" of media products in connection with an article that appeared on the website of *Deutsche Welle*, which was not accredited in the country. A local human rights defender told the independent media outlet Belapan that authorities harassed Burakou because of his complaints against police officers. On October 8, a court in Mahilyou fined Burakou six million rubles (\$560) for cooperating with *Deutsche Welle*.

On September 25, a court in Babruisk fined Maryna Malchanava, a *Bobruysky Kuryer* reporter, 4.8 million rubles (\$450) for working for foreign media without accreditation. Authorities charged Malchanava with writing for the Poland-based Belsat TV website.

On October 20, police detained for an hour political opposition leader and poet Uladzimir Niakliaeu, cameraman Ales Lubenchuk, and freelance journalist Mariya Artsybashava. The two were filming Niakliaeu reading poems in a public park.

On November 25, authorities reportedly detained independent journalist Aliaksandr Alesin but without any official, public confirmation. On December 8, authorities informed his family that he was in KGB custody and faced charges of espionage and treason. On December 10, authorities released Alesin from KGB detention on his own recognizance but forbade him from leaving Minsk. Authorities dropped the treason charge against him but maintained charges of cooperating with foreign intelligence sources, which carry a maximum penalty of two years' imprisonment. The case remained pending at year's end.

On December 2, Hrodna-based independent journalist Andrei Mialeshka was fined six million rubles (\$560) on charges of illegally producing and distributing publications. This was his third fine during the year in addition to 4.5 million ruble (\$440) and 5.25 million ruble (\$495) fines for writing articles for the Polish Radio Racyja.

On December 18, authorities in Biaroza fined freelance journalist Tamara Shchapiotkina 4.5 million rubles (\$420) for writing for Radio Racyja. On December 24, authorities in Brest fined independent journalist Ales Liauchuk six million rubles (\$560) for working for a foreign media outlet without accreditation.

Censorship or Content Restrictions: The government obliged the vast majority of publications to exercise self-censorship. The government tightly controlled the content of state broadcast and print media. Local independent television stations operated in some areas and reported local news, although most were under government pressure to forgo reporting on national and sensitive issues or risk censorship.

Authorities allowed only state-run radio and the state-run television networks to broadcast nationwide. The government continued to use its monopoly of television and radio broadcasting to disseminate its version of events and minimize all opposing viewpoints. Authorities banned state media from citing works and broadcasting music by independent local and well-known foreign musicians, artists, writers, and painters who were named on an alleged, unofficial nationwide "blacklist" for speaking in support of political prisoners and opposition or democratic activists.

Local authorities reportedly warned independent editors and journalists to avoid reporting on certain topics and not to criticize the government. Authorities occasionally harassed bloggers for the same reasons. Authorities also warned

businesses not to advertise in newspapers that criticized the government. As a result independent media outlets operated under severe budgetary constraints.

Journalists reporting for international media that gave extensive coverage to the country, such as the Warsaw-based independent satellite channel Belsat TV and Radio Racyja, were unable to receive press accreditation and thus continued to receive warnings from the Prosecutor's Office or receive heavy fines.

Authorities issued warnings to at least six independent and freelance journalists for working without accreditation. For example, on June 10, the Brest prosecutors' office issued a warning to Maksim Khliabets for working for the Radio Racyja without accreditation. In March, Khliabets was summoned to security services and reported that officers attempted to recruit him.

Libel Laws/National Security: Libel is a criminal offense. There are large fines and prison sentences of up to four years for defaming or insulting the president. Penalties for defamation of character make no distinction between private and public persons. A public figure who is criticized for poor performance while in office may sue both the journalist and the media outlet that disseminated the critical report.

On March 17, a court in Babruisk fined local blogger Aleh Zhalnou 5.85 million rubles (\$550) for posting on YouTube a video of a local senior police official meeting with local residents.

Authorities frequently cited national security as grounds for censorship of media.

Internet Freedom

The government continued to interfere with internet freedom by reportedly actively monitoring e-mail and internet chat rooms. While individuals, groups, and publications were generally able to engage in the peaceful expression of views via the internet, including by e-mail, all who did so risked possible legal and personal repercussions and at times were believed to practice self-censorship. Opposition activists faced the likelihood that their e-mails and other web-based communications would be monitored.

On December 20, Lukashenka signed media law amendments making news websites and any internet information sources subject to the same regulations as print media. Under the amended law, online news providers must remove content

and publish corrections if ordered by the authorities and must adhere to a prohibition against “extremist” information. Authorities may block access to the sites that fail to obey government orders or based on a single violation of distributing prohibited information without a prosecutor’s or court’s mandate. The amended law also mandates the creation of a database of news websites. If a news website receives two or more formal warnings from the authorities, it may be removed from the database and lose its right to distribute information. Amendments also prohibit foreign states and foreign individuals from holding more than 20 percent in local media companies. The amendments were set to go into effect in 2015.

On December 19, access to several independent news websites, including *onliner.by*, *belapan.com*, *belapan.by*, *naviny.by*, *charter97.org*, *gazetaby.com*, *zautra.by*, *belaruspartisan.org*, *udf.by*, and *21.by*, was blocked; however, with the exception of *onliner.by*, authorities did not publicly claim responsibility for the blockage or launch an investigation. Information Minister Liliya Ananich warned independent media outlets against “inciting panic” amid ongoing currency devaluations. At year’s end at least three news websites remained blocked.

The independent online news portal TUT.by reported that as of October the number of internet users reached approximately 4.9 million persons or approximately 52 percent of the population. More than 60 percent of those using the internet did so daily, and the level of internet penetration was approximately 71 percent among users 15 to 74 years of age.

The authorities reportedly monitored internet traffic. By law the telecommunications monopoly, Beltelekam, and other organizations authorized by the government have the exclusive right to maintain internet domains.

A 2010 presidential edict requires registration of service providers and internet websites, establishes restrictions on access to sites containing “extremist activity” (which many activists believed could be interpreted to include government opponents), and requires the collection of information on users at internet cafes. It requires service providers to store data on the internet use of individuals for a year and provide that information to law enforcement agencies upon their request. Violations of the edict are punishable by prison sentences.

The edict restricts access to websites whose content includes “extremist activities”; materials related to illicit weapons, explosives, and drugs; trafficking in persons; pornography; and the promotion of violence. It requires service providers to

eliminate access to these subjects from government offices, educational facilities, and cultural institutions if ordered to do so by the KGB, prosecutor general, the Presidential Administration's Operation and Analytical Center, or other state agencies. The edict does not block access from private sites such as homes or private companies. According to credible sources, the list, which authorities did not release publicly, contained approximately 80 websites in 2013, including opposition portals Charter 97 and Belarusian Partisan. Authorities required internet service providers to update the list on a daily basis. Decisions to restrict access to internet sources may be appealed to the courts.

State companies and organizations, which included the workplaces of 80 percent of the country's workers, reportedly had internet filters. In response to the government's interference and internet restrictions, many opposition groups and independent newspapers switched to internet domains operating outside the country. Observers said the few remaining independent media sites with domestic ".BY" (Belarus) domain suffixes practiced self-censorship at times.

In December 2013 the prosecutor general, responding to an inquiry by the human rights organization Vyasna, stated the government blocked the Vyasna website on computers at government buildings and other official institutions because the group was not registered, which rendered its activities illegal.

On several occasions cyberattacks of unknown origin temporarily disabled independent news portals and social networking sites.

According to the opposition news portal Charter97, Beltelekam blocked access to the website for customers of a number of internet providers across the country for several hours on August 14. On October 15, the news portal stated their website was subjected to an attempted cyberattack.

The government continued to collect and obtain personally identifiable information on independent journalists and democratic activists during raids and by confiscating computer equipment.

Academic Freedom and Cultural Events

The government restricted academic freedom and cultural events. Educational institutions were required to teach an official state ideology that combined reverence for the achievements of the former Soviet Union and Belarus under the leadership of Lukashenka. Use of the word "academic" was restricted, and NGOs

were prohibited from including the word “academy” in their titles. Opportunities to receive a higher education in the Belarusian language in the majority of fields of study were scarce. The administrations of higher educational institutions made no effort to accommodate students wishing to study in Belarusian-language classes.

Authorities harassed, intimidated, and dismissed teachers and professors on political grounds. For example, in January university officials did not re-elect Ina Sorkina, associate professor of history at Hrodna State University, to an associate professor position, which she viewed as politically motivated. The election was held early due to a restructuring of the Belarusian history department and resulted in severing her association with the university. Sorkina had actively protested earlier politically motivated dismissals of her colleagues, in promoting wider use and teaching in the Belarusian language at schools.

In December, Hrdona State University refused to extend an employment agreement with Sviatlana Kul-Sialverstava, a professor of history also teaching at a school in Poland, on grounds of allegedly not complying with her job requirements and failing to publish her works on history annually. The university notified professor of archeology Genadz Semianchuk, one of the leading archeologists in the country and author of various textbooks on archeology, that his employment agreement would not be extended after December 27.

Government-mandated textbooks contained a heavily propagandized version of history and other subjects. Authorities obligated all schools, including private institutions, to follow state directives to inculcate the official ideology and could not be led by opposition members. The education minister has the right to appoint and dismiss the heads of private educational institutions.

The Belarusian Republican Youth Union (BRYU), an official organization modeled on the Soviet-era Komsomol, urged university students to join the BRYU to receive benefits and dormitory rooms. Local authorities also pressured BRYU members to campaign on behalf of government candidates. Additionally, authorities at times reportedly pressured students to act as informants for the country’s security services.

According to an Education Ministry directive, educational institutions may expel students who engage in antigovernment or unsanctioned political activity and must ensure the proper ideological education of students. School officials, however, cited poor academic performance or absence from classes as the official reason for expulsions. According to Ina Kulei, chairperson of the unregistered Committee for

Assistance to the Repressed “Solidarity,” authorities expelled at least 12 students from universities on political grounds during the year, including for participating in the March local elections.

The government continued to discourage and prevent teachers and democratic activists from advancing the wider use of the Belarusian language and the preservation of Belarusian culture. For example, a number of universities across the country continued not to enroll students in their undergraduate Belarusian linguistic programs for teachers of the Belarusian language and literature, citing low demand and a low number of applications in recent years.

The government also restricted cultural events. For example, authorities selectively approved performances of what they deemed as opposition music groups at small concert halls, which required groups to go through cumbersome and time-consuming procedures to receive permissions. It continued to force some opposition theater and music groups out of public venues and into bars and private apartments by banning their performances.

Authorities also suppressed unofficial commemorations of historical events. In January 2013 Lukashenka stated that he was not aware of any blacklist for musicians or artists. He suggested that authorities punished musicians for “spitting on the country” and accused them of accepting payments from outside groups.

On May 12, Minsk city ideology officers banned punk band Amaroka from performing at a night club in Minsk on the grounds that their lyrics could pose a threat to national security and public order, violate human rights, and be of an extremist nature. On July 8, Minsk city authorities refused an application for prominent singer and songwriter Zmitser Vaitsushkevich to hold a concert on September 11. Authorities stated that he was “controversial.” Nevertheless, authorities allowed Vaitsushkevich, who had been banned from performing since 2011 for supporting an opposition presidential candidate in 2010, to perform at a large venue on October 29 following prior scrutiny of his lyrics and approval for each song to be performed. The official permission notice stated Vaitsushkevich’s works “can be allowed for distribution in the country.” Nevertheless, on December 12, authorities prevented Vaitsushkevich from performing at a large concert hall in Minsk.

The government also restricted the activities of a nonofficial writers union, the independent Union of Belarusian Writers, and extensively supported the progovernment Union of Writers of Belarus. Authorities harassed distributors of

books authored by critical and independent writers or written in the Belarusian language.

On October 23, Lukashenka invited the heads of the independent Union of Belarusian Writers and the pro-regime Union of Writers of Belarus, as well as the Belarusian PEN Center chairman, to a televised meeting on literature. He told his interlocutors that “no one dictates what and how to write” and claimed that there was “no censorship and no state monopoly on printing books.”

In 2013 a commission of experts ruled that Ales Byalyatski’s book about Belarusian literature, which he wrote in detention, “caus[ed] harm to the image of Belarus” and its political interests. Customs officers in Ashmyany had confiscated 40 copies of the book from Byalyatski’s associate Tatsyana Ravyaka and forwarded them to the commission for examination. On February 11, a court in Ashmyany denied Ravyaka’s appeal seeking to return copies of the book and lift the ban on the book’s distribution in the country. At year’s end the book remained banned from distribution in the country.

On October 13, customs officers confiscated 20 copies of books written by Zianon Pazniak, emigre opposition leader, from Pavel Sevyarynets, co-chair of the unregistered Belarusian Christian Democracy, at a border with Poland. Authorities told him that the books would be sent to local authorities for an examination in terms of any extremism content.

On October 23, police detained Viktor Martsinovich, deputy editor of the independent weekly *Belgazeta* and well-known writer, during a presentation of his book *Mova* (Language) in Hrodna. According to Martsinovich authorities accused him of “organizing an unsanctioned event,” and he received a legal “evaluation” on his case. No charges followed.

On December 17, the tax ministry imposed on Ihar Lohvinaw’s publishing house a penalty of one billion rubles (\$93,000) for “unlicensed retailing.” Lohvinaw has applied eight times for a license since authorities ordered him to obtain one in January. Authorities refused his request each time. In 2013 the Information Ministry revoked the Lohvinaw Publishing House’s license over the publication of the 2011 *Belarus Press Photo* book, which the authorities determined to be “extremist material.”

b. Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and Association

Freedom of Assembly

The constitution provides for freedom of peaceful assembly; however, the government severely restricted this right. Only registered political parties, trade unions, and NGOs could request permission to hold a demonstration of more than 1,000 persons. Authorities usually denied requests by independent and opposition groups. A general atmosphere of repression and the threat of imprisonment exercised a chilling effect on potential protest organizers. This appeared to have resulted in fewer and smaller demonstrations.

The law criminalizes participation in the activities of unregistered NGOs, training persons to demonstrate, financing public demonstrations, or soliciting foreign assistance “to the detriment” of the country. In 2011 the law was amended to prohibit also announcing demonstrations, including via the internet or social networks, before authorities approved them. Violations are punishable by up to three years in prison.

Authorities employed a variety of means to discourage demonstrations, disperse them, minimize their effect, and punish the participants. Organizers must apply at least 15 days in advance for permission to conduct a public demonstration, rally, or meeting, and government officials are required to respond no later than five days prior to the scheduled event. Authorities, however, generally refused permits to opposition groups or granted permits only for demonstrations held far from city centers. Authorities used intimidation and threats to discourage persons from participating in demonstrations, openly videotaped participants, and imposed heavy fines or jail sentences on participants in unsanctioned demonstrations.

In April authorities rejected numerous applications for permission for human rights activists to stage demonstrations in support of political prisoners and call for their release in 10 cities across the country.

On May 8, Minsk city authorities rejected applications from a number of opposition groups for permission to stage a march for independence in central Minsk on May 14, citing that organizers had publicly announced its date without a prior permission from authorities.

On many occasions police and other security officials detained demonstrators before, during, and after unsanctioned peaceful demonstrations and major public events (see section 1.d.). Numerous protest participants were detained, fined, and sentenced to periods of up to 25 days in administrative detention. Authorities fined

opposition activists and members of NGOs for participating in unauthorized protests.

Police also suppressed small authorized demonstrations.

Police used preemptive arrest and detention to prevent democratic activists' participation in protests. Authorities took various measures to deter prodemocracy activists from celebrating the March 25 anniversary of the country's 1918 declaration of independence (an event the government does not recognize), although Minsk city authorities authorized the demonstration. For example, authorities in Brest detained local Belarusian Christian Democracy Party activists Heorhi Dzmitruk and Zmitser Shurkhai for five hours after traffic police stopped them on their way to Minsk. This detention prevented their participation in the demonstration. Officers released them after testing them for alcohol and searching their vehicle.

Authorities arrested a number of activists ahead of the government-sanctioned Chernobyl commemoration march on April 26. Courts in Minsk sentenced former political prisoner Aliaksandr Frantskevich to 25 days in jail for allegedly resisting police and using foul language. Authorities detained Frantskevich as well as other activists, including Aliaksandr Stepanenko, Vladimir Sergeyeu, Ilya Dabratvor, Maksim Viniarski, and Zmitser Dashkevich, prior to the demonstration and sentenced them to up to 25 days in jail to prevent their participation.

On December 24, authorities fined Yuras Belenki, co-chair of the Conservative Christian Party, 3.75 million rubles (\$350) for violating "mass events regulations" and failing to compensate for police presence at demonstrations. Although Belenki received official permission from local authorities for holding demonstrations to commemorate Remembrance of Ancestors Day on November 2 and 9, he was fined three million rubles (\$280) on November 17 and 4.5 million rubles (\$420) on November 28 on similar charges.

Authorities prevented any activity to commemorate the fourth anniversary of the 2010 repression of postelection demonstrations and the continued detention of political prisoners. On December 20, authorities fined opposition activist Volha Mikalaychyk 2.25 million rubles (\$210) for participating in a gathering commemorating it.

Freedom of Association

The law provides for freedom of association, but the government restricted it and selectively enforced laws and registration regulations to restrict the operation of independent associations that might criticize the government.

On February 20, authorities introduced minor amendments to the law on public associations that did not relax any registration or other requirements. All NGOs, political parties, and trade unions must receive prior approval from the Ministry of Justice to register. A government commission reviews and approves all registration applications; it based its decisions largely on political and ideological compatibility with official views and practices. Actual registration procedures required applicants to provide the number and names of founders, along with a physical address in a nonresidential building for an office, an extraordinary burden in view of the tight financial straits of most NGOs, and individual property owners' fears of renting space to independent groups. Individuals listed as members were vulnerable to reprisal. The government's refusal to rent office space to unregistered organizations and the expense of renting private space reportedly forced most organizations to use residential addresses, which could serve as a reason for deregistration. The law bans all activity by unregistered groups and subjects group members to penalties ranging from heavy fines to two years in prison (also see section 7.a.).

Following the 2010 repression, authorities sought to close any "legal loopholes" they considered beneficial to NGOs. For example, the law on public associations prohibits NGOs from keeping funds for local activities at foreign financial institutions. The law also prohibits NGOs from facilitating provision of any support or benefits from foreign states to civil servants based on their political or religious views or ethnicity, a provision widely believed to be aimed at the Polish minority.

Only registered NGOs can legally accept foreign grants and technical aid. NGOs must receive approval from the Department for Humanitarian Affairs of the Presidential Administration before they can accept such funds or register the grants.

The government continued to deny registration to NGOs and political parties, which Lukashenka frequently labeled as "the fifth column," on a variety of pretexts, including "technical" problems with applications. Authorities frequently harassed and intimidated individuals who identified themselves as founding members of organizations in an effort to induce them to abandon their membership and thus deprive groups of the number of petitioners necessary for registration.

Many of the rejected groups previously had been denied registration on multiple occasions.

On January 8, the Brest regional justice office denied registration to the NGO Brest Christian Democrats. This was the NGO's second registration attempt. In denying the application, authorities cited that the name was purportedly inappropriate for an NGO.

On August 3, the Justice Ministry denied registration to a newly established human rights group called Movement for the Implementation of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. The ministry cited two minor misprints as a reason for the denial. On September 30, in an appeal ruling, the Supreme Court upheld the registration denial.

On December 12, the Minsk regional justice department denied registration to the regional organization of Belarusian Christian Democracy, which sought registration as an NGO named Christian Democrats of the Minsk Region.

Authorities continued to issue written warnings to NGOs, political parties, and trade unions, as well as to their members. For example, on April 7, the justice ministry warned the United Civic Party that the party must comply with laws regulating organization of mass events and demonstrations (see also section 3, Political Parties and Political Participation).

Harassment in the form of inspections by security officials and confiscation of political literature continued.

c. Freedom of Religion

See the Department of State's *International Religious Freedom Report* at www.state.gov/religiousfreedomreport/.

d. Freedom of Movement, Internally Displaced Persons, Protection of Refugees, and Stateless Persons

The law provides for freedom of movement, including the right to emigrate, but the government at times restricted the right of its citizens to foreign travel, in particular former political prisoners. The government cooperated with the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and other humanitarian organizations

in providing protection and assistance to internally displaced persons, refugees, returning refugees, asylum seekers, stateless persons, and other persons of concern.

In-country Movement: Passports serve as a form of national identity document and were required for permanent housing, work, and hotel registration. Police continued to harass selectively individuals who lived at a location other than their legal place of residence indicated in mandatory stamps in their passports.

The law also requires persons who travel to areas within 15 miles of the border (aside from authorized crossing points) to obtain an entrance pass.

Foreign Travel: The government maintained a database of persons banned from traveling abroad. According to the latest available information from the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the list contained the names of at least 130,000 persons who authorities prohibited from foreign travel, including those who possessed state secrets, faced criminal prosecution or civil suits, or had outstanding financial obligations. Authorities informed some persons by letter that their names were in the database; others learned only at border crossings. In certain cases opposition activists either were turned away at the border or detained for lengthy searches. For example, on June 12, border officials detained Young Front activist Ivan Shyla for a two-and-a-half-hour search when crossing the Belarus-Poland border. Officials seized his passport and subjected him to a search before releasing him without charge.

In July 2012 Lukashenka issued orders to ban persons under the KGB's special "preventive" surveillance from traveling abroad. Based on results of preliminary criminal investigations or searches, the KGB is authorized to monitor persons whose activities "may threaten the national security of Belarus, inflict damage to state or public interests, rights, freedoms, and legitimate interests of individuals" and "may result in committing subsequent crimes." The Internal Affairs Ministry and security agencies, border and customs services, and financial investigation departments have a right to place persons on "preventive" surveillance lists.

Authorities amended a 2012 presidential decree so heads of educational institutions may issue their students the required permission to study abroad, replacing the previous requirement that students acquire the minister of education's permission. The decree, ostensibly intended to counter trafficking in persons, still requires the Ministry of Internal Affairs to track citizens working abroad and obliges employment agencies to report individuals who do not return from abroad as scheduled.

Exile: The law does not allow forced exile, but sources asserted that security forces continued to threaten some opposition members with bodily harm or prosecution if they did not leave the country, and many were in self-imposed exile. Khimiya, a form of internal exile, is permitted for persons convicted of crimes, and authorities employed it during the year.

Many university students who had been expelled or believed they were under threat of expulsion for their political activities opted for self-imposed exile.

Protection of Refugees

Access to Asylum: The law provides for the granting of asylum or refugee status, and the government has established a system for providing protection to refugees.

While all foreigners have the right to apply for asylum, authorities did not grant Russian nationals either refugee status or complementary protection in the country. Under the terms of the Union Treaty with Russia, Russians can legally settle and obtain residence permits in the country based on their Russian citizenship and therefore do not need asylum. As of October 1, 14 Russian nationals applied for asylum, one of which was withdrawn by the applicant. Overall, as of October 1, immigration authorities accepted 644 applications for asylum compared with 208 in 2013, including 497 from Ukrainians, 58 Syrians, and 28 Afghani nationals.

Refoulement: In addition to refugee status, the country's asylum law provides for complementary protection and protection against refoulement (in the form of temporary residence for a one-year term). During the year at least one person was granted nonrefoulement protection, and six persons were able to extend protection against refoulement for one year.

Refugee Abuse: Asylum seekers have freedom of movement within the country but must reside in the region where they filed their applications for refugee status and in a place known to authorities while their applications are being considered, including during an appeals procedure. Authorities reportedly often encouraged asylum seekers to settle in rural areas; however, the majority settled in cities and towns. Change of residence was possible with a following notification to authorities. Authorities issue registered asylum seekers certificates that serve as identification documents and protect them from expulsion in the valid capacity of asylum seekers. In accordance with the law, they also must register with local authorities of their place of residence.

Temporary Protection: Although the government in the past provided temporary protection to individuals who may not qualify as refugees, it did not do so during the year.

Stateless Persons

As of July 1, the UNHCR listed 6,606 stateless persons in the country; all had permanent residence according to authorities.

Permanently resident stateless persons held residence permits and were treated comparably to citizens in terms of access to employment, with the exception of a limited number of positions in the public sector and law enforcement that were available only to citizens. Stateless persons, however, occasionally faced discrimination in employment, since authorities often encouraged them to settle in rural areas where the range of employment opportunities was limited. According to the UNHCR, stateless persons could freely change their region of residence.

Section 3. Respect for Political Rights: The Right of Citizens to Change Their Government

The law provides the ability of citizens to change their government through the ability to vote in free and fair elections, but the government consistently denied citizens this ability by not conducting elections in line with international standards.

Since his election in 1994 to a four-year term as the country's first president, Lukashenka steadily consolidated power in the executive branch to dominate all branches of government, effectively ending any separation of powers among the branches. Flawed referenda in 1996 and 2004 amended the constitution to broaden his powers, extend his term in office, and remove presidential term limits. Subsequent presidential elections, including the one held in 2010, continued to deny citizens the right to express their will to choose among opposing candidates in an honest and transparent process with fair access to independent media and resources.

Elections and Political Participation

Recent Elections: The 2010 presidential election was marred by numerous violations of procedures and an absence of transparency and accountability that led the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe's (OSCE) Office for

Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) observer mission to report that the country still had “a considerable way to go in meeting its international commitments.” OSCE/ODIHR observers assessed the vote count as “bad or very bad in almost half of all observed polling stations,” with clear instances of ballot stuffing and tampering. Although opposition candidates enjoyed somewhat greater freedom to enter the race and promote their candidacies than in earlier elections, pre-election campaigning remained extremely limited, and government harassment of independent newspapers, opposition political parties, and independent NGOs throughout the year limited the opposition’s ability to mount effective campaigns.

According to the OSCE/ODIHR mission, broadcasters nationwide devoted 90 percent of their political coverage to Lukashenka, and coverage of opposition candidates was overwhelmingly negative. Despite a nominal increase in opposition representation, authorities continued to exclude opposition representatives from election commissions at all levels. The majority of observers at local polling places appeared to be from government-sponsored NGOs. Many of them received instructions in advance to report to foreign observers that the proceedings were “in order” or to harass independent observers.

The most serious violations took place after the polls closed, when, as the OSCE/ODIHR mission observed, the situation “deteriorated significantly.” In many instances international observers reported that authorities conducted counting silently and at a distance from observers, which prevented evaluation of the count. There were a number of reports that vote totals changed as authorities transported the ballot boxes between local precincts and the territorial election commission offices. Although no independent organizations were permitted to conduct exit polls, the NGO For Fair Elections stated that Lukashenka failed to gain the 50 percent of the vote necessary to avoid a runoff in the 250 polling stations it monitored. The official results gave him 79.65 percent of the vote against nine other candidates.

Elections in the lower house of the National Assembly took place in September 2012. There were no opposition parties in the National Assembly. The final report by the OSCE/ODIHR mission stated that the elections fell significantly short of international standards for democratic elections and repeated the same shortcomings encountered in the 2010 elections. The report stated that, despite some improvements to the electoral law, authorities did not respect many OSCE commitments, including citizens’ rights to associate, run as candidates, and express themselves freely. The government also did not administer the elections in an impartial manner, especially regarding the composition of election commissions;

an honest vote count could not be assured; and the complaints and appeals process did not assure an effective remedy.

In December 2013 several new amendments to the electoral code took effect. The amendments introduce a simple majority system in the first round of elections for the National Assembly. They also end the government practice of providing public funds for printing candidates' campaign materials while increasing the allowable amount of private campaign funds. Additionally, the amendments prohibit citizens from campaigning to disrupt elections and referendums or to have them cancelled or postponed, that is, call for a boycott. Other changes include regulations on who can appeal for a vote recount and what type of questions can be put to public referendum. Some members of the democratic opposition alleged that the amendments disproportionately targeted their candidates and activities since they have little access to private funds given Lukashenka's public statements that business should not finance the opposition or face punishment.

Local elections took place on March 23, and local human rights groups judged them to be neither free nor fair. Local human rights organizations observed and reported on a number of violations, including the general atmosphere of control by the government, exclusion of opposition and civil society representatives from electoral commissions, refusals of registrations of opposition candidates to run, unequal opportunities for campaigning for state-supported and independent or opposition candidates and harassment of the latter, inflated turnout of voters, and nontransparent tabulation that was not visible to independent observers.

Political Parties and Political Participation: Authorities routinely harassed and impeded the activities of opposition political parties and activists. Some opposition parties lacked legal status because authorities refused to register them, and the government routinely interfered with the right to organize, run for election, seek votes, and publicize views. The government allowed approximately half a dozen largely inactive, but officially registered pro-Lukashenka political parties to operate freely, although they appeared to be little more than fig leaves for a system that, in effect, excluded party politics.

The law allows authorities to suspend parties for six months after one warning and close them after two. On April 7, the Justice Ministry warned the United Civic Party that the party and its members should "rigorously" comply with laws regulating organization of mass events and demonstrations. In its letter the ministry cited references to online reports of party members being held liable for holding unsanctioned demonstrations or pickets. The letter also read that by law

the Supreme Court can shut the party for a single violation of laws on mass events. No further actions were taken against the party. During the year other political parties did not receive any formal warnings, but members of parties that authorities refused to register, such as the Belarus Christian Democracy Party, continued to be subjected to harassment and arbitrary checks. The law also prohibits political parties from receiving support from abroad and requires all political groups and coalitions to register with the Ministry of Justice.

Authorities continued to harass the unrecognized Union of Poles of Belarus and its members. On September 28, authorities briefly detained for at least three hours leaders of the union, Anzhalika Borys and Mechyslau Yaskevich, at a border with Poland and reportedly made photocopies of all their documents and other printed materials, including personal notebooks.

Ongoing restrictions on civil society organizations' ability to associate and advocate impeded their ability to monitor and comment on the elections process and restrictions on voter registration.

Participation of Women and Minorities: There were no laws preventing women or minorities from voting or participating in political life on the same basis as men or nonminority citizens.

In the lower house of the National Assembly, women held 29 of the 109 seats. In the upper house, women held 20 of the 58 seats. Women led two of the 24 government ministries, and a woman was a deputy prime minister. A woman also headed the Central Election Committee. Data on the participation of members of minorities in government was not available.

Section 4. Corruption and Lack of Transparency in Government

The law provides criminal penalties for official corruption, and the government regularly jailed officials alleged to be corrupt, but reports indicated that officials continued to engage in corrupt practices. The World Bank's Worldwide Governance Indicators reflected that corruption was a serious problem in the country.

Corruption: According to official sources, most corruption cases involved soliciting and accepting bribes, fraud, and abuse of power, although anecdotal evidence indicated such corruption usually did not occur as part of day-to-day interaction between citizens and minor state officials.

The absence of an independent judicial system and law enforcement, the lack of separation of powers, and a harried independent press barred largely from interaction with a nontransparent state bureaucracy made it virtually impossible to gauge the scale of corruption or combat it effectively.

The Prosecutor General's Office is responsible for organizing and coordinating activities to combat corruption, including monitoring law enforcement operations, analyzing efficacy of implemented measures, supervising engaged parties, and drafting further legislation.

As of December 2013 the Prosecutor General's Office reported that the government registered 2,301 corruption crimes, an increase of 29.3 percent year-on-year. The most corrupt sectors were state administration, industrial sector, construction industry, health-care, and educational sectors.

The Ministry of Internal Affairs reported 632 cases of bribery between January and September, a decrease of 42.7 percent compared with the same period in 2013, and 256 cases of abuse of power, an increase of 8 percent compared with the same period in 2013.

There were numerous corruption prosecutions during the year, but prosecutions remained selective, nontransparent, and appeared (in some cases) politically motivated. For example, on April 22, authorities sentenced Viktor Pilipets, a former mayor of Homyel, to five years in jail on charges of abuse of power in a case connected to illegal distribution of real estate at discounted prices to friends and family.

Financial Disclosure: Anticorruption laws require income and asset disclosure by appointed and elected officials, their spouses, and members of households who have reached legal age and continue to live with them in the same household. According to the law, specialized anticorruption departments within the Prosecutor General's Office, the KGB, and the Internal Affairs Ministry monitor and verify anticorruption practices, and the prosecutor general and all other prosecutors are mandated to oversee the enforcement of anticorruption law. These declarations were not made available to the public. An exception applies to candidates running in presidential, parliamentary, and municipal elections. There are administrative sanctions and disciplinary penalties for noncompliance.

Public Access to Information: The law, government policies, and a presidential decree severely restricted public access to government information. Citizens had some access to certain categories of information on government databases and websites, but much of the information was neither current nor complete.

Section 5. Governmental Attitude Regarding International and Nongovernmental Investigation of Alleged Violations of Human Rights

There were a number of active domestic human rights NGOs, although authorities were often hostile to their efforts, did not cooperate with them, and were not responsive to their views.

Two prominent human rights NGOs--the Belarusian Helsinki Committee and the Center for Legal Transformations--remained registered. The government refused to register NGOs, thus placing them at risk under the criminal code, which criminalizes organizing or participating in any activity by an unregistered organization. The law also prohibits persons from acting on behalf of unregistered NGOs. A variety of unregistered NGOs, including Vyasna, the Solidarity Committee for the Protection of the Repressed, and Legal Assistance to the Population continued to operate in spite of systematic harassment from authorities.

Authorities harassed both registered and unregistered NGOs, subjected them to frequent inspections and threats of deregistration, and reportedly monitored their correspondence and telephone conversations. Authorities harassed family members of NGO leaders and civil society activists. The government ignored reports issued by human rights NGOs and rarely met with them. State-run media did not report on human rights NGOs and their actions.

On November 5, migration and citizenship authorities ordered Alena Tankachova, a Russian citizen, to leave the country and stated she would not be permitted to return for three years. Tankachova, the chair of the Legal Transformation Center (also called Lawtrend), had been a permanent resident for 30 years. Authorities accused Tankachova of traffic-regulation violations and stated she posed a threat to the national security of Belarus. Local human rights organizations asserted the case was politically motivated and that she was being expelled for her human rights work. Tankachova filed a complaint with the Minsk city police, which police rejected on December 17. Tankachova subsequently filed a complaint with a court, and her case remained pending at year's end.

Authorities can close an NGO after issuing only one warning that it violated the law. The most common pretexts prompting a warning or closure were failure to obtain a legal address and technical discrepancies in application documents. The law allows authorities to close an NGO for accepting what it considered illegal forms of foreign assistance and permits the Ministry of Justice to participate in any NGO activity and to review all NGO documents. NGOs also must submit detailed reports annually to the ministry about their activities, office locations, officers, and total numbers of members.

During the year authorities denied registration to the Lida-based cultural and educational NGO Spadchyna as well as subsequent appeals challenging the denial. The owner of the facilities that the NGO planned to rent for their activities, a requirement for legal registration, refused to rent the property to them, reportedly due to pressure by local authorities.

A 2008 presidential order increased rent 10-fold for most NGOs. Prior to the order, NGOs paid one euro (\$1.25) per square foot of office space, compared with 10 euros (\$12.50) charged to commercial groups. While some groups, including youth sports groups, charity organizations, and children's arts centers, continued to pay rent at the reduced rate, independent NGOs were required to pay the higher rate. The higher rents forced some NGOs to close or move. In 2010 a senior state property committee member stated that to be eligible for discounted rent rates, an NGO must actively support government policies.

In 2013 the rent rate for the Francisak Skaryna Belarusian Language Society in Minsk rose by 60 percent after the Council of Ministers did not include the NGO on a list of groups entitled to low office rent rates. The list contained 195 NGOs, mostly connected to sports activities and charitable groups.

In 2012 the unregistered human rights NGO Vyasna was forced to abandon its office of 12 years, which was confiscated as part of the court sentence against its leader, Ales Byalyatski. The group used Byalyatski's apartment as an office because it was not able to rent property without being registered.

During the year the Belarusian Helsinki Committee's accounts remained blocked due to tax arrears. In 2008 the Supreme Court allowed the Ministry of Justice to withdraw a petition to suspend the BHC's activities. Nevertheless, at year's end the NGO's bank accounts remained blocked, and alleged tax arrears remained unresolved.

Authorities were reluctant to engage on human rights problems with international NGOs and other human rights officials, and international NGO representatives often had difficulty gaining admission to the country.

Authorities routinely ignored local and international NGO recommendations on improving human rights in the country and requests to stop harassing the NGO community.

The United Nations or Other International Bodies: In 2010 a Foreign Ministry spokesman announced there were “no objective reasons” for extending the mandate of the OSCE office in Minsk, despite the fact that the mandate of the office had not been fulfilled. The government claimed that the OSCE mandate “has been fulfilled” and pointed to the earlier closure of OSCE missions in neighboring countries. In October 2013 a Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson stated that the government was not considering the possibility of reopening the Minsk OSCE office.

In June the UN Human Rights Council extended the mandate of Miklos Haraszti as the special rapporteur on the human rights situation in Belarus. During the year Haraszti released two reports on the situation of human rights in the country. Prior to his reappointment, a senior foreign ministry official stated in February that Haraszti could not be a part of “a constructive dialogue” with authorities and his appointment was made “without consultations and approval from Belarusian authorities.” In June the foreign ministry spokesperson reaffirmed that authorities did not recognize the special rapporteur’s mandate and would refuse any cooperation with the special rapporteur’s mission, and consequently he was not permitted to travel to the country. At the same time, on July 24, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson stated that the government extended invitations to various UN human rights bodies’ special rapporteurs, including the special rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, and was ready to accommodate their visits at any time.

Government Human Rights Bodies: A standing commission on human rights in the lower chamber of parliament was ineffective.

Section 6. Discrimination, Societal Abuses, and Trafficking in Persons

The law prohibits discrimination based on race, gender, language, or social status, but the government did not always enforce these prohibitions.

Women

Rape and Domestic Violence: The law criminalizes rape in general but does not include separate provisions on marital rape. Rape was a problem, but most women did not report it due to shame or fear that police would blame the victim.

According to the Ministry of Internal Affairs, there were 102 registered cases of rape or attempted rape from January to September, the same number as in the same period in 2013.

Domestic violence was a significant problem, and the government took measures to prevent it during the year. In 2011 the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights raised grave concerns about the persistence of violence against women, in particular domestic and sexual violence, its underreporting, the lack of prosecution of violence within the family, the fact that rape was subject to private rather than official prosecution, and the lack of shelters for victims of domestic violence.

State-run district centers for social services across the country ran 94 shelter-type crisis rooms for victims as of July 1, including domestic violence victims, and there were at least four more shelters for victims of domestic violence run by NGOs, including one located at a monastery and run by a religious group. Authorities reported in January-March that crisis rooms assisted 54 individuals, including 38 domestic violence victims; however, observers noted a lack of adequate training of social center staff, short-term sheltering, and limited working hours of the crisis rooms. On April 16, the government enforced a new law on preventing crimes, which contains a separate definition of domestic violence and provides for implementation of protective orders. Such orders, ranging from three to 30 days, are issued to abusers who have been charged with two counts of violence within one year. By law authorities have to provide victims and abusers with temporary accommodation until the orders expire. As of November 25, a senior police official reported that authorities issued 119 protective orders. In addition to the newly adopted law, the code on administrative offenses, amended in August 2013, prescribes a heavy fine or detention for up to 15 days for battery, intended infliction of pain, and psychological or physical suffering committed against a close family member. The criminal code does not contain a separate article dealing with domestic violence.

According to a study released by the UN Population Fund office on September 24, three out of four women and men between the ages of 18 and 60 claimed they were subjected to some form of violence in their families. Of this number, 76.2 percent

of women and 75.6 percent of men were subjected to psychological violence, and 36.5 percent of women and 27.9 percent of men to economic pressures. More than 31 percent of women and 24.8 percent of men suffered from physical violence, and 18.4 percent of women and 11.9 percent of men reported their partners sexually abused them. The majority of the survey participants (52.7 percent of women and 48.3 percent of men) described alcohol abuse as a primary cause of domestic violence. Additionally, 28.7 percent of women and 22.1 percent of men blamed aggressiveness and lack of anger management. Some 17.1 percent of men and 13.1 percent of women named financial problems, and 13.1 percent of men and 6 percent of women blamed the “provocative” actions of the victims. Women remained reluctant to report domestic violence due to fear of escalating the violence, reprisal, and social stigma--due to lack of confidence that they would be rendered appropriate and timely assistance. Moreover, they feared that if the aggressor were fined, the financial burden would fall on the family. Male victims of domestic violence did not report their cases due to their own guilt, feeling pity for their abuser, and due to fears of family disruptions. According to the study, 11.7 percent of male and 29.2 percent of female victims of domestic violence sought professional assistance. NGOs operated crisis shelters, primarily in Minsk, but they were poorly funded and received only limited support from the government.

Government efforts to combat gender-based violence mainly were directed at preventing such crimes and not at protecting or assisting victims, although crisis rooms provided limited psychological and medical assistance to victims. Authorities did not tackle the root causes of violence, including alcoholism, social stigma, and gender-based stereotypes.

At a press conference on May 15, a senior police official reported that every third resident in the country in domestic violence cases died of lethal bodily injuries inflicted by family members. In more than 85 percent of these cases, the perpetrator abused alcohol. The official also added that in April-May police registered 784 criminal cases related to domestic violence, including 30 cases of murder, 61 cases of severe bodily damage, and 30 cases of minor bodily injuries. Additionally, police investigated 13,000 administrative penalties related to domestic violence against family members. In January-April the officer reported police registered 4,859 offenses in connection to violence against a close family member under the code on administrative offenses.

At a press conference on November 25, a senior police official reported that women acted as aggressors in at least 10 percent of all domestic violence cases

across the country and perpetrated approximately 35 percent of murders and incidents of inflicting severe bodily damage. In the majority of these cases, women said they defended themselves and had been previously threatened with violence in their households. The official stated that authorities investigated 103 murders and 205 cases of premeditated bodily damage as of November.

Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting (FGM/C): The law does not prohibit FGM/C, but there were no reports that FGM/C was performed in the country.

Sexual Harassment: Sexual harassment reportedly was widespread, but no specific laws, other than those against physical assault, address the problem.

Reproductive Rights: Couples and individuals have the right to decide the number, spacing, and timing of children, and had the information and means to do so and the right to attain the highest standard of reproductive health free from discrimination. Access to information on contraception and skilled attendance at delivery and in postpartum care were widely available.

Discrimination: The law provides for equal treatment of women with regard to property ownership and inheritance, family law, and the judicial system, and the law was generally respected. The law requiring equal pay for equal work was not regularly enforced, and independent women's NGOs reported that women were paid at least 25 percent less than men.

The National Statistics Committee reported that, as of November 2013, 8,700 or 41.4 percent of unemployed persons were women, compared with 12,800 or 48.3 percent in November 2012. The committee also noted that on average men found new employment in one month, while women searched for more than two months. Women also accounted for two-thirds of all officially unemployed persons seeking a job for more than a year.

Very few women were in the upper ranks of management or government, and most women were concentrated in the lower-paid public sector. Women's groups also voiced concerns about the feminization of poverty, particularly among women with more than two children, female-headed households, women taking care of family members with disabilities or older family members, rural women, and older women.

Although the law grants women the right to three years of maternity leave with assurance of job availability upon return, employers often circumvented

employment protections by using short-term contracts, then refusing to renew a woman's contract when she became pregnant.

Children

Birth Registration: Citizenship is derived either by birth within the country's territory or from one's parents. A child of a citizen is a citizen regardless of place of birth, even if one of the parents is not a citizen. In general births were registered immediately.

Education: There continued to be isolated reports that non-Romani children and teachers harassed Romani children. The majority of Romani youth did not finish secondary school and failed to enroll in university programs, although the situation improved as more Romani children from mixed families enrolled and obtained bachelor degrees, including in the regions. There were no special school programs for Roma, although there were such programs for Jews, ethnic Lithuanians, and Poles.

Child Abuse: Rape or sexual assault of a person known to be a minor is punishable by up to 15 years in jail. Sexual acts between a person older than 18 years of age and a person known to be younger than age 16 carry penalties of up to five years in jail.

According to NGOs that assist child abuse victims, authorities reported approximately 238 criminal cases during 2012 in which children were victims of various forms of sexual abuse and molestation, including rape. According to police sources, in January to August, 51 children suffered from crimes related to domestic violence, including eight from sexual abuse. In the January to July period, the Internal Affairs Ministry investigated 343 crimes in connection with pornography, pedophilia, and engaging minors into antisocial behavior, including 27 cases of production and distribution of child pornography. Authorities registered 88 pedophilia crimes, including seven cases of rape, 40 cases of coercive actions of a sexual nature, 34 cases of sexual intercourse with a minor, and seven cases of sexual abuse. Police identified 54 victims of pedophilia, including 32 children under 14, mostly male. The Education Ministry reported on emotional and physical abuse against children that did not require forensic investigations.

At a press conference on November 25, a senior police official reported that authorities registered 15 cases of sexual abuse of children, including rape and molestation, and 65 domestic violence crimes against children, including two

killings and 15 incidents of minor body damage, between January and November. Another senior Interior Ministry official stated that, according to the latest sociological research, at least 65 percent of children between two and 14 years old suffered either psychological or physical abuse by their parents.

Early and Forced Marriage: The legal minimum age of marriage for both boys and girls is 18 years old, although girls as young as 14 can be married legally with parental consent. There were reports of early marriage in which girls as young as 14 years old and boys as young as 16 married with parental consent.

Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting (FGM/C): The law does not prohibit FGM/C, but there were no reports that FGM/C was performed in the country.

Sexual Exploitation of Children: The minimum age of consensual sex is 16 years old. Prostitution of children was a problem. According to data from the Ministry of Internal Affairs, 13 minors became victims of trafficking-related for sexual exploitation and pornography crimes in the January to September period while the International Organization for Migration reported a figure of 31 victims in the same period. The law provides penalties of up to 13 years in prison for production or distribution of pornographic materials depicting a minor. The law generally was enforced. Between January and October, the Ministry of Internal Affairs reportedly registered 44 criminal cases in connection with the production and distribution of child pornography, including 38 cases of distribution on the internet. Additionally, in the same period the ministry reported 105 criminal cases related to pedophilia, including eight rapes, 56 sexual battery cases, 33 cases of having sex with minors under 16 years of age, and eight cases of sexual abuse.

Institutionalized Children: There was no system for monitoring child abuse in orphanages or other specialized institutions. Authorities did not publicly report on any child abuse incidents. During the year there were reports of alleged abuse in foster families. The government opened investigations into some of these cases.

In 2007-08 the Education Ministry and the UN Children's Fund conducted a national survey to assess child abuse in the country. According to the ministry, 20 percent of institutionalized children between the ages of 10 and 17 reported psychological abuse by family members, and 22 percent reported that they were victims of physical abuse. Independent observers suggested that the numbers were likely higher, since approximately 30 percent of children refused to answer this question.

International Child Abductions: The country is a party to the 1980 Hague Convention on the Civil Aspects of International Child Abduction. For country-specific information see the Department of State's website at travel.state.gov/content/childabduction/english/country/Belarus.html.

Anti-Semitism

Jewish groups estimated that between 30,000 and 40,000 persons identified themselves as Jews. Most were not active religiously.

Anti-Semitic incidents continued but were on the decline, and authorities sporadically investigated reports of such acts. On August 14, a local priest in Hrodna reported that vandals had painted swastikas on several plaques commemorating Jews. The plaques were installed at an alley of trees planted by participants during the festival of national minorities in Hrodna in June.

On December 28, a local rabbi reported that vandals painted swastikas and anti-Semitic slogans on a Jewish religious and secular community center in Homyel. Members of the local Jewish community filed a case with police, and the investigation was ongoing at year's end.

The government did not promote antibias and tolerance education. Jewish community and civil society activists expressed concern over the concept of a "greater Slavic union" that was popular among nationalist organizations, including the neo-Nazi group Russian National Unity, which remained active despite its official dissolution in 2000. Neo-Nazis were widely believed to be behind anti-Semitic incidents across the country. Anti-Semitic and Russian ultranationalist newspapers, literature, DVDs, and videotapes imported from Russia were sold.

Trafficking in Persons

See the Department of State's *Trafficking in Persons Report* at www.state.gov/j/tip/rls/tiprpt/.

Persons with Disabilities

The law does not specifically prohibit discrimination against persons with physical, sensory, intellectual, or mental disabilities in employment, education, air travel and other transportation, access to health care, and other government services, and discrimination was common.

The Ministry of Labor and Social Security is the main government agency responsible for protecting the rights of persons with disabilities, who accounted for more than half a million persons. The law mandates that transport, residences, and businesses be accessible to persons with disabilities, but few public areas were wheelchair accessible or accessible for hearing and vision-impaired persons. The National Association of Disabled Wheelchair Users estimated that more than 90 percent of persons with physical disabilities were unable to leave their places of residence without assistance, and their places of residence were not built to accommodate wheelchair users. While authorities claimed that 30 percent of the country's total infrastructure was accessible, disability rights organizations disputed this figure.

A government prohibition against workdays longer than seven hours for persons with disabilities reportedly made companies reluctant to hire them. Local NGOs reported that up to 85 percent of persons with disabilities were unemployed. Authorities provided minimal welfare benefits for persons with disabilities, and calculations of pensions did not take disability status into account. Members of the country's Paralympic teams received half the salaries and prize money of athletes without disabilities.

The country's lack of independent living opportunities left many persons with disabilities no choice but to live in state-run institutions. Approximately 78 such institutions existed across the country and housed over 18,000 persons. Disability rights organizations reported that the quality of care in these facilities was low, and instances of fundamental human rights violations, harassment, mistreatment, and other abuse were reported. Authorities frequently placed persons with physical and mental disabilities in the same facilities and did not provide either group with specialized care.

Public transportation was free to persons with disabilities, but the majority of subway stations in Minsk and the bus system were not wheelchair accessible. According to government statistics, 2 percent of the country's public transportation network was accessible.

Disability rights organizations reported difficulty organizing advocacy activities due to impediments to freedom of assembly, censorship of materials, and the government's unwillingness to register assistance projects. For example, on November 21, authorities in Svetlahorsk denied civil society activist Yuri Liashenka, who uses a wheelchair, permission to hold a picket in the city center to

protest delayed renovation of his apartment building that did not comply with accessibility requirements. When he attempted to protest without an official sanction on November 25, an ambulance picked him up and transported him to a local hospital where police questioned him. On December 22, a Svetlahorsk district court fined Liashenka 300,000 rubles (\$28) for allegedly violating regulations on holding a demonstration.

Advocates also noted that persons with disabilities, especially those who were visually and hearing impaired, lacked the ability to address violations of their rights easily and completely since courts often failed to provide special equipment and sign language translation.

On January 15, a Minsk district court partially upheld an appeal filed by Yauheni Shauko, the chair of the National Association of Disabled Wheelchair Users, to ban the national airport in Minsk from using unsafe chairs without belts or any other security to move persons using wheelchairs onto airplanes. The airport administration compensated Shauko five million rubles (\$470) out of the 10 million sought (\$940) in moral damages.

In the period preceding the May World Ice Hockey Championship in Minsk, the Belarusian Office for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities conducted an accessibility analysis of sports and transportation facilities. Their monitoring found a lack of accessible infrastructure to travel to the sporting events and that sports facilities were often not accessible. They also reported difficulties for persons with disabilities to enter sports arenas due to security issues as well as challenges purchasing tickets.

National/Racial/Ethnic Minorities

Governmental and societal discrimination against ethnic Poles and Roma persisted. There were also expressions of societal hostility toward proponents of Belarusian national culture, which the government often identified with actors of the democratic opposition, repeatedly labeled by Lukashenka as “the fifth column.”

Authorities continued to harass the independent and unregistered Union of Poles of Belarus.

Official and societal discrimination continued against the country’s 10,000 to 20,000 Roma. The Romani community continued to experience high unemployment and low levels of education. Authorities estimated the

unemployment rate among Roma to be as high as 80 percent, according to the latest available information. Authorities often denied Roma access to higher education in state-run universities. Generally, Roma hold Belarusian citizenship, but many lacked official government identity documents.

In July a newspaper in Homyel published a police warning for citizens that Romani persons often targeted elderly persons for crimes. The article also requested that citizens inform the Internal Affairs Ministry if they saw Roma in settlements in the region. Local activists Maryia Klimovich and Ales Yauseyenka filed a complaint with the Homyel authorities over discriminatory statements. In August local officials responded to the complaint and noted that they asked the newspaper to refrain from printing any anti-Roma materials.

While the Russian and Belarusian languages have equal legal status, Russian was the primary language used by the government. According to independent polling, the overwhelming majority of the population spoke Russian as their mother tongue. Because the government viewed many proponents of the Belarusian language as political opponents of the regime, authorities continued to harass and intimidate academic and cultural groups that sought to promote use of the Belarusian language and routinely rejected proposals to widen use of the language. The situation improved slightly after Lukashenka stated that the Belarusian language was “the national treasure” and spoke in Belarusian at a meeting with writers on October 23.

Acts of Violence, Discrimination, and Other Abuses Based on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

Consensual same-sex sexual conduct between adults is not illegal, but discrimination against LGBT persons was widespread, and harassment occurred.

Due to egregious official harassment of the LGBT community, groups opted for holding private activities and events. LGBT groups did not seek permission from authorities to hold any public events, including a pride parade.

On May 25, several anti-LGBT individuals harassed and severely beat Mikhail Pishcheuski, an LGBT man, as he left a club frequented by LGBT persons. The victim was taken to the hospital in a coma and remained in a coma at year's end. Police arrested several individuals in connection with the beating. On October 16, a court in Minsk sentenced the alleged perpetrator to two years and eight months in jail on charges of hooliganism and inflicting severe body damage. The court did

not press charges in connection with intolerance or hatred based on sexual orientation and gender identity despite the testimony of a number of witnesses. Independent journalists and human rights advocates who observed the trial reported that the defendant openly insulted the victim and his friends in the courtroom.

Societal discrimination against LGBT activists persisted, with the tacit support of the regime.

In March 2013 Lukashenka stated that he could not “forgive” homosexuality in men, and in April 2013 he stated, “We should not be forced to introduce same-sex marriages. This will not happen in the near future. That is for sure, as long as I am the president.” In July 2013 Lukashenka condemned same-sex marriages as a “tragic sin of a general spiritual crisis and the Western world’s blindness.”

HIV and AIDS Social Stigma

Societal discrimination against persons with HIV/AIDS remained a problem, and the illness carried a heavy social stigma. The Joint UN Program on HIV/AIDS office reported that there were numerous reports of HIV-infected individuals who faced discrimination, especially at workplaces and during job interviews.

According to a 2011 study by the UN Fund for Population Activities, 31 percent of surveyed doctors indicated their reluctance to work with HIV-positive persons. Only 8 percent expressed a positive attitude towards HIV-infected patients. More than 16 percent of doctors reported that they lacked knowledge for treating such patients efficiently.

A December 2 public statement of the NGO Vstrecha, which provides assistance to persons with HIV/AIDS and men who have sex with men, said that the Interior Ministry banned their November 29 events to commemorate the World AIDS Day despite earlier approvals from the Healthcare Ministry and local authorities. Officials cited LGBT community representatives’ participation as a reason for refusal and warned that they would interfere if the NGO proceeded with holding the events.

The government continued to broadcast and post public service advertisements raising awareness about HIV/AIDS and calling for greater tolerance toward persons infected with the virus.

There were also frequent reports of family discrimination against HIV/AIDS-positive members of households. This included preventing HIV/AIDS-positive parents from seeing their children or requiring HIV/AIDS-positive family members to use separate dishware.

Section 7. Worker Rights

a. Freedom of Association and the Right to Collective Bargaining

Although the law provides for the rights of workers, except state security and military personnel, to form and join independent unions and to strike, it places a number of serious restrictions on the exercise of these rights. The law provides for the right to organize and bargain collectively but does not protect against antiunion discrimination. Workers fired for union activity have no effective recourse or remedy.

The government severely restricted independent unions. The government-controlled Federation of Trade Unions of Belarus is the largest union, claiming more than four million members, although that number was inflated, since the country's total workforce was approximately four million. It largely resembled its Soviet predecessors and served as a control mechanism and distributor of benefits. The Belarusian Congress of Democratic Trade Unions (BCDTU), with four constituent unions and approximately 10,000 members of independent trade unions, was the largest independent union umbrella organization, but tight government control over registration requirements and public demonstrations made it difficult for the federation to organize, expand, and strike.

Prohibitive registration requirements that any new independent union have a large membership and cooperation from the employer continued to present significant obstacles to union formation. Authorities continued to resist attempts by workers to leave the official union and join the independent one.

Management and local authorities blocked worker attempts to organize strikes on many occasions by declaring them illegal. The legal requirements to conduct a strike are high. For example, strikes can only be held at least three months after dispute settlement between the union and employer has failed. Additionally, a minimum number of workers must continue to work during the strike. Nevertheless, these requirements were largely irrelevant, since the unions that represented almost all workers were under government control. Government authorities and managers of state-owned enterprises routinely interfered with union

activities and hindered workers' efforts to bargain collectively, in some instances arbitrarily suspending collective bargaining agreements. Union members who participated in public demonstrations were subjected to arrest and detention. Due to a persistent atmosphere of repression and the fear of imprisonment, few public demonstrations took place during the year.

Amendments adopted in 2011 to the Law on Mass Activities continue seriously to limit demonstrations, rallies, and other public action, constraining the right of unions to organize and strike. In June international worker rights organizations again urged the government to implement long-standing recommendations relating to serious cases of antiunion discrimination and continuing obstacles to trade union registration.

The government continued efforts to suppress independent unions, stop union activities, and bring all union activity fully under its control. Its efforts included frequent refusals to extend employment contracts for members of independent unions and refusals to register independent unions. According to BCDTU leader Aliaksandr Yarashuk, no independent unions have been established since a 1999 decree requiring trade unions to register with the government. Authorities routinely fired workers who were deemed "natural leaders" or who involved themselves in NGOs or opposition political activities for these activities.

For example, in February the Babruisk-based Plant of Tractor Parts and Assemblies administration notified Aliaksandr Mikitka, a member of the Free Trade Union (FTU) that his labor contract had expired. Mikhail Kavalkou, the chairman of the trade union's office, condemned the dismissal and stated that Mikitka's contract was terminated due to his union membership.

In October the plant administration notified Aleh Shauchenka, Aliaksandr Benasik, and Mikalai Zhybul that their labor contracts would not be extended. All three were FTU members. On November 5, four dismissed FTU members, including Zhybul and Shauchenka, announced a hunger strike to protest their dismissals. They went to the local authorities' administration in Babruisk, but police removed them from the building. On December 18, a court in Babruisk fined Zhybul, Shauchenka, and their two other dismissed colleagues 1.05 million rubles (\$100) each on charges of allegedly violating mass events regulations and organizing a hunger strike in November.

Authorities and state-run enterprises continued to pressure independent trade unions and deny their right to sign collective bargaining agreements.

The government requires state employees, who constituted approximately 80 percent of the workforce, to sign short-term work contracts. Although such contracts may have terms of up to five years, most expired after one year, which gave the government the ability to fire employees by declining to renew their contracts. Many members of independent unions, political parties, and civil society groups lost their jobs because of this practice. A government edict provides the possibility for employers to sign open-ended work contracts after five years of good conduct. The edict limits the right of employers to approve open-ended contracts earlier than five years after the service computation date. The provision does not apply to state employees and other categories of workers who remained subject to mandatory contracts.

Opposition political party members and democratic activists sometimes had difficulty finding work due to government pressure on employers to force them out of their political engagement and activity. For example, in January, Lahoisk-based company Minauta did not extend the contract of Zmitser Shevel, a Belarusian Popular Front activist.

On December 15, Lukashenka passed Decree No. 5, which the authorities stated was aimed at rooting out “mismanagement,” strengthening discipline, and preventing the hiring of dishonest managers in new positions. Among other subjects under the new decree, managers can reduce payment of bonuses to employees (which often comprised a large portion of salary), while workers can be fired more easily. An independent trade union lawyer told the press that workers have fewer rights under the new law.

b. Prohibition of Forced or Compulsory Labor

The law prohibits all forms of forced or compulsory labor, but the government did not effectively enforce its provisions.

Resources and inspections dedicated to forced and compulsory labor were minimal and inadequate to deter violations. Penalties for violations included forfeiture of assets and sentences of five to 15 years imprisonment. Victims of trafficking were rarely identified by the government, and prosecution of those responsible for forced labor remained minimal. Government efforts to prevent and eliminate forced labor in the country improved.

Forced labor occurred among men, women, and children. The government prevented workers in wood processing and in related-to-wood-processing construction renovation projects with state-owned enterprises from leaving their jobs without employer approval and subjecting them to significant fines. There were few reports about the forced labor regulations being enforced against individuals; rather, it served a deterrent effect.

During the year the government continued the practice of “subbotniks,” which require employees of the government, state enterprises, and many private businesses to work on Saturday and donate their earnings to finance government social and other projects. Employers and authorities intimidated and fined some workers who refused to participate.

Authorities reportedly forced military conscripts to perform work that was unrelated to their military service, and prison labor practices amounted to forced labor. Former inmates stated that their monthly wages were as low as 30,000 to 40,000 rubles (three to four dollars). Senior officials with the General Prosecutor’s Office and the Interior Ministry stated on November 28 that at least 97 percent of all work-capable inmates worked in jail as required by law, excluding retirees and persons with disabilities, and that labor in jail was important and useful for rehabilitation and reintegration of inmates. Authorities also continued to employ unpaid agricultural labor and sent university and high school students to help farmers during the harvesting season.

Also see the Department of State’s *Trafficking in Persons Report* at www.state.gov/j/tip/rls/tiprpt/.

c. Prohibition of Child Labor and Minimum Age for Employment

The minimum age for employment is 16, but children as young as 14 may conclude a labor contract with the written consent of one parent or a legal guardian. The Prosecutor General’s Office reportedly enforced the law effectively. Persons under the age of 18 are allowed to work in nonhazardous jobs but are not allowed to work overtime, on weekends, or on government holidays. Work may not be harmful to children’s health or hinder their education.

The government generally enforced these laws. Nevertheless, schoolchildren occasionally continued to be induced to help local collective farms with the harvest from August to October.

d. Discrimination with Respect to Employment or Occupation

The law prohibits discrimination based on race, gender, language, or social status. These laws do not apply specifically to employment or occupation. The government did not effectively enforce these laws. Discrimination in employment and occupation occurred with respect to ethnicity, gender, disability, language, sexual orientation and/or gender identity, and HIV-positive status (see section 6).

e. Acceptable Conditions of Work

As of September 1, the national minimum monthly wage was 1,756,730 rubles (\$165). As of October the average monthly wage was 6,365,000 rubles (\$595). As of November 1, the government set the poverty line at 1,396,020 rubles (\$130) per month per capita.

The law establishes a standard workweek of 40 hours and provides for at least one 24-hour rest period per week. The law provides for mandatory overtime and holiday pay and restricts overtime to 10 hours a week, with a maximum of 180 hours of overtime each year.

The law establishes minimum conditions for workplace safety and worker health, but employers often ignored these standards. Workers at many heavy machinery plants did not wear minimal safety gear. The state labor inspectorate lacked authority to enforce employer compliance and often ignored violations.

The Ministry of Labor and Social Security was responsible for enforcement of these laws. Information regarding resources, inspections, remediation, and penalties was not available. The government reported that approximately 400,000 persons worked in the informal economy. The law did not cover informal workers.

The ministry reported 78 persons killed and 338 persons injured at workplaces between January and June. The ministry reported the majority of workplace accidents occurred in the heavy machinery production industry and caused by carelessness, poor conditions, malfunctioning equipment, and poor training and instruction.

The law does not provide workers the right to remove themselves from situations that endangered health or safety without jeopardy to their employment. Authorities did not effectively protect workers in this situation.