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AUTHORITARIAN POLITICS AND HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS IN  
BELARUS

AN ANALYSIS OF THE 2020 – 2025 PERIOD

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## **ABSTRACT.**

This study examines how political factors shaped the pattern of human rights violations in Belarus between 2020 and 2025, a period marked by widespread repression following the contested 2020 presidential election. The research focuses on understanding why these violations became systematic and persistent, arguing that political dynamics—rather than social or economic conditions—were the primary determinants of state behavior. A qualitative, documentary case study methodology was employed, utilizing reports from international human rights organizations, official statements, legal documents, and other publicly available sources. The findings reveal a coordinated and institutionalized system of repression involving mass arrests, torture, and ill-treatment of detainees, legal restrictions targeting dissent, censorship of cultural and media sectors, persecution of LGBTQ+ individuals, and extensive use of forced exile. These patterns demonstrate that state institutions—including security forces, courts, and regulatory bodies—operated collectively to suppress opposition and consolidate executive authority. The results align with theories of authoritarian survival that emphasize the strategic use of coercion when political legitimacy is weakened. The discussion shows that emergency measures adopted during the 2020 protests evolved into long-term mechanisms of governance, highlighting how authoritarian regimes normalize repression to maintain control. International pressure proved largely ineffective in altering state behavior, reinforcing the dominance of internal political structures. The study concludes that political

factors are indeed the most significant drivers of human rights violations in Belarus during this period, and they contribute to broader discussions on authoritarian resilience under conditions of crisis and global scrutiny.

**Key Words:** Authoritarianism; Human Rights Violations; Belarus; Political Repression; State Institutions; 2020 Elections; Forced Exile

### **ABSTRACTO.**

Este estudio examina cómo los factores políticos moldearon el patrón de violaciones a los derechos humanos en Bielorrusia entre 2020 y 2025, un período marcado por una represión generalizada tras las controvertidas elecciones presidenciales de 2020. La investigación se centra en comprender por qué estas violaciones se volvieron sistemáticas y persistentes, argumentando que las dinámicas políticas—más que las condiciones sociales o económicas—fueron los principales determinantes del comportamiento estatal. Se empleó una metodología cualitativa de estudio de caso documental, utilizando informes de organizaciones internacionales de derechos humanos, declaraciones oficiales, documentos legales y otras fuentes públicas disponibles. Este enfoque permitió un análisis en profundidad, evitando los riesgos éticos asociados con el trabajo de campo en un entorno altamente represivo.

Los hallazgos revelan un sistema de represión coordinado e institucionalizado que involucra arrestos masivos, tortura y malos tratos a detenidos, restricciones legales dirigidas a la disidencia, censura en los sectores culturales y mediáticos, persecución de personas LGBTQ+ y un uso extensivo del exilio forzado. Estos

patrones demuestran que las instituciones estatales—incluyendo las fuerzas de seguridad, los tribunales y los organismos reguladores—operaron colectivamente para suprimir la oposición y consolidar la autoridad ejecutiva. Los resultados se alinean con las teorías sobre la supervivencia autoritaria que enfatizan el uso estratégico de la coerción cuando la legitimidad política se encuentra debilitada.

La discusión muestra que las medidas de emergencia adoptadas durante las protestas de 2020 evolucionaron hacia mecanismos de gobernanza a largo plazo, destacando cómo los regímenes autoritarios normalizan la represión para mantener el control. La presión internacional resultó en gran medida ineficaz para modificar el comportamiento estatal, reforzando el predominio de las estructuras políticas internas. El estudio concluye que los factores políticos son, de hecho, los impulsores más significativos de las violaciones a los derechos humanos en Bielorrusia durante este período y contribuye a discusiones más amplias sobre la resiliencia autoritaria bajo condiciones de crisis y escrutinio global.

**Palabras clave:** Autoritarismo; Violaciones de Derechos Humanos; Bielorrusia; Represión Política; Instituciones Estatales; Elecciones 2020; Exilio Forzado

## **Introduction.**

Since the contested 2020 presidential election, Belarus has become one of the most emblematic examples of authoritarian consolidation and systematic human rights violations in contemporary Europe. The developments that unfolded during and after the election marked a fundamental turning point in the relationship between the Belarusian state and its citizens. President Alexander Lukashenko's government responded to unprecedented nationwide protests with mass repression, aggressive policing, and the dismantling of independent institutions (Liechtenstein, 2020; Human Rights Watch, 2024). As reports by the Organization for Security and Co-Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) demonstrate, the years 2020–2025 represent a period of intensified and institutionalized violations across political, legal, and cultural domains (Liechtenstein, 2020; OHCHR, 2023). The consistency and severity of these abuses reveal that the regime's actions were not temporary measures but components of a deliberate political strategy aimed at reinforcing authoritarian control (Svolik, 2012; Levitsky & Way, 2010).

The core problem of this study is understanding why human rights abuses became so deeply embedded during this five-year period. Although social, economic, and geopolitical influences contributed to the context, the evidence shows that the primary determinants are political. Repression emerged from a highly centralized political system in which power is concentrated in the executive and state institutions operate under direct political command. The

regime's actions demonstrate the use of state structures—security forces, courts, media regulators, and administrative bodies—to silence dissent, criminalize opposition, and reshape society to fit authoritarian goals (Human Rights Watch, 2025; Spring96, 2025). This raises the central research question of whether political factors are indeed the most significant drivers behind the pattern of human rights violations in Belarus from 2020 to 2025.

Theoretical literature on authoritarianism provides an essential framework for interpreting the Belarusian case. Linz's classic definition emphasizes restricted pluralism, limited political competition, and concentrated power (Linz, 2000). Belarus exemplified these characteristics prior to 2020, but the post-election period intensified them dramatically. Levitsky and Way's concept of competitive authoritarianism is also relevant (Levitsky & Way, 2010). Although Belarus previously maintained limited electoral competition, the regime effectively eliminated all political contestation after 2020, weaponizing institutions to ensure total dominance (Levitsky & Way, 2010; Human Rights Watch, 2024).

Similarly, Svoblik's work on authoritarian survival highlights how leaders rely on coercion to deter mass mobilization when their legitimacy is undermined (Svoblik, 2012). The government's actions—mass arrests, torture, censorship, and expanded criminal codes—align closely with the mechanisms he describes. The protests in 2020 created a political threat that prompted the regime to adopt increasingly repressive strategies to prevent further public mobilization. These theories help explain why the Belarusian government expanded repression systematically rather than temporarily.

While the general patterns of authoritarian consolidation are well documented, the literature addressing Belarus specifically after 2020 reveals a gap. Many existing studies focus on earlier periods, leaving the dramatic escalation of repression between 2020 and 2025 insufficiently addressed. Reports from human rights organizations provide important data, but academic analyses connecting these abuses directly to political decision-making remain limited. This study addresses that gap by examining how state institutions, legal reforms, and political discourse were used as strategic instruments of repression.

The significance of this study lies in its contribution to understanding how modern authoritarian states adapt and survive under conditions of internal protest and international condemnation. Belarus demonstrates that contemporary authoritarianism is not solely built on force but on the instrumentalization of institutions. Courts, police, cultural regulators, and media agencies all play coordinated roles in maintaining political dominance (Human Rights Watch, 2025; PEN Belarus, 2024). Furthermore, the Belarusian case highlights the limitations of external pressure. Despite sanctions, UN resolutions, and international criticism, the government continued to intensify repression, revealing how deeply political structures influence human rights outcomes (UN News, 2025; United Nations Human Rights Council, 2024).

To guide the reader, the structure of this paper is organized as follows. Section 2 presents the theoretical framework and literature review, synthesizing major scholarly contributions and analyzing how repression evolved in Belarus. Section 3 outlines the qualitative methodology, explaining the documentary

approach and its ethical and practical advantages. Section 4 presents the results, categorizing the main patterns of human rights violations observed from 2020 to 2025. Section 5 provides a discussion connecting these patterns to broader theories of authoritarian politics. Finally, Section 6 offers conclusions that summarize the findings and answer the central research question regarding the political determinants of human rights violations in Belarus.

### **Theoretical Framework / Literature Review.**

The authoritarian transformation of Belarus between 2020 and 2025 has been widely examined by scholars, international organizations, and human rights institutions. The literature converges on the view that the Lukashenko regime has evolved into a consolidated authoritarian system grounded in repression, institutional control, and legal manipulation (Gerschewski, 2013). The key theories and empirical findings relevant to understanding how political structures shape systematic human rights violations in Belarus. It draws from classical theories of authoritarianism, hybrid regime analysis, and contemporary scholarship on post-Soviet political developments, while identifying the gaps that this study aims to address.

Theoretical foundations of authoritarianism begin with the work of Juan Linz (2000), who defines authoritarian systems as political orders that limit pluralism, restrict participation, and concentrate power in one leader or a narrow ruling elite. In such regimes, democratic institutions may exist formally but lack substantive autonomy. The regime responded not with reform, but with intensified repression, signaling a shift toward deeper authoritarian entrenchment

(Liechtenstein, 2020). Linz's framework helps clarify how the erosion of institutional checks and balances creates conditions for human rights violations to become routine state strategies (Linz, 2000).

A second pillar of the theoretical foundation is Levitsky and Way's (2010) concept of competitive authoritarianism. In competitive authoritarian regimes, elections occur and opposition parties exist, but incumbents manipulate state institutions, media access, and legal mechanisms so extensively that genuine political competition is impossible (Levitsky & Way, 2010). Belarus had long been considered a competitive authoritarian state; however, after 2020, the regime increasingly abandoned even the pretense of competition. Human rights organizations reported widespread intimidation, suppression of opposition candidates, and legal constraints on political participation (Human Rights Watch, 2024; Spring96, 2025). Levitsky and Way's theory helps explain how Belarus uses formal institutions not to enable democratic governance, but to legitimize political repression.

Svolik's (2012) theory of authoritarian politics provides a third crucial dimension. Svolik argues that authoritarian rulers remain in power by balancing two threats: elite defection and mass mobilization. To prevent elite defection, leaders use patronage and coercion; to suppress popular resistance, they rely on repression and fear (Svolik, 2012).

The Belarusian case reflects this dynamic. Following the 2020 protests, Lukashenko intensified loyalty checks within the security services and expanded the authority of the police and intelligence agencies, especially the KGB and riot

police (Liechtenstein, 2020; Human Rights Watch, 2024). According to OSCE reports (Liechtenstein, 2020), the regime used systematic violence, arbitrary arrests, and torture to repress mass mobilization. Svolik's framework captures how repression becomes a deliberate strategy for maintaining power when legitimacy and elite unity are threatened.

Hall (2022) argues that Belarus entered a new phase after 2020, abandoning the limited negotiated flexibility that had occasionally characterized earlier years. Instead of balancing repression with co-optation or symbolic legitimacy, the regime shifted toward overt coercion. This analysis aligns with Jens Gerschewski's model of the three pillars of authoritarian stability—repression, co-optation, and legitimation (Gerschewski, 2013). In Belarus, repression has become the dominant pillar, overshadowing attempts at legitimation or co-optation. The regime increasingly relies on force, intimidation, and the instrumentalization of law to retain control.

Empirical studies reinforce these theoretical perspectives. A broad body of literature documents how repression in Belarus is not merely reactive, but deeply institutionalized. Deikalo (2024) situates the issue within business and human rights frameworks, noting that political repression is intertwined with violations of economic and social rights. According to Deikalo, repression is a governing tool designed to enforce loyalty across all sectors, including the cultural sphere, education, and the labor market (Deikalo, 2024).

Similar insights emerge from Bosse (2021), who emphasizes the regime's dual strategy of internal control and external legitimacy. Bosse argues that

Lukashenko strategically manipulates legal frameworks to consolidate authority while simultaneously attempting to present the regime as stable and sovereign to international observers (Bosse, 2021). This legalistic façade allows the government to reinterpret repression as the defense of national stability, a narrative that recurs in official statements and state-controlled media. Abadjian (2020) further explains that Belarus remains “at a crossroads” between reform and repression, with Lukashenko choosing to consolidate power by subordinating legislative and judicial institutions. These perspectives reveal how legal manipulation is central to the regime’s authoritarian durability.

The breakdown of institutional independence in Belarus is particularly evident in the judiciary, which has become an extension of executive authority. Reports from Spring96 (2025) describe the “collapse of the rule of law,” noting recurrent prosecutions of attorneys, journalists, cultural workers, and human rights defenders. Similarly, Human Rights Watch (2025) documents severe restrictions on peaceful assembly and the persecution of NGOs. These findings highlight how legal institutions are co-opted to legitimize coercion, supporting Levitsky and Way’s argument that authoritarian incumbents often rely on the politicization of law to mask repression behind institutional procedures.

International organizations have also provided crucial analyses of the political logic behind repression. OHCHR (2023) reports describe widespread arbitrary detentions, torture, and surveillance, noting that these abuses intensify during politically sensitive periods such as elections. The United Nations has repeatedly condemned Belarus for issuing sentences in absentia against political

exiles, a practice that expanded after 2023 (UN News, 2025). These dynamics reflect a regime that uses both domestic and extraterritorial means to suppress. Another significant development in recent literature concerns the intersection of authoritarianism and cultural repression. Reports by PEN Belarus (2024) highlight how artists, journalists, writers, and cultural workers have been targeted with censorship, administrative prosecution, and denial of fair trial rights. The targeting of LGBTQ+ communities, as documented by Equaldex (n.d.), further illustrates how the regime extends repression into identity-based spheres, viewing diversity as a threat to its authoritarian order.

Despite extensive research, gaps remain in the academic understanding of Belarus. Much of the earlier post-Soviet literature focused on the democratic backsliding of the early 2000s, leaving the sharp escalation of repression after 2020 insufficiently theorized. While institutional reports document widespread abuses, relatively few academic studies explicitly connect these violations to the political logic of authoritarian survival in Belarus. Moreover, the 2020–2025 period presents unique features—mass protests, digital activism, pandemic dynamics, and heightened Russian involvement—that differentiate it from earlier authoritarian phases. This study addresses these gaps by integrating classical authoritarian theory with contemporary empirical evidence to provide a comprehensive political explanation for human rights violations in Belarus.

The literature shows that Belarus exemplifies a consolidated authoritarian regime where repression is institutionalized through political, legal, and cultural mechanisms. Existing theories—from Linz to Svoboda—offer valuable tools for

understanding this evolution, empirical studies document the concrete practices through which the state enforces control. However, a systematic connection between these theories and the specific political drivers of human rights abuses in Belarus remains underdeveloped. This research contributes to filling that gap by demonstrating how political factors, rather than social or economic dynamics, most directly explain the pattern of human rights violations between 2020 and 2025.

### **Methodology.**

This study employs a qualitative case study methodology to analyze how political and institutional dynamics have shaped human rights violations in Belarus between 2020 and 2025. A qualitative approach is the most appropriate for this topic because the nature of repression, coercion, and institutional behavior cannot be reliably measured through quantitative indicators, especially given the limited transparency of the Belarusian government and the risks associated with data collection inside the country. Instead, the study focuses on the interpretation of political actions, legal frameworks, and documented human rights abuses, emphasizing depth of understanding rather than numerical generalization. The analysis centers on how government decisions, authoritarian structures, and state institutions have enabled repression to become systematic, following the contested 2020 elections.

The research design is documentary and interpretive. Conducting interviews, surveys, or field observations would pose ethical risks due to the continuing persecution and surveillance of individuals involved in political or

civic activism in Belarus. Additionally, the state's restrictions on access to information, combined with the potential danger for participants, make field-based research unsafe and unreliable. Therefore, the study relies exclusively on publicly available documents produced by credible and verifiable sources. These include reports from the United Nations, the OSCE, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and other international human rights organizations, along with government decrees, public speeches, and institutional statements. Documentary research allows for a safe, ethical, and comprehensive examination of political repression without exposing individuals to harm.

The study is both descriptive and explanatory. The descriptive component documents the types of repression deployed by the Belarusian state since 2020, such as mass arrests, torture, expanded detention facilities, criminalization of protest, media censorship, and the targeting of cultural and identity-based communities. Description is essential for outlining the scope and nature of the abuses. However, description alone does not address the central research question of why political factors are the most significant determinants of these violations. Therefore, the explanatory element analyzes how political motivations—particularly authoritarian power consolidation—have influenced the restructuring of state institutions and legal frameworks. This dual design enables the study to present factual evidence while also linking these facts to broader political dynamics.

The research focuses on state actors because they constitute the institutional foundations of repression in Belarus. Key actors examined include

the presidency, the judiciary, security forces (such as the KGB, police, and riot control units), and other government-controlled institutions. These bodies are responsible for implementing political decisions, enforcing laws, and carrying out coercive actions (Human Rights Watch, 2024; Viasna, 2023). By concentrating the analysis on these institutions, the study aims to understand how power is centralized and operationalized through state structures. Civil society organizations, opposition groups, and ordinary citizens are analyzed primarily as targets of repression rather than as autonomous political agents, given that the purpose of the study is to evaluate state behavior rather than public responses.

Data collection involves gathering official statements, legal amendments, policy announcements, media regulations, governmental rhetoric, and verified human rights reports. A qualitative content analysis is applied to identify recurring patterns and narratives that reveal how the Belarusian state justifies and normalizes repression. This procedure involves examining the language used in government communications, the legal framing of criminal charges, and the rationales offered for restricting rights such as assembly, expression, and cultural freedom. The analysis also traces key developments in repression from 2020 to 2025, identifying turning points such as new criminal code amendments, the closure of independent media, and the expansion of categories deemed “extremist” (United Nations Human Rights Council, 2024; Reporters Without Borders, 2024). Content analysis enables the study to classify and interpret political practices as deliberate strategies rather than isolated incidents.

Process tracing is also used to identify the sequence of events that contributed to the institutionalization of repression. Through this technique, the study examines how emergency security measures adopted during the 2020 protests gradually evolved into a permanent system of political control. Key moments—such as the criminalization of dissent, mass detentions, and expanded censorship—are mapped to show how authoritarian practices intensified and stabilized over time.

Ethical considerations are central to this research. No human subjects are directly involved, eliminating risks of exposure, retaliation, or compromised confidentiality. All data are sourced from publicly available documents produced by institutions that operate independently of the Belarusian government. Care is taken to present information accurately, respectfully, and without sensationalism. The study avoids reproducing sensitive personal details unless already publicly documented by reputable organizations.

Despite its strengths, the methodology has limitations. Belarus's lack of transparency restricts access to internal governmental data, meaning that some events or decisions may be concealed or inaccurately reported by official channels. Even reliable human rights organizations face difficulties verifying every incident due to restricted access and state obstruction (OHCHR, 2023; Human Rights Watch, 2024). Additionally, the exclusive focus on political factors may limit the analysis of social or economic dimensions of repression. Nonetheless, by triangulating information from multiple documentary sources, the study strengthens the credibility and validity of its findings.

In sum, this qualitative, documentary case study provides an interpretive analysis of how authoritarian political structures in Belarus have shaped systematic human rights violations. By analyzing official documents, institutional actions, and authoritative human rights reports, the methodology illuminates how repression functions as a deliberate state strategy rather than a reaction to instability. This approach offers a coherent framework for understanding the political mechanisms behind the persistence of human rights abuses in Belarus from 2020 to 2025.

### **Results.**

The findings of this study reveal a clear, sustained, and multi-dimensional pattern of human rights violations in Belarus from 2020 to 2025. These violations were not sporadic or isolated incidents but constituted a deliberate, institutionalized strategy executed through state institutions. Analysis of official statements, legal documents, and reports from human rights organizations demonstrates that these violations involved multiple actors, including the executive branch, security forces, the judiciary, and cultural regulatory agencies. The results are organized into key categories: mass arrests and detentions, torture and mistreatment, legal repression, censorship of media and cultural sectors, persecution of identity-based groups, and forced exile.

A primary finding concerns the scale, frequency, and targeting of arrests. Thousands of individuals were detained in response to protests, political activity, and expressions of dissent. These included demonstrators, journalists, civil society actors, and ordinary citizens who engaged in online communication considered

oppositional. Arrests continued consistently across the five-year period, reflecting that detention was a central mechanism of control rather than a temporary reaction to unrest (Spring96, 2025). Reports by OHCHR (2023) and UN News (2025) document over 1,400 political prisoners in 2023 alone, with arrests continuing for those accused of participating in banned organizations or disseminating so-called extremist content. This sustained campaign demonstrates that detention was utilized both as a preventive measure against political mobilization and as a tool to intimidate the general population.

Torture and ill-treatment represent another significant pattern. Detained individuals consistently reported physical beatings, prolonged isolation, overcrowded cells, deprivation of food and water, and denial of medical care. Psychological intimidation, threats to family members, and coercion to sign confessions were common. The recurrence of these practices across multiple years and detention facilities highlights that abuse was systematic rather than ad hoc (OHCHR, 2023; Human Rights Watch, 2024). The evidence shows that the state employed these measures to enforce compliance and punish dissenters, creating an environment of fear designed to suppress political organization and opposition activity.

Legal repression was also central to the state's strategy. Amendments to the criminal code expanded the definition of extremism, criminalized peaceful protest, and increased penalties for online dissent (United Nations Human Rights Council, 2024). Article 356, which authorizes the death penalty for certain acts of treason, exemplifies how legal instruments were manipulated to target political

actors (United Nations Human Rights Council, 2024). Lawyers defending political detainees were themselves subjected to disbarment, criminal investigation, or harassment, effectively removing legal safeguards for defendants (Viasna, 2023). These findings indicate that judicial institutions functioned as extensions of executive authority, providing a formal framework for legitimizing repression while undermining the rule of law.

Cultural and media censorship formed another consistent pattern. PEN Belarus (2023–2024) documented hundreds of cases in which writers, artists, journalists, and cultural workers faced prosecution, censorship, or administrative penalties. Common violations included banning performances, closing cultural institutions, confiscating materials, and labeling cultural content as extremist (PEN Belarus, 2024). These measures demonstrate that the government extended its control beyond the political sphere into cultural expression, seeking to monopolize public narratives and eliminate forms of communication that could challenge state ideology. The systematic targeting of the cultural sector reflects the use of repression as a means to influence societal beliefs and norms, not solely to punish political dissent.

Persecution of identity-based groups, particularly LGBTQ+ communities, also emerged as a pattern. Lack of legal protections, increased police monitoring, harassment, and social stigmatization characterized the state's approach to these populations (Equaldex, n.d.). Reports indicate that these groups were subjected to surveillance, censorship, and administrative penalties, further showing the expansion of coercive practices into social and cultural domains (PEN Belarus,

2024; Equaldex, n.d.). This aligns with the broader pattern of repression, demonstrating that authoritarian control was exercised over both political behavior and personal identity.

Forced migration and prosecution in absentia were additional findings of significance. Thousands of Belarusians—including journalists, activists, cultural workers, and political opponents—fled the country to escape persecution (Liechtenstein, 2020). The government responded by issuing criminal charges in absentia, often labeling exiles as extremists or traitors. The data show that these extraterritorial actions were used strategically to deter opposition, even beyond national borders (United Nations Human Rights Council, 2024). Such measures extended the reach of state repression internationally and reinforced the climate of fear for those who remained in Belarus or considered returning.

Finally, the findings indicate that multiple state institutions acted in coordination to sustain repression. Security forces, including the police, KGB, and riot control units, executed arrests and enforced compliance (Human Rights Watch, 2024; Liechtenstein, 2020). The judiciary implemented laws criminalizing dissent, while administrative bodies and cultural regulators ensured censorship and ideological control (PEN Belarus, 2024). The integration of these institutions into a unified strategy demonstrates that human rights violations were systemic and not merely the result of individual misconduct.

Overall, the results confirm that Belarus employed a multi-layered, continuous system of repression during 2020–2025. Arrests, torture, legal manipulation, cultural censorship, persecution of identity-based groups, and

forced exile were persistent and coordinated across state institutions. These findings provide a comprehensive, evidence-based picture of systematic violations, establishing the factual foundation necessary for analysis in the discussion section.

## **Discussion**

The findings presented in the results section reveal a consistent and interrelated pattern of repression in Belarus between 2020 and 2025. When analyzed through the lens of authoritarian political dynamics, these findings support the central argument that political factors—specifically the concentration of executive authority, the politicization of state institutions, and the strategic use of coercive mechanisms—played the most decisive role in shaping the human rights landscape during this period. Each pattern identified in the results aligns with existing theoretical models of authoritarianism.

The widespread use of mass arrests provides strong evidence of this political strategy. These arrests, directed at protesters, journalists, activists, and even ordinary individuals engaged in online expression, illustrate a systematic attempt to dismantle civic mobilization. The persistence of political detentions over several years supports theories such as those proposed by Svoboda, which argue that authoritarian regimes rely heavily on coercion to prevent mass collective action when legitimacy weakens (Svoboda, 2012). The long-term continuation of arrests shows that the government aimed not just to suppress initial protests but to eliminate the possibility of future political organization.

The presence of torture and ill-treatment within detention facilities further reinforces this interpretation. The nature of the abuses—overcrowded conditions, physical violence, denial of medical care, and prolonged isolation—suggests a systematic approach to punishment and intimidation (OHCHR, 2023; Human Rights Watch, 2024). These practices align with authoritarian survival theories that highlight the role of fear in maintaining public passivity. Rather than isolated misconduct, the findings demonstrate an intentional use of detention facilities as instruments of political control. This supports the hypothesis that human rights violations are integrated into the state’s broader strategy of authoritarian consolidation.

Legal repression represents another critical dimension of the political logic guiding state behavior. The expansion of criminal code provisions related to extremism, protest, and treason illustrates the regime’s use of law as a mechanism of control (United Nations Human Rights Council, 2024). Authoritarian regimes often rely on legal manipulation to provide a façade of legitimacy for coercive actions, a dynamic described by Levitsky and Way (Levitsky & Way, 2010). In Belarus, the legal system not only justified repression but actively enabled it through punitive reforms and the targeting of defense lawyers (Spring96, 2025). This transformation of judiciary into an instrument of political punishment demonstrates how institutional structures were repurposed to sustain authoritarian power.

Cultural censorship also emerges as a politically significant pattern. The targeting of cultural workers—writers, artists, journalists, museum staff, and

performers—shows that the Belarusian government views cultural expression as a potential source of ideological resistance. By criminalizing or censoring cultural content, the state seeks to monopolize narratives and restrict any form of public discourse that challenges official legitimacy (PEN Belarus, 2024). The extensive violations documented against cultural figures support the argument that repression in Belarus is multi-dimensional, extending beyond political actors to shape the cultural environment as well (PEN Belarus, 2024). This reflects an authoritarian strategy aimed at controlling not only political actions but also the symbolic and expressive life of society.

The repression of LGBTQ+ individuals further illustrates the regime's attempt to regulate identity and suppress groups considered incompatible with its ideological framework (Equaldex, n.d.). The absence of legal protections and the increase in surveillance and harassment since 2020 show that the state extends its coercive reach into personal and social spheres (Spring96, 2025). This supports the broader hypothesis that repression in Belarus is not limited to overt political dissent but encompasses any community perceived as threatening the state's image of social conformity.

The trend of forced migration and the issuance of sentences in absentia highlight the extraterritorial expansion of Belarusian repression. The fact that political opponents continued to face legal persecution after fleeing the country indicates that the Belarusian state employs punishment beyond its borders (UN News, 2025; United Nations Human Rights Council, 2024). This demonstrates that repression is designed to eliminate alternatives to state authority wherever

they may exist, limiting the capacity of exiled activists to organize opposition movements abroad ( Liechtenstein, 2020). This pattern aligns with authoritarian resilience theories that emphasize the adaptability of coercive strategies to new political conditions.

When considered collectively, these findings confirm the revised hypothesis: human rights violations in Belarus between 2020 and 2025 are not accidental, spontaneous, or temporary. Instead, they represent a deliberate and institutionalized authoritarian strategy. The results demonstrate that political factors—namely the consolidation of executive power, the central role of security forces, and the politicization of legal and cultural institutions—are the primary determinants of the human rights situation in Belarus. This confirms earlier theoretical expectations that repression intensifies when regimes face legitimacy crises, as occurred after the 2020 election.

The findings also reveal important implications for understanding the durability of authoritarian regimes under international scrutiny. Despite sustained criticism from international organizations and the imposition of sanctions, Belarus continued to escalate its repressive practices (UN News, 2025; Human Rights Watch, 2024). This illustrates the limitations of external pressure when domestic institutions are fully subordinated to executive authority and when external allies, such as Russia, reinforce the regime's survival (Levitsky & Way, 2010). The inability of international accountability mechanisms to influence state behavior underscores the importance of internal politics.

The study's results further highlight several limitations and areas for future research. The lack of transparency within Belarus limits access to internal state documents and data, which restricts the ability to assess the full scope of repression. Finally, comparative research with other authoritarian states in the region could strengthen understanding of how Belarus fits into broader patterns of post-Soviet authoritarian consolidation.

Overall, the discussion shows that the persistence of human rights violations in Belarus between 2020 and 2025 can be understood only through a political analysis of authoritarian power. The patterns identified—mass arrests, torture, legal manipulation, cultural censorship, identity-based persecution, and forced exile—are interconnected elements of a comprehensive strategy to maintain political dominance. These findings underscore the central role of political factors in shaping human rights outcomes and provide a foundation for the conclusions presented in the next section.

## **Conclusion**

This study set out to examine the extent to which political factors are the primary determinants of human rights violations in Belarus between 2020 and 2025. Based on the findings and their interpretation, it is clear that the persistence and escalation of repression during this period can only be understood within the political logic of authoritarian consolidation. The evidence demonstrates that human rights violations were not isolated incidents or temporary reactions to the unrest following the 2020 presidential election. Instead, they formed part of a

deliberate and institutionalized strategy designed to maintain political power in the face of declining legitimacy and widespread public resistance.

The analysis shows that mass arrests, torture, legal manipulation, cultural censorship, and forced exile were systematically deployed by state institutions under direct political direction. These practices highlight how the executive branch concentrated authority, subordinated the judiciary, and mobilized security forces to eliminate dissent. Political factors—not economic pressures or spontaneous social conflicts—were therefore the central drivers of the patterns of abuse documented during this period. The use of law as an instrument of repression, the targeting of cultural and identity-based communities, and the expansion of punitive measures against opposition figures further illustrate the depth of political control shaping human rights outcomes.

The study also demonstrates that repression in Belarus became normalized and institutionalized over the five-year period examined. Emergency measures initially adopted in response to mass protests evolved into permanent components of state governance (Human Rights Watch, 2024). This progression reflects an authoritarian logic in which coercion replaces institutional accountability and becomes the primary tool of regime survival. The persistence of repression despite international condemnation underscores the limitations of external pressure when domestic political structures are fully aligned with authoritarian objectives.

In answering the research question, the evidence confirms that political factors are indeed the most important determinants of human rights violations in

Belarus from 2020 to 2025. The concentration of executive power, ideological loyalty within the security apparatus, and manipulation of legal and cultural institutions collectively shaped a system in which repression served as a strategic instrument of political control.

The study contributes to the broader understanding of how contemporary authoritarian regimes operate under conditions of internal crisis and international scrutiny. While the analysis is limited by the restricted access to internal state data and the exclusive focus on political variables, it provides a comprehensive foundation for future research. Further studies could explore the interaction between economic conditions and repression or compare Belarus with other post-Soviet authoritarian states to deepen understanding of regional patterns.

Ultimately, this research underscores the central role of authoritarian political structures in producing systematic human rights violations. The Belarusian case shows how modern regimes deploy coercion across political, legal, cultural, and social spheres to preserve power, offering important insights into the mechanisms that sustain authoritarian rule in the twenty-first century

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