

Why did Belarus sign a new death penalty into law?

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Opponents of the Lukashenka regime can now be threatened with the death penalty, including for 'attempted terrorism'

A campaign of mass political repression has been going on in Belarus for almost two years now. The scale is unprecedented: there are now more than [1,200 political prisoners](#), and the authorities have initiated over 5,000 criminal cases related to politics since the country's contested presidential election in August 2020.

Yet, the Belarusian authorities' level of cruelty continues to grow – now, opponents of the regime of President Alexander Lukashenka can be threatened not only with [Stalinist prison terms](#), but with the death penalty.

Death penalty for 'attempted terrorism'

[Belarus is the only country in Europe that still has the death penalty](#), and more than 400 people have been executed since 1991. Until now, execution has been reserved for only the most violent crimes; the authorities have never sought it for political opponents.

But since the 2020 protests, which were a significant challenge to the Lukashenka regime, the situation has changed. The authorities began to spin propaganda around the threat of “terrorism” – to discredit the protests and intimidate society. On 17 May, Lukashenka [signed new amendments](#) that introduce the death penalty for terrorism offences, including an “attempted” act of terrorism.

This paves the way for further retribution against political opponents. The authorities have opened several investigations into alleged terrorism offences by opposition leaders Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya and Pavel Latushka, prominent bloggers Stsiapan Putsila and Anton Motolko, and former security service personnel who have turned against the regime.

All the above are currently in exile in Lithuania or Poland, and therefore largely not at risk, but people who have remained in Belarus now face even harsher consequences for resistance.

Indeed, the state propaganda [machine does not hide](#) the fact that this radical step is in response to the recent “[railway war](#)”: a series of resistance actions on the country's railway network, designed to hamper Russia's war against Ukraine. These partisan attacks may have been non-violent (not a single person has been injured), but Lukashenka's security forces announced from the start that any sabotage of railway infrastructure would be treated as terrorism.

The security services have also turned the threat of terrorism into a tool to intimidate society. Responding to the emerging crisis, Lukashenka [claimed](#) in October 2020 that “not only an informational, but a terrorist war has been launched against us.”

The authorities [thus](#) reported [terrorist attacks](#) that no one had ever heard of, the discovery of [caches of explosives](#) and the exposure of terrorist groups. The secret services attempted to frighten Belarusian society, claiming the protesters [did not intend to spare](#) “neither women, nor children” in their political struggle.

First suspects: Autukhovich and Alinevich

Belarusian law enforcement soon reported the detention of its first terrorism suspects: two groups of men centred around a former businessman, Mikalai Autukhovich, and an anarchist activist, Ihar Alinevich.

Alinevich and three other anarchists were accused of setting fire to a traffic-police department in Mazyr, the [State Committee for Forensic Examinations](#) building in Salihorsk, and some cars outside a local prosecutor’s office. Autukhovich was accused of [setting fire](#) to the car and unfinished house of a police officer in Vaukavysk, as well as blowing up the car of a riot police officer in Hrodna.

It should be said that neither Alinevich nor Autukhovich [believe](#) that peaceful protests could be successful in Belarus, and were not opposed to violent methods of political struggle. But the very nature of the actions they were charged with indicates that the perpetrators seem to have tried to avoid casualties (the arson was carried out at night, when there were no people nearby).

The security services first opened a criminal investigation on charges of “[malicious hooliganism](#)” and “deliberate destruction or damage to property.” These charges were consistent with existing legal precedents. However, the [government then intervened](#). The charges were changed; Alinevich and Autukhovich they were accused of having committed “acts of terrorism”.

In December 2021, the defendants in the Alinevich case were [sentenced](#) to between 18 and 20 years in prison. The Autukhovich trial is [currently under way in Hrodna prison](#). Eleven persons are in the dock alongside the former businessman. Among them is Siarhei Rezanovich, the rector of a local church, and his family, who are all accused of being “terrorists”.

Judging by [reports in state media](#), the charge against the Orthodox priest, his wife and son relies on the fact Autukhovich lived in their house for a period, although “not all of [the family members] knew and figured out what was happening.”

Fabricated cases

While some cases clearly involve excessive charges, some of the terrorism cases appear fabricated.

In July 2021, for example, President Lukashenka announced that a number of “[sleeper terrorist cells](#)” had been identified in the country. These units, which were coordinated via a Telegram channel called ‘Civil Self-Defence Detachments of Belarus’, had allegedly been preparing a “violent change of power on a certain day”.

At least five people were arrested, and accused of attempting to set fire to logging equipment, attempting to undermine a Russian communications centre, and attempting to attack state media host Grigory Azarenok. All these actions appear to have been prepared with the help of [infiltrated KGB agents](#) and, according to human rights activists, were [probably staged](#).

A couple of months later, in September, Belarusian law enforcement arrested a family in the town of Barysaw, who had, according to the KGB, been [planning](#) “terrorist attacks” funded with “Western money”. In particular, they were accused of throwing two “Molotov cocktails” at the house of politician Aleh Haidukevich ([at a time when no one was home](#)).

Finally, the case against Tsikhanouskaya, Latushka and the former security officials relies on dubious testimony from a former criminal, who allegedly planned to carry out explosions in Minsk and next to a military base in the nearby town of Pechi. No evidence of a connection with members of the opposition has been presented.

The *Supratsiŭ* movement

That said, the Belarusian security services don't always invent crimes.

Some Belarusians, in response to mass repression and the total suppression of dissent by the Lukashenka regime, were sincerely disappointed by the peaceful protests. Some citizens felt the appeal of more decisive forms of struggle, including actions that would break the law.

In these cases, human rights activists [often state](#) that some illegal actions were the result of “a violation by the state of its obligations regarding the maintenance of peace, security and law and order”. Belarusians were deprived of their opportunity to legally influence the government and express their opinion, and are therefore forced to look for other ways to do so, human rights activists say.

In May 2021, the manifesto of the *Supratsiŭ* ('Resistance') movement appeared online, which included the *Busly Lyatsyats* ('Storks Fly') and 'People's Self-Defense Teams' Telegram channels, as well as the 'Cyberpartisans' hacker group. *Supratsiŭ* declared that its goal was to overthrow the Lukashenka regime, and return the country to democracy and the rule of law. The movement believes that Belarusians have the right to rebel against tyranny.

Supratsiŭ [compares itself with the Resistance movement](#) in the Second World War and acts under complete anonymity. It is impossible to say how many people are involved in this underground work. But *Supratsiŭ* periodically takes responsibility for direct actions: damaging or destroying the property of the security forces, blocking railway lines and destroying CCTV.

The movement's most famous actions have been attacks on the [compound](#) of riot police and [internal troops](#): the underground fighters, using drones, dropped containers of a combustible mixture on the buildings. At the moment, not a single case is known where people suffered as a result of the actions of *Supratsiŭ*, though they have still been [declared terrorists](#).

Broad and vague definition

The apparently coordinated campaign of *Supratsiŭ* has been declared “terrorism”, but so have seemingly more mundane, everyday acts of resistance. These cases speak to the fact that the Belarusian criminal code's definition of an “act of terrorism” is deliberately vague, which leaves space for abuse.

As well as actions that are commonly associated with terrorism, such as perpetrating an explosion that puts human lives at risk, the Belarusian criminal code mentions “other acts” and “other grave consequences” with “the aim of destabilising public order”.

Belarusian lawyer Dmitry Laevsky [believes](#) that any political speech could be equated with “other acts” – if that's what the authorities want to do. “With this definition of a terrorist attack, anything can be painted as a terrorist attack – from terrible actions in the spirit of Al-Qaeda, and actions that fall under the more lenient articles of the criminal code, to the organisation of political protests,” he said.

The very concept of ‘terrorism’ is now interpreted as broadly as possible in Belarus. This explains

how in the Mahilyow region in September 2021, local residents were [accused of terrorism](#) for allegedly leaving dummy explosive devices on a railway line. At the end of 2021, the security forces [detained a group of Minsk residents](#) who allegedly punctured the tyres of a judge's car, threw a stone at the window of a prosecutor's office, and destroyed CCTV cameras in the city. These actions were also deemed to be terrorism.

A resident of Novopolotsk, Ruslan Slutsky, scattered home-made anti-vehicle devices along the route of a pro-government rally in November 2020. The court considered the punctured tyres a terrorist attack and sentenced him to [11 years in prison](#).

Only execution remains

How exactly the new death penalty provisions will be applied in practice is still an open question. Laevsky, for example, does not believe that Belarusian courts will decide in the near future to impose death sentences in apparently political cases, as there is a risk of "absolutely unpredictable public reaction".

However, the Lukashenka regime has repeatedly demonstrated its readiness to take the toughest and most scandalous measures in order to achieve its political goals. In this sense, the "execution amendments," and the increasing use of especially serious articles of the criminal code against opponents of the authorities, look like a completely natural phenomenon.

Today, in Belarus, participation in a [peaceful protest action](#), a [performance](#), a [live stream](#), as well as writing an inscription [on a road](#) or a piece of graffiti on a [fence, or a post on social networks](#) can offer grounds for criminal prosecution. A person can be sent to jail for a long time for such harmless acts. If that is the case, then the punishment for partisan actions against railway infrastructure or the property of government officials should be much worse. This is the logic of [Belarus's new totalitarian system](#): if [painting a red stripe on hay bales](#) is charged as "malicious hooliganism", then a punctured tyre is deemed a "terrorist attack".

In the two years after the protests that shook the regime, the Lukashenka regime has used unlimited repression against Belarusian society. But it has still not completely 'pacified' it, and its arsenal of threats has begun to be exhausted. Now, it appears, only execution remains.

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