

Freedom to Speak:

Promoting
the Freedom
of expression
in Belarus

Draft Publication

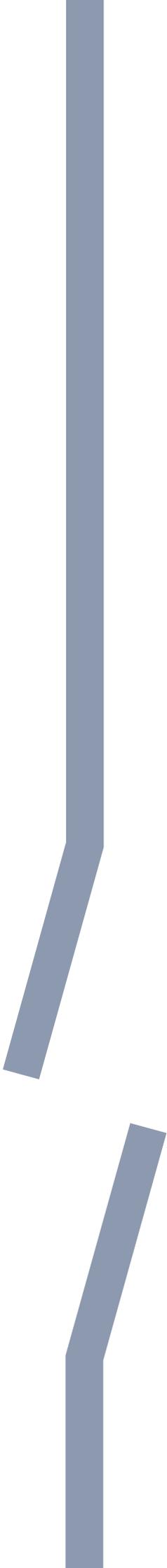


Kingdom of the Netherlands



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Freedom to Speak: Promoting the Freedom of expression in Belarus

Foreword

Following the disputed presidential election in August 2020 and the refusal by the Western states to recognize the incumbent Alyaksandr Lukashenka as the elected president of Belarus, several waves of political repressions swept across the country. During one month, more than 7,500 citizens were detained for participating in peaceful protests, according to the Viasna Human Rights Centre. The authorities began pressing charges against opposition figures, human rights defenders, journalists, lawyers, and ordinary citizens, a trend that continues till today.

The youth was no exception to this. One of the groups that suffered the most from state repression after the events of August 2020 were young people, particularly those receiving higher education in the Republic of Belarus, as well as university professors. In 2021 alone, the Belarusian Students Union together with its partners collected evidence of 492 detained students, 246 cases of politically motivated expulsions, as well as 52 cases of criminal prosecution against students.

The high rate of young people's detentions happened due to their active involvement in the democratic movement. One of the examples illustrates this clearly. On November 12, 2020, searches were conducted in the office

of the Belarusian Students Union and at the residences of its members. On the same day, 10 activists of the student movement, as well as one lecturer at the Belarusian State University were detained. Human rights organisations recognized all of them as political prisoners.

Belarusian youth's activism, self-organisation, and engagement in the pro-democratic movement testify to the need for education in the field of youth rights advocacy and protection. The Eastern Europe Studies Center, together with the Belarusian National Youth Council RADA, conducted the project "Right to Speak: promoting the freedom of expression in Belarus" to contribute to the deepening of knowledge of young Belarusians in the field. The project was generously funded by the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in Warsaw.

This project provided a platform for deepening self-organisation as well as experience exchange via organizing several practical workshops on youth rights. Moreover, to provide an opportunity for young Belarusians to gain practical experience in the youth rights advocacy field, the Eastern Europe Studies Centre together with RADA launched a mentorship and internship program in May – June 2022. During the program, young people with specific interests were matched with either a Be-

Belarusian organisation or an expert in the field, deepening their knowledge and capacities. Six such internship and mentorship programs were conducted.

As a result, participants produced several advocacy programs, public action plans, strategic advocacy campaign planning, a draft educational course, a draft public education campaign, and work on making the napryamok.org website more inclusive and accessible to people affected by war, focusing on the needs of vulnerable groups.

In the course of the program, participants developed shadow thematic reports, focusing on various youth rights-related topics, including non-discrimination clauses, repressions against young people, and restrictions on youth rights access.

In this publication, we present the joint products developed during the mentorship program.

Co-contributors:

- Lavon Marozau (RADA) and Marharyta Vorykhava (European Youth Parliament Belarus) | Motion on Non-Discrimination of Young Belarusian Activists and Support for Democratic Principles in Europe to European Youth Forum
- Marharyta Vorykhava (RADA) and Aliaksei Plashchynski (European Youth Parliament Belarus) | Analysis of the documents developed by Belarusian National Youth Council RADA in cooperation with its Member Organisations in regard to the tendency of work focused on National and International levels
- Dzmitry Herylovich (RADA) and Maryna Nikifarenka (NGO Third Sector) | Address regarding limitations of access of Belarusian youth to youth exchanges and participation in the Erasmus+ program
- Lavon Marozau (RADA) and Darya Rubluskaya (Belarusian Student Association) | «Summer holiday» in Belarus: repression against young people in June – August 2022.

1. Motion on Non-Discrimination of Young Belarusian Activists and Support for Democratic Principles in Europe to European Youth Forum



Lavon Marozau and Marharyta Vorykhava

*Submitted by Belarusian National Youth Council
(RADA) for European Youth Forum
Adopted by the Council of Members
Brussels, Belgium, 13–14 May 2022.*

Belarusian and European civil society strongly condemn the military invasion by the Russian army into the territory of sovereign Ukraine. We believe that any military action on the territory of an independent country is not only a violation of norms and principles of international law and human rights but also a violation of the right to life and peaceful future of all Ukrainian youth and young people living on the territory of Ukraine.

Over the past two years representatives of independent youth organisations in Europe and Belarusian youth NGOs, have shown their strong determination and will to revitalize democracy and defend youth rights. Belarusian civil society has suffered countless humiliations and repressions by its own autocratic regime: the killing of peaceful protesters, torture, arrests, liquidation of organisations, and forced emigration. All these have become new

challenges for youth from Eastern European countries and inspired solidarity action from European youth on different levels.

Representatives of civil society, including member organisations of the Belarusian National Council RADA, have experienced various types of discrimination. Thousands of young people from Belarus were forced to leave their country for security reasons, including to Ukraine. Tens of thousands were arrested in Belarus, and over a thousand are still in prisons and deprived of all their democratic rights and the right to live freely in their country. All these people are either political prisoners or political refugees.

The full team of the Belarusian National Youth Council RADA have been forced to leave the country and have not been able to return safely to Belarus for more than a year, nor have they been allowed to live in their home country. At the same time, we all continue to stand for the values of democracy and human rights.

Thousands of Belarusians living in Ukraine together with Ukrainian youth are fighting for the freedom and independence of Ukraine. Young people from all over Europe strongly condemn Russia's military aggression and the Belarusian regime that supports Russia in these actions.

However, more and more often we hear unfair accusations from political actors that the Belarusians and the Belarusian people are collaborators in the war against Ukraine, and that they are aggressors and enemies of the Ukrainian people. Furthermore, we are concerned by the multiple signals that Belarusians and other third-country citizens face discriminatory treatment in different countries.

We firmly emphasize that unfair, unjust elections were held in Belarus in 2020. The Belarusian regime has lost its legitimacy and should not be considered representative of the Belarusian people; it is not recognized by any European or another democratic country in the World.

The European Union is founded on the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law, and respect for human rights. Considering the fact that Belarusian youth is continuously showing alignment with these values and their promotion in Belarusian society, as well as the implementation of UN Resolutions 2250 and 2419 on Youth, Peace, and Security, we are taking our full responsibility to promote peace, its values, and the well-being of all young people.

The European Youth Forum and its member organisations:

1. urge the European Parliament, the European Commission, the Council of the European Union, and more generally all European politicians and parties, to refrain from associating the political regime in Belarus with the Belarusian people;
2. express their regret at discriminatory statements by politicians and parties at national and European levels, and point out that such statements only increase the problem of nationality-based discrimination;
3. condemn nationality-based discrimination as a flagrant violation of individual rights and an expression of intolerance, and call upon the governments of the Member States to ensure that Belarusian and other third-country citizens escaping Belarus and Ukraine are protected against violence and any form of discrimination;
4. call upon the governments of European countries to provide visa and humanitarian assistance to Belarusian young activists and NGO representatives;
5. support the solidarity movement with Belarusian youth, in Belarus and in exile, and stand up against discrimination against young Belarusian activists and Belarusian people in the light of the Russian military aggression against Ukraine;
6. call on the Council of Europe to join the solidarity movement with Belarusian youth forced to leave first Belarus and now Ukraine to the European Union;
7. call on the EU bodies to join the solidarity movement with Belarusian youth forced to leave first Belarus and now Ukraine to different countries.

2.

Analysis of the documents developed by the Belarusian National Youth Council RADA in cooperation with its Member Organisations in regard to the tendency of work focused on National and International levels

Marharyta Vorykhava and Aliaksei Plashchynski

Background

This evaluation study is commissioned by RADA. It is undertaken by Mr. Aliaksey Plashchynsky (European Youth Parliament – Member Organisation of RADA).

The Belarusian National Youth Council RADA is a voluntary union of 34 youth associations, created to consolidate youth organisations and initiatives in Belarus. RADA operates in the areas of representation, promotion, and defending common interests and freedoms of youth organisations and young people of Belarus.

The Belarusian National Youth Council RADA is an independent democratic national youth council of Belarus and a member of the European Youth Forum (YFJ). It started working in 1992 and was officially registered in 1997. As a result of the repressive policy of the authorities toward civil society, RADA was deprived of official registration in Belarus in 2006. Despite this, RADA managed to maintain its structure

and continue to operate thanks to its international partners. For a long time, RADA's activity was not public and focused exclusively on supporting member organisations. Since 2014, RADA has changed its approach to its work and has become more visible in society. In recent years, RADA has increased the number of member organisations representing such areas of the youth sector as LGBTQ, human rights, and inclusion.

RADA is a recognized expert organisation in the field of monitoring, protection, and education in the field of youth rights in Belarus at the national and international level (youth rights watchdog). Expertise is confirmed by the systematic monitoring of violations of the rights of Belarusian youth and the provision of information to interested parties.

RADA strives to conduct systematic data collection and preparation of reports/surveys on the situation of Belarusian youth; conduct its

research and cooperate with analytical and research centres to accumulate and analyse up-to-date information about Belarusian youth and youth organisations; create positions and other documents to improve the situation of young people; organize and conduct campaigns in defence of the interests of Belarusian youth together with national and international partners.

Therefore RADA will start with this evaluation study themselves to create a baseline for and give input to the development and implementation of the planned activities.

The main objective of the evaluation study is to evaluate the youth council's capacity in the sphere of development of statements and resolutions with a focus on (1) Youth, (2) Human Rights, and (3) Other. The study's results will be used to design RADA's capacity of the youth council in the sphere.

Overview

The current context of the youth sector in Belarus is driven by the following key factors:

- Increased repression against civil society since 2020, due to which young activists were forced to flee the country, and some were imprisoned. Another important factor was the liquidation of registered organisations, including most RADA affiliates. All this has led to the fact that in Belarus the realization of the right to freedom of association, peaceful assembly, and freedom of speech has become a subject of criminal liability for those who present an alternative to the official narrative. For the youth sector, the repression created new challenges and changes to which it was necessary to adapt: maintaining the connection between those who left and those who remained; continuation of the activities of organisations and initiatives associated with high risks; the actual impossibility of official financing of activities; reduced opportunities

for participation in international programs and projects for both organisations and youth; the exodus of young people abroad. At the same time, the manifestation of social inclusion through the support of prisoners and victims for political reasons has gained popularity among youth, as well as a high degree of civic participation – as shown by the emergence of new young leaders and leaders, as well as high involvement as volunteers.

- As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, public organisations were for a long time rare conductors of information in Belarus about the danger of coronavirus infection, the means of reducing the risk of the disease, and other WHO recommendations. Youth organisations often took responsibility for their members, volunteers, and people participating in events, independently introduced rules of conduct, provided masks and antiseptics, and moved activities online. The pandemic left many young people in Belarus in a vulnerable position: international programs and projects were suspended or postponed indefinitely, and educational institutions randomly introduced and cancelled various rules, which led to disruption of the educational process and worsened the relationship between students and administration.
- The trend of the digitalization of the activities of youth organisations and of society at large was on the one hand a logical continuation of the increase in the use of information technologies in society, but on the other hand, it was accelerated due to the activation of civil society during 2020, as well as the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result of this trend, organisations' events could be attended by more people, regardless of geographic location, new technologies were used, and digital literacy increased, including a critical approach to obtaining information, concern for digital security, and concealment of personal data on the internet. One of the negative effects of the

digitalization of activities was fatigue syndrome (zoom-fatigue), due to which it was necessary to revise and change the online work format to make the participants feel comfortable and make sure their attention is not scattered.

- The decline in the authority of state bodies and the increase in the authority of civil society organisations has accelerated due to the socio-political and epidemiological crises, but this trend has existed for a long time, which is confirmed by the RADA 2019–2020 study. As part of the study, it was found that the degree of trust and participation in the activities of CSOs reached 40% among youth, while only 11% of young people interacted with government bodies and programs (March 2020). This trend, together with the policy of paternalism on the part of the state bodies of Belarus, has led to the fact that state initiatives, including the “Strategy for the Development of State Youth Policy”, remain without the attention and participation of young people, creating a gap between the activities of state bodies and what is relevant for and demanded by young people.

Evaluation criteria and methods

This evaluation is based on assessing against 5 main criteria. The main categories are:

- Linguistic efficiency. Policy papers are usually addressed to a non-academic audience, such as a particular official, agency, or organisation. Especially considering the current level of advocacy work in the Republic of Belarus, the language should be understandable and accessible to different audience groups.
- Topic depth. This category reveals the depth of the description of the topic when writing relevant documents through semantic analysis, additionally covering the evidence provided in the policy work.

- Argumentation.
- Compositional, logical structures.
- Operable conclusions. Analysis of logical conclusions and conclusions from the given argumentation, as well as the actors to which recommendations are made.

Based on these activities, each of the criteria is graded according to 5 categories:

- Fully met. The criterion is met completely or nearly completely.
- Partially met. Some aspects of this criterion are covered in a substantial way, but there are areas for development.
- Not met. This criterion is not met or is met only in a small way.
- Not applicable. This criterion is not relevant.
- Not assessed. There was not enough data received to assess this criterion

Criteria	Assessment	Comments
THESIS		
Can we find the thesis? Does it make a clear argument?	Fully met	Yes, we can. The thesis always makes a clear argument.
Is the argument focused enough to be covered in the paper?	Fully met	Yes, it is. It is formulated in a direct and precise way.
Does it accurately voice the main idea of the paper?	Fully met	Yes, it accurately resembles the main topic of discussion.
ARGUMENT/CONTENT		
Is the thesis supported in the body of the paper? Is any evidence or support missing? Is all of the textual evidence clearly related to the thesis? If some information is not relevant, can it be cut? Is there any information that contradicts the thesis?	Fully met	Overall, the body of the paper is constructed in a rather formal and precise manner. There's a clear correlation between discussed points and the thesis and no contradictions or useless information was found during reviews.
Includes counterarguments/alternative arguments	Not met	No instances of counterarguments or alternative arguments were found.
Coherence. Do any of the ideas seem vague? What can the writer explain more thoroughly that would help the reader? Is the purpose of the paper clear?	Fully met	Even if the idea statement is written in a vague way, its following descriptions are well-written to clarify any misalignments.
STRUCTURE		
Is the structure apparent and easy to follow?	Fully met	Yes, it is.
Is there a logic to the structure?	Fully met	The general structure is usually the same: introduction with the relevant information, followed by a list of concerns/requests and a summary.
	Поўнасцю выконваецца	Так, у патрэбных месцах.
Are there adequate transitions to help connect ideas?	Fully met	Yes, they are where required.
Adequate summary of findings and reasonable conclusion?	Partially met	Usually present, but not always evident.

Conclusions and recommendations

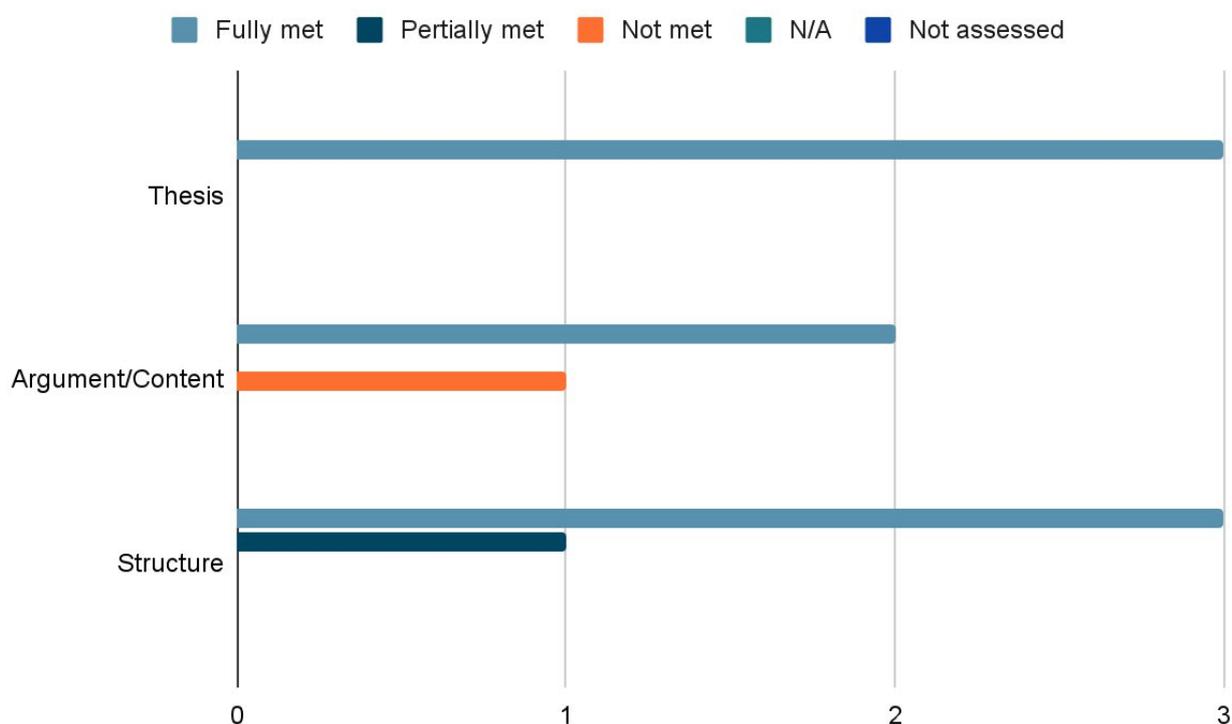


Figure 1. Criteria assessment table

The overall results indicate that:

- generally, the policy papers and documents developed are focused on the big picture and meet the goals of RADA;
- the overall structure of the papers is clear and logically accessible. All of the sections are useful and necessary for the papers;
- improvement can be awaited in the area of transparency and openness by including a counterargument to the statement published, thus aiming to stimulate the audience to decide on the position on their own.

Assessment in further detail

Considering the documents developed by RADA within the framework of policy work on extensive political platforms, an assessment of the work trend within national and international circles can be done.

Policy work conducted by RADA since 2020:

- Resolution on non-discrimination of Young Belarusian activists and support for democratic principles in Europe;
- Resolution on expanding space for youth organisations and NYCs;
- Resolution on abolishing death penalty measures in Belarus;
- A brief analytical review of the situation and condition of youth and youth NGOs in Belarus after the events of August 2020;
- Suggestions for the List of Issues Before Reporting to be adopted by the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights at its 71st session (PSWG) concerning Belarus;
- Official appeal to the United Nations special rapporteur;
- Official Public Statements;

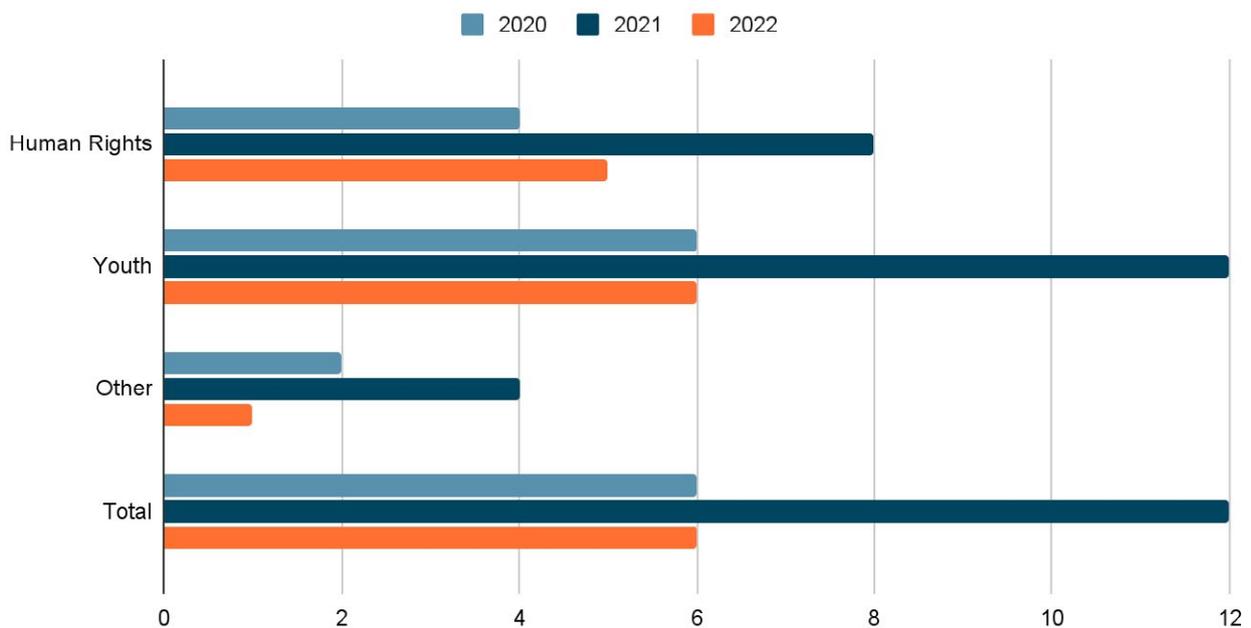
- Court Observation of the hearings on politically motivated cases of repressed youth;
- Universal Periodic Review;

The main keywords used in the papers are as follows:

“youth rights, rights to education, equal rights, freedom of expression, young human rights defenders, student rights, shrinking civic space, youth organisation”

Topic coverage

RADA explicitly emphasizes two main themes in its statements and documents: youth and human rights. In the chart below, you can see a comparative overview of the topics that have been covered by RADA in its policy work presented in publishing official statements:



We can draw the following conclusions from the data presented above:

- Regardless of political world events and working conditions, RADA remains faithful to its main task of working on the topic of youth. During the last three years, 100% of RADA’s statements are devoted to the topic of youth.
- The number of statements of all categories has doubled in 2021 compared to 2020, and an early analysis of the results of 2022

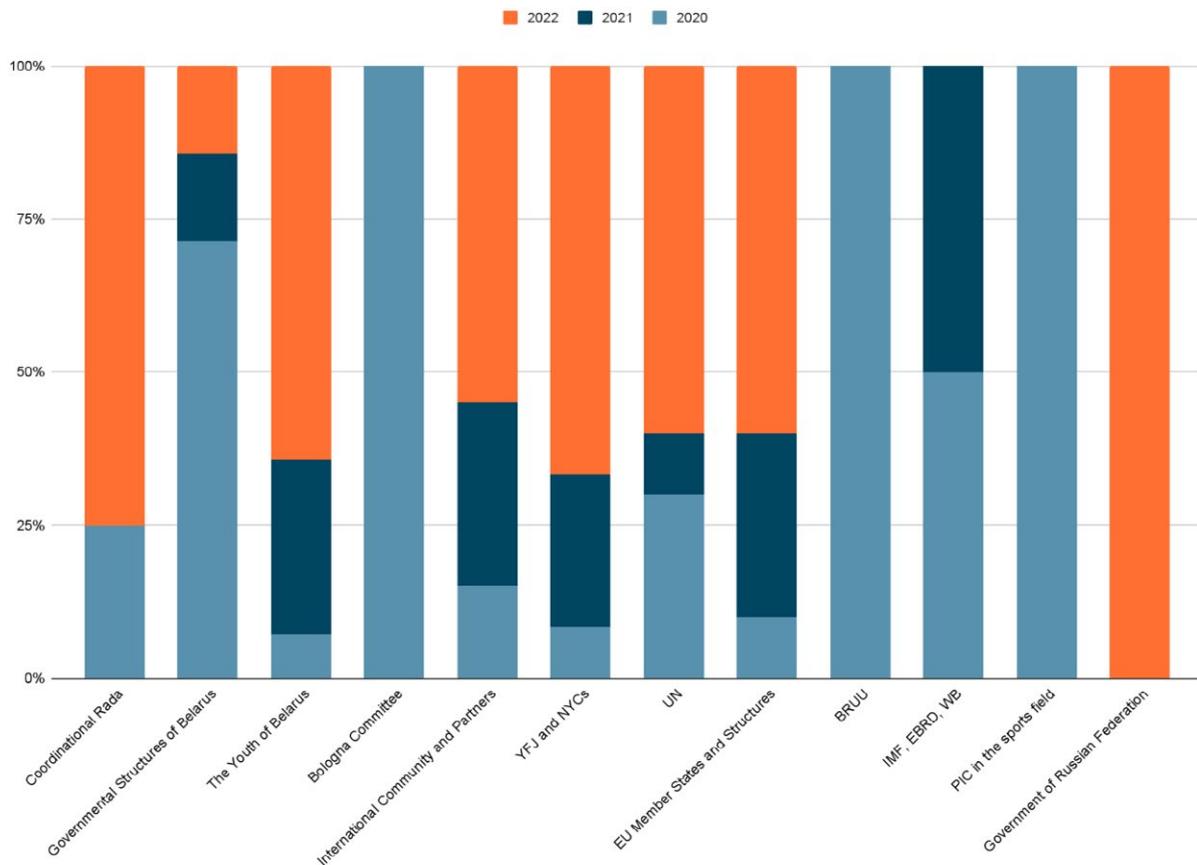
clearly indicates at least a continuation, if not an improvement, of the levels achieved in 2021.

- The number of statements on human rights in the first half of 2022 already exceeds the number of statements on this topic for the whole of 2020, which certainly indicates positive growth dynamics in this sector.
- This, however, is also an area with room for improvement in the future: where more statements are focused on human rights,

less attention is paid to other topics, which are currently at least half the number of human rights statements for the third year in a row.

Bodies in Charge

In its policy work, RADA addresses multiple actors from the relevant fields of work that are capable of representing the interests of the target groups, whose interests were covered in the paper developed. RADA gives recommendations or advice to the following actors and political bodies:



We will go through the statistics of all references in recent years one by one and evaluate them:

- The number of referrals to Coordinational RADA (CR) in the first half of this year is already three times the number of referrals in all of 2020. This is a positive trend because CR is the face of democratic forces in Belarus. However, we recommend deepening

and increasing interaction with the Coordinating Rada due to its legitimate position of representing the interests of the Belarusian society at the international level. Accordingly, a certain level of cooperation is required for equal representation of groups of society.

- In turn, the number of appeals to the state structures of Belarus has fallen by almost 4 times compared to 2020. Such an outcome

is more than understandable: at present, the structures are not trustworthy, and there are no appeals results. The same conclusion can be made regarding BRUU: despite only having one appeal in 2020, it's unlikely that such attempts are worth the effort.

- The number of appeals to the Youth of Belarus continues to grow actively: 4 times from 2020 to 2021 and by 25% in the first half of 2022 compared to all of 2021. Since RADA's work is aimed primarily at the youth of Belarus, dialogue with them is important and promising.
- As for the Bologna Committee and PIC in the sports field, there is clearly a lack of appeals. For the years 2021 and 2022, there were no new appeals to them, despite the widespread influence of mentioned actors.
- Appeals to IMF, EBRO, and WB are not notable for high usage, so this is another area where RADA has an opportunity for development.
- The number of appeals to the International Community and partners is stable in its growth: it has doubled from 2020 to 2021 and has already exceeded the 2021 results for the first half of 2022. Also, the number of appeals to YFJ and NYCs, as well as EU member states and structures has increased. The statistics are exactly the same: tripling from 2020 to 2021 and up 66% for the first half of 2022 compared to last year. This is a positive trajectory, as all of these actors are directly related to RADA.

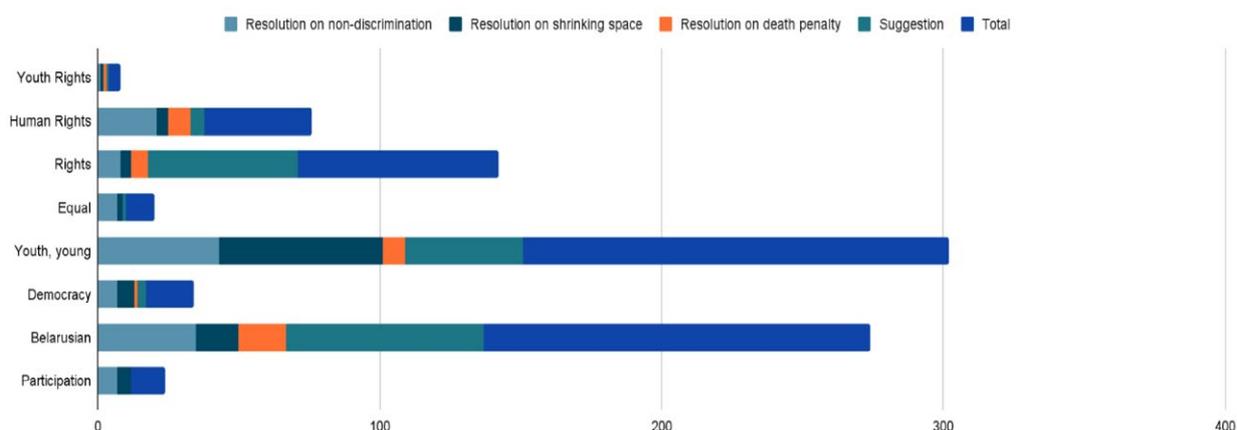
- Regarding UN referrals, the number dropped noticeably in 2021 but returned to a good state in the first half of 2022, again surpassing the results of 2020.
- We should also note the emergence of a new actor in 2022, the Russian Federation. However, it's hard to make conclusions and predictions about further treatment in this case.

Summing up the analysis results, it is worth noting the tendency to move away from references to the Belarusian actors and refocus on international actors over time. As for aspects to look at in the future, RADA should resort more often to referring to the Bologna Committee as a direct decision-maker in the process of educating the student body.

Assessing the International area of Policy work

Of particular interest is the work of RADA in the international arena, especially given the situation with the general level of development of skills in working with political documents in the civil sector of Belarus.

We propose to turn to the analysis of the distribution of keywords declared to reflect the topics disclosed in the policy work of the RADA. Evaluation of the distribution of keywords in the Policy documents developed by RADA will allow us to note the trend towards using individual keywords, which we consider as an indicator of topic disclosure and an assessment of the degree of focus on individual topics.



Noting with sympathy that RADA transparently celebrates and broadcasts its values in the works described above:

- Both works submitted for evaluation include a description of the problems associated with the main target group – Belarusian youth and youth organisations in Belarus. According to the analysis, it can be noted that the greatest focus is indeed placed on young people in the context of Belarusian realities: the term “young people” was directly used more than 190 times in total in all works.
- RADA outlines the boundaries of both works with the framework of human rights and broadcasts its position by frequently mentioning the terms “rights”, “youth rights” and “human rights” – 89 times in total.
- Youth rights, democracy, and participation are evident topics of discussion.

General recommendations and conclusions

RADA has done an exceptional job in developing policy documents, and moreover, is creating a platform for the development of related skills throughout the civil sector through the open distribution of resources with an audience, the provision of educational opportunities and a knowledge transfer process.

In the field of representing the interests of its target group, RADA has achieved a strong position and is promoting an agenda relevant to the youth of Belarus. First of all, the work of the RADA is focused on interaction with international actors (the number of appeals to the state structures of Belarus has fallen by almost 4 times compared to 2020), which in a normal situation would be a negative factor. Given the specific situation in Belarus, however, we prefer to assess this factor as neutral or neutral-positive since interaction with state structures would interfere with the further activities of the RADA.

3.

Address regarding limitations of access of Belarusian youth to youth exchanges and participation in the Erasmus+ program

Dzmitry Herylovich and Maryna Nikifarenka

To Whom It May Concern,

We, the union of thirty-four democratic youth organisations of Belarus, created to consolidate youth organisations and initiatives of Belarus for representing, promoting and defending common interests, exercising the right to freedoms of association and other constitutional rights, represented by the Governing Body – the Board of RADA, make the following address regarding limitations of access of Belarusian youth to youth exchanges and participation in the Erasmus+ program.

Here, the main theses of the address are presented.

What happens to Belarusian youth Civic Society organisations and young people?

Since 2020 civic society has been under severe pressure in Belarus.

More than 800 Belarusian CSOs have been liquidated or are in the process of liquidation.

There is criminal liability for organizing and taking part in unregistered organisations with a prison sentence of up to 2 years (**article 193-1** of the Criminal Code of the Republic of Belarus).

In many cases, it becomes unsafe for activists to stay in Belarus because of their political views and civil activism.

Under current conditions democratic CSOs have no opportunity to act freely on the territory of Belarus.

Many of the CSOs and young people who were forced to leave Belarus are part (or potential part) of Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps programs.

Participation of Belarusian CSOs in Erasmus+ and ESC

Impact on civic society:

- visibility and recognition of the youth movement and civic society of Belarus;
- recognition and understanding of the situation in Belarus;

- capacities of youth civic activists; solidarity with Belarusian civic society;
- emphasis on the fact that the vast majority of Belarusian young people are against the war;
- representation of the national identity of Belarus; strengthening of the democratic development in Belarus.

Impact on particular participants:

- formation of active citizenship and proactivity; promotion of European values;
- formation of important modern skills through a non-formal education approach;
- multicultural dialogue;
- motivation and space to learn a foreign language.

Erasmus+

3,000+ students and academic staff have participated in Erasmus+ exchanges since 2009

3,400+ young Belarusian people and workers have participated in joint exchanges, training and projects in the EU

European Solidarity Corps and European Voluntary Service:

- 10 organisations with Quality Label in Belarus;
- 100+ young Europeans visited Belarus as participants;
- 1000+ Belarusian young people have taken part.

Challenges:

1. Illegal liquidation of CSOs by the regime;
2. Criminal liability for acting on behalf of an unregistered organisation or those in process of liquidation in Belarus;

3. Forced exile from Belarus for active young people. Belarusians settled abroad can hardly participate in mobility programs on behalf of Belarus;
4. Risk of prosecution for cooperating with liquidated CSOs or CSOs in a process of liquidation;
5. Unjustified association of CSOs with the regime and the Russian invasion in Ukraine;
6. Visa and logistics;
7. Bank accounts of CSOs are under strict control and restrictions;
8. Costs for young people.

Potential negative consequences of discrimination against young Belarusians:

1. The national identity of Belarusian participants has fewer chances to be shown;
2. Belarusian CSOs get fewer chances to survive;
3. The civic society of Belarus has fewer chances to be seen and heard;
4. The place of democratic CSOs in Belarus can be taken by GoNGOs (Government-affiliated NGOs).

Additional rules are:

1. Exclude Belarusian youth organisations that are either pro-government (state-funded) or close allies of the Belarusian authorities (GoNGOs) from participating or receiving grants;
2. Consider the possibility of opening core support to the liquidated Belarusian youth organisations;
3. Make the participation of young people from Belarus in the European mobility programs more accessible economically and logistically.

4.

«Summer holiday» in Belarus: repression against young people in June – August 2022.

Lavon Marozau and Darya Rubleuskaya

Summary:

- The situation of a deep crisis of human rights in Belarus against the background of the aggression of the Russian Federation in Ukraine is getting worse;
- Young people (18 – 35 years old) are one of the most vulnerable social groups that are subject to politically motivated persecution by the authorities for the peaceful and non-violent exercise of their rights and freedoms;
- More than 1,300 political prisoners are still held in places of captivity, among which at least (number) are young people;
- Employees of law enforcement structures and places of detention continue to implement targeted torture practices, as well as treatment that is cruel, inhuman, and degrading to human dignity;
- The possible denunciation of the Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights will limit the possibility of protecting the rights violated by the Belarusian authorities;

- Belarus remains the only country in Europe that continues the practice of issuing death sentences;
- The illegal practice of recording and publishing “repentance videos” with detainees on pro-government channels continues, including involving minors.

Political prisoners and politically motivated persecution

Politically motivated administrative and criminal prosecution is still used by the Belarusian authorities as a means of suppressing dissent among citizens. Detentions occur both for participation in peaceful protests in 2020 and for the actions of the post-election campaign. Since February 2022, there has also been a wave of repression in relation to manifestations of an anti-war stance and support for Ukraine.

1,300 political prisoners are held in places of captivity, among which at least (number) are young people. Belarus [ranks](#) 20th in the world in terms of the number of prisoners. It should be noted that in places of captivity, torture and other forms of violence are systematically

applied to politically convicted persons. For example, 25-year-old ex-police prisoner [Nastassya Kukharova](#), convicted under Article 342 of the Criminal Code, spoke about her own detention:

“In the room with me, there were two huge bags. One of them grabbed me by the hair and started hitting my head against the wall, then punched my head, face... I started to have a tantrum. He hit me below the chest a few times... Then he broke my glasses and was pissed about it. He finished beating me and I was sobbing.

He continued to taunt. He said: ‘Well, why are you crying, Nastachka, it’s all right. Maybe some tea or coffee for you? Now you will go to the zone, su...a yo...anaya, and you will organize a revolution there!’

They said that people like me should be killed. That people like me should not even be allowed near children [Nasta is a teacher of Russian language and literature, taught at school]. It was unbearable.”

In addition to physical violence and torture, political prisoners continue to be subjected to such restrictions as the blockade of correspondence, the denial of medical care, the arbitrary deprivation of legal meetings and transfers, the strengthening of the regime and the transfer to stricter types of punishment.

With the beginning of the full-scale offensive of the Russian Federation on the territory of Ukraine, the practice of persecution of peaceful anti-war protesters in Belarus has intensified: we are observing cases of detention and criminal prosecution. So, for example, 20-year-old student [Danuta Peradnia](#) was sentenced to 6.6 years in prison for reposting a chat text that sharply criticized the actions of Vladimir Putin and Alexander Lukashenko to start a war in Ukraine. It also contained a call for street demonstrations and noted the lack of prospects for the Belarusian army in the event of its direct entry into the war. The KGB added the young girl to the list of “persons involved in terrorist activities”.

Individuals who express a desire to help Ukraine fight the results of the Russian military aggression are persecuted. One example involves the [detention](#) and initiation of a criminal case against the 27-year-old Minchuk, who was registered in the Belarusian armed formation within the USU.

In addition, the practice of political persecution of citizens who barred their electoral rights continues. For example, 18-year-old Roman Karpuka [was sentenced](#) to 3 years in prison for sending letters to members of the referendum commission. The text of the letters contained appeals to count votes honestly and to report violations at polling stations, as well as a list of articles of the Criminal Code with responsibility for falsifiers. Roman himself noted at the trial that he just wanted the votes to be counted fairly.

Violation of freedom of peaceful assembly and suppression of freedom of expression

The practice of sentencing participants in protest actions during the 2020 elections continues. It should be noted that [human rights activists deny](#) the existence of mass riots in Belarus during protests and recognized 190 of their participants, convicted under Art. 293 of the Criminal Code, as political prisoners.

Human rights activists condemn these and other cases of punishment for the exercise of freedom of expression and recognize the imprisoned participants in these cases as political prisoners: the decriminalization of defamation offences is a standard formulated and justified in the decisions of a number of international organisations. The UN and the OSCE have recommended that the laws that provide for criminal liability for defamation be abolished, or at least not be deprived of liberty for committing defamation offences, accepting civil prosecution as the norm. The OSCE Parliamentary Assembly called for the repeal of all laws that provide for criminal liability for defamation of public figures, the state or its bodies. The

UN and OSCE plenipotentiaries on freedom of speech stated that “criminal prosecution for defamation is not a justifiable restriction on freedom of expression; all laws on criminal prosecution for defamation should be repealed and replaced, where appropriate, with civil liability measures.” No one can be punished for criticizing or insulting a nation, state or its symbols, government, state departments or public and political figures, as well as a foreign nation, state or its symbols, government, state departments or state and public figures, unless the criticism or insults are intended to incite violent acts or may lead to such acts. Restrictions on freedom of expression should not be related to the official position of those persons about whom information is disseminated.

One of the most impressive cases is the story of 24-year-old Belarusian Yana Pinchuk, who was arrested on the territory of the Russian Federation and whom the Belarusian authorities accuse of managing the Telegram channels “Vitebsk 97%”, “Vorsha 97%” and “Navapolatsk and Polotsk 97%”. The authorities of the Russian Federation [carried out](#) Yana’s extradition, despite the prohibition of the UN Human Rights Committee. In Belarus, the girl was charged under five articles of the Criminal Code, and faces 19 years in prison.

Also in July, a 17-year-old journalist and author of a sports publication, Roman Kachyna, was [detained](#) for participating in protest actions and making negative comments about the war in Ukraine. A repentant video appeared on pro-government Telegram channels and the boy was arrested.

Freedom of association

The policy of destroying any form of association of citizens, including through the liquidation of non-profit organisations, continues. Thus, in June, one of the oldest youth organisations of Belarus, the Belarusian Association of Students of Architects, was [liquidated](#). This organisation was founded in 1993 and was engaged in non-formal education. Students

watched movies, read lectures and held Belarusian and international architectural forums and schools.

In August, Alexandra Kondratsenko, a student of the Faculty of International Relations of BSU, who supervised the “One step closer” project, was [detained](#). As part of the One Step Closer project, BSU applicants could talk with current students and gain a lot of useful information.

We remind you that now (a number) of youth non-profit organisations have been liquidated in Belarus, and some of their members have been imprisoned and sentenced to real terms. For example, Ksenia Syromalot and Alana Gebremariam – members of the Council of Association of Belarusian Students – were sentenced to 2.5 years in a general regime colony.

Torture cases. Cruel, inhuman, humiliating treatment

Human rights defenders point out that during detention, officers use torture as well as cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment, which is a gross violation of the inalienable and absolute right to be free from torture (Article 5 of the Universal Declaration human rights).

So, for example, [20-year-old Anna Marska](#) was detained five times by security forces since the beginning of 2021, according to administrative cases. In February, after being detained at an anti-war protest, the girl witnessed the beating of a cellmate in the TsIP on Akrestina, and in May, she was beaten by the security forces herself. Anna spent a total of 63 days behind bars in inhumane conditions. In May, in GUBAZIK, a girl was held on the floor for half an hour with a “swallow”, one of the methods of torture.

Death penalty

[Special Rapporteurs](#) on the issue of extrajudicial executions, executions without due trial or arbitrary executions, on the provisions in the field of human rights in Belarus and on the issue of the promotion and protection of human

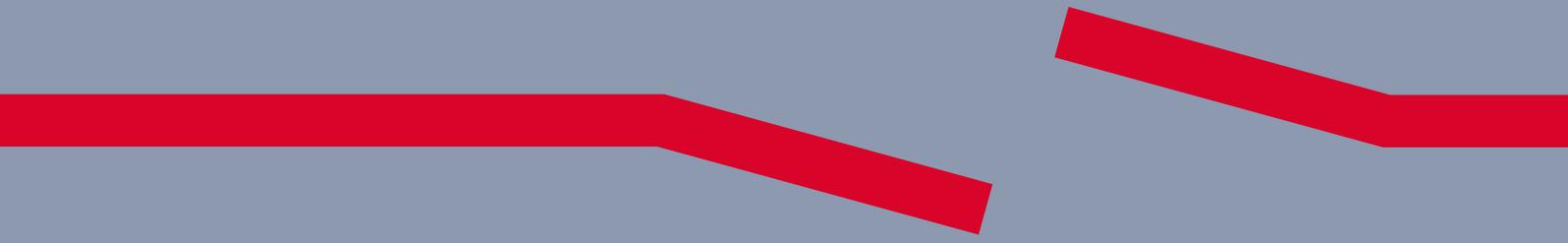
rights and fundamental freedoms in the context of the fight against terrorism of the UN Human Rights Committee sent a message to the government of Belarus. In it, they expressed concern about amendments to the Criminal Code of Belarus, which introduce the death penalty for preparation and attempt to commit crimes related to terrorism. The Special Rapporteurs expressed concern about the process of adoption of these amendments, which lacked transparency and civil dialogue, and did not provide adequate time for consultations with experts and civil society.

The Special Rapporteurs reminded the government of Belarus of its obligations under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the Convention against Torture. Separately, the Special Rapporteurs emphasized the inconsistency of the adopted amendments to Article 6 of the ICCPR, which stipulates that death sentences may be imposed only for the most serious crimes involving intentional loss of life. The Special Rapporteurs expressed concern about the broad and vague wording of Art. 289 of the Criminal Code (the “Terrorism Act”), which could potentially cover activities such as dissent and the protection of human rights. The Special Rapporteurs recalled that crimes punishable by the death penalty, like any other crime, must be clearly defined in law in accordance with the principle of legal certainty.

The report also emphasizes that expanding the scope of the death penalty “contradicts the spirit and purpose of Article 6 of the ICCPR”. According to the Special Rapporteurs, the amendments may lead to “irreversible damage and flagrant violations of the right to life”. Moreover, the Special Rapporteurs drew attention to reports of systematic violations of the right to a fair trial in relation to persons facing the death penalty, and noted that states that apply the death penalty are obliged to strictly and consistently monitor the implementation of the judicial guarantees enshrined in articles 9 and 14 of the ICCPR to avoid arbitrary deprivation of life.

Recommendations to international actors and foreign partners:

- Pay attention to the [practice](#) of opening pro-government military-patriotic circles in Belarus and stop any partnerships with educational institutions that thus involve minors in supporting the existing regime;
- Additionally protect persons who are being tried in Belarus within the framework of the newly introduced institution of “absentee courts”;
- Initiate the opening of support and resocialization programs for young political prisoners who are released from prison and need medical and psychological assistance;
- Expand academic and activist youth exchange programs for activists from Belarus to strengthen grassroots initiatives and youth organisations;
- Actively express an opinion about the situation regarding the rights of young people in Belarus, supporting current information in the foreign information space;
- Support political prisoners through letters, postcards, parcels and direct assistance to relatives.



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