

# QUASHING ONLINE DISSSENT



**ANTI-EXTREMISM LAWS PUT  
DIGITAL RIGHTS AT RISK  
IN BELARUS**

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## Introduction

*...the laws have been grossly misused to punish, with harsh sentences, the legitimate exercise of the rights to freedom of expression, assembly and association.*

*Report of the Group of Independent Experts on the Situation of Human Rights in Belarus, A/HRC/58/68, para. 28*

*He was jeopardising his traditional rights of freedom and independence by daring to exercise them.*

*Catch-22, Joseph Heller*

Autocrats tend to coin a personal set of buzz-words – elastic labels that can be stretched to fit almost any political foe. Catch-all terms like ‘extremist’, ‘foreign agent’, or ‘undesirable organisation’, loosely defined under national laws, are an essential part of the dictators’ vocabulary. ‘Anti-extremism’ laws and policies have long served as tools for societal control and the suppression of civic engagement in [Eastern Europe and Central Asia](#). The hostile tone around the newly crafted term of [‘gender ideology extremism’](#) is also heard across the Atlantic. While [violent extremism](#) is a real threat, worth monitoring and combating, the liberty with which the notion is juggled and weaponised poses an equally real threat to human rights, offline and online.

The gravest threats to digital freedoms do not come only from [phishing attacks](#) or [spyware](#) but from the machinery of law, repurposed to serve as part of the censorship apparatus. The repressive tactics do not require a high degree of technological sophistication to be part of the [digital dictators’ toolbox](#). The ‘analogue’ means of tightening laws, updating lists of banned materials, and regularly issuing harsh verdicts can have disastrous effects on digital rights, particularly free speech online.

‘Anti-extremism’ laws pose an inherent risk to digital rights as they are easily wielded. The Human Rights Committee articulates this risk in General Comment No. 34 to the International Covenant of Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), stating that offences like ‘encouragement of terrorism’ and ‘extremist activity’ should be ‘clearly defined to ensure that they do not lead to unnecessary or disproportionate interference with freedom of expression.’ The Joint [Declaration](#) on Freedom of Expression and Countering Violent Extremism<sup>1</sup> also warned that the concept of ‘extremism’ should not be used as the basis for restricting freedom of expression unless defined clearly and appropriately narrowly.

Imprecision is the authoritarians’ power – the broader the term, the easier it is to convert a meme, a donation, or a simple ‘like’ into a crime. The definitions are stretched, redrafted, and even applied retroactively, so yesterday’s lawful post can become today’s crime.

<sup>1</sup> Authored by the United Nations (UN) Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Opinion and Expression, the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Representative on Freedom of the Media, the Organisation of American States (OAS) Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression and the African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights (ACHPR) Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression and Access to Information, Having discussed these issues together with the assistance of ARTICLE 19 and the Centre for Law and Democracy (CLD), published on 3 May 2016.

## Belarus: Extremism conveyor

Belarus seems to be leading the authoritarians and authoritarian wannabes by example – branding almost any dissent as ‘extremism’ or ‘terrorism’ has become the go-to tool of repression. The prosecution for ‘extremism’ often takes absurd forms – [songs](#), [memes](#), and [anime](#) are routinely deemed as manifestations of extremism. However, the consequences are far from humorous – Belarusian courts have repeatedly issued harsh sentences for making [online donations](#), leaving [online comments](#), or administering [online platforms](#). Since the [2020-2021 protests](#), the Belarusian *de-facto* authorities reported at least [22.500 criminal cases](#) opened on ‘anti-extremism’ grounds.

The ‘ecosystem’ of ‘anti-extremism’ repression rests on specialised laws on combating ‘extremism’ and ‘terrorism’, corresponding criminal and administrative offenses; numerous [‘extremist’ lists](#); amendments enabling the [citizenship revocation](#) for ‘extremist crimes’, the imposition of the death penalty for [‘acts of terrorism’](#) and [‘high treason’](#), and introducing [‘prone to extremism’ labels](#) in prisons. The politicised nature of this system has been repeatedly criticised, including by the [Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Belarus](#), the [Group of Independent Experts on the Situation of Human Rights in Belarus](#), the [OSCE Moscow Mechanism](#) rapporteurs, as well as the international and local NGOs.

The cost of such elastic labels is measured in lives. [Hanna Kandratsenka](#) was arrested in May 2022 for a handful of critical comments left in Telegram channels. Charged with ‘insulting the president, officials and judges’, she was sentenced to three years in a general-regime colony and a heavy fine. While imprisoned, she was diagnosed with advanced cervical cancer, yet the authorities denied her early release. She served her sentence in full, released only in June 2024. Hanna [died](#) in February 2025 a few months before her 40th birthday, leaving only her elderly mother to mourn. [Sviatlana Krutsikava](#) committed suicide by throwing herself under a train in December 2024 following accusations of ‘disseminating extremist materials’ – charges frequently used by Belarusian authorities to repress those opposing the regime. According to her friends, Krutsikava felt she could no longer cope with the constant searches, arrests, and psychological pressure. In May 2025, political prisoner [Valiantsin Shtermer](#), who had been sentenced to 5 years in prison for online comments condemning Russian aggression against Ukraine back in 2023, [died](#) Shklou penal colony. This is the same colony where, on 21 May 2021, another political prisoner, [Vitold Ashurak](#) died in detention – a tragedy which prompted rights group Viasna to designate 21 May as the Day of Soliarity with Political Prisoners in Belarus. These deaths are, sadly, only some of the stark examples of the ongoing and cruel [political persecution](#) in the country.

Dozens of Belarusians are serving time for writing a sharp comment, or making a modest donation to solidarity funds. Every conviction shows how any form of dissent can be criminalised, and every day of persecution exacerbates the physical and psychological toll on those targeted. While the Belarusian authorities may have weaponised the ‘anti-extremism’ laws to curb dissent online, spreading knowledge is a powerful tool to fight injustice.

## Cases and tendencies

Thousands of Belarusians have been fined or sentenced by courts to up to fifteen days of administrative detention for simply storing, sharing, reposting, subscribing to or liking online materials declared ‘extremist’ by the authorities since 2020<sup>2</sup>. Criminal persecution is widespread and on the rise too. So far,

<sup>2</sup> [Report of the Group of Independent Experts on the Situation of Human Rights in Belarus](#), OHCHR, A/HRC/58/68, 7 February 2025, para. 34

human rights defenders have documented criminal prosecutions for a wide range of online activities, including:

- [registering in activists' 'extremist' chatbots](#);
- [joining activists' 'extremist' chats](#);
- [shooting videos and posting them on 'extremist' channels](#);
- [participating in online educational programs](#);
- [taking part in online shows](#);
- [sharing information on military and police movements](#);
- [developing software for pro-democracy organisations](#);
- [posting TikTok videos on social issues](#);
- [doxxing governmental officials](#);
- [engaging in chat roulette conversation](#); and
- [messaging Belarusian military units fighting in the Ukrainian army](#).

Below is an overview of the types of cases where digital rights are most affected by the repressive use of 'anti-extremism' laws in Belarus – persecution for online comments (1), administration of online channels (2), and making online donations (3).

## Online comments

Online commentators regularly come under attack from the authorities for what the latter see as 'inciting hatred' under Article 130 of the Criminal Code, increasingly used against active citizens. While the article is written in a relatively neutral manner, *prima facie* providing a basis to protect vulnerable groups from hate speech, its actual interpretation is arbitrary and politicised. The rule criminalises the incitement of racial, national, religious, or other social hatred. 'Other' forms of hatred are typically seen by the regime as hatred allegedly incited against law enforcement officers or state officials via online comments. This interpretation is not new or unique to Belarus. When Russia convicted a blogger for 'inciting hatred' against a social group of police officers under a similar article, the European Court of Human Rights in [Savva Terentyev v. Russia](#) stated that:

*The police, a law-enforcement public agency, can hardly be described as an unprotected minority or group that has a history of oppression or inequality, or that faces deep-rooted prejudices, hostility and discrimination, or that is vulnerable for some other reason, and thus may, in principle, need a heightened protection from attacks committed by insult, holding up to ridicule or slander<sup>3</sup>.*

In an atmosphere of a widespread lack of accountability, this pronouncement carries little weight with the officials in Belarus. Article 130 of the Criminal Code, along with other provisions such as: Article 361 ('calls to harm national security'), Article 364 ('violence or threat of violence against an employee of the internal affairs bodies'), or Article 369 ('insulting a government official'), continues to be widely used to crack down on free speech online. Comments posted on so-called 'extremist' platforms or referencing 'extremist' organisations (such designations are easily made by extrajudicially updating multiple ['extremist' lists](#)) can trigger even harsher penalties, ranging from charges of engaging with 'extremist materials' under Article 19.11 of the Code of Administrative Offenses to 'running an 'extremist' formation under Article 361-1 of the Criminal Code.

<sup>3</sup> See also [Dmitriyevskiy v. Russia](#), ECtHR, Application no. 42168/06, 3 October 2017.

Some of the most striking examples of such crackdowns stem from the wave of repression associated with the Zeltser case. In September 2021, activist [Andrey Zeltser](#) was shot dead in his apartment during a KGB raid. A KGB officer conducting the raid also died, allegedly shot by Zeltser. While there is no footage of Zeltser himself opening fire, the state television broadcast plainclothes officers breaking down an apartment door and a man firing at them as they entered. Following the incident Zeltser's widow [Maryia Uspenskaya](#) was found guilty of aiding in the KGB officer's murder and sent in coercive psychiatric treatment.

However, the persecution extended far beyond the immediate family of the deceased. People who commented on the shooting online were detained and tried *en masse*. At least [124 people](#) were convicted in criminal cases for comments condemning the actions of KGB officials. The Ministry of Internal Affairs reported identifying [200 people](#) who had left negative comments about the deceased KGB officer. Most of the arrested served their prison sentences – some up to several years – in full. One of them, a 38-year-old creative worker [Artsiom Zadrutski](#) sentenced to 3 years for online comments, later confirmed the use of [torture and inhuman treatment](#) against the detainees linked to the Zeltser's case. Merely liking a comment is enough for imprisonment: rescue worker [Aliaksandr Kurhanski](#) served 1.5 years of imprisonment under Article 130 for liking a Facebook post about the incident.

Years after the shooting, people are still being detained for online comments about the case. In late May 2024, [Aliaksandr Sudnikovich](#) was detained at the Belarusian-Lithuanian border. In a coerced 'confession' video – another notorious and inhumane practice sometimes described as ['digital torture'](#) – he admitted to 'leaving comments approving of Zeltser's actions.' Sudnikovich remains in detention, and his exact sentence is still unknown.

The persecution goes far beyond the Zeltser's case. Almost any form of expressing criticism of the authorities online is outlawed, including – but far from limited to – the following examples:

- IT engineer from Hrodna [Aliaksei Haloukin](#) served a full three-year sentence for posting anti-regime comments online. He was severely beaten while in detention. Due to the beating, he recalled having bleeding under the skin ('on my head, on my shoulders, on my back, on my leg'), and being unable to sleep or step on his foot. A doctor, who eventually saw Haloukin, responded to the detainee's complaints by saying ['What hemophilia? You shouldn't have written comments on the Internet.'](#)
- [Natalia Piatrovich](#), 68 years old at the time of her arrest in 2022, was sentenced to six years of imprisonment for leaving critical comments online. She was released in 2024 through a state pardon, without being exonerated or rehabilitated.
- In April 2024, [Aliaksei Herman](#) was sentenced to [five years of imprisonment](#) for making online comments, allegedly aimed at 'exacerbating social tension and destabilising the situation in the Republic of Belarus;'
- In February 2025, 72-year-old [Vasil Dzemidovich](#) was tried for 'insulting a government official' through online comments for the ninth consecutive time. He is the [oldest Belarusian political prisoner](#) on the national ['terrorist list.'](#)

Most individuals are prosecuted for online interactions with 'extremist' materials even if these haven't been officially declared 'extremist' at the time. For example, in 2024, priest Andrzej Juchniewicz, [was convicted at least four consecutive times](#), receiving a total of 60 days of administrative detention, with each 'prohibited' subscription or repost constituting a separate administrative case against him.



## Administering and subscribing to online platforms and channels

Administering 'extremist' channels is severely punished – usually with a host of criminal charges, almost inevitably including Article 361-1 of the Criminal Code, penalising 'the creation of or participation in an extremist formation,'<sup>4</sup> and likely complemented by some other variation of this article:

- Article 361. Calls for Restrictive Measures (Sanctions) and Other Actions Aimed at Harming National Security;
- Article 361-1. Creation of or Participation in an Extremist Formation;
- Article 361-2. Financing Extremist Activity;
- Article 361-3. Participation in Armed Formations or Conflicts Abroad;
- Article 361-4. Aiding Extremist Activity;
- Article 361-5. Training for Participation in Extremist Activity.

Accusations of 'terrorism' are used alongside those of extremism. For instance, Article 290-4, prohibiting 'establishing or participating in an organisation for the purpose of terrorist activity', is often used to facilitate political persecution.

Digital organising tools are being cracked down on by the state to identify and suppress dissent. In many cases of arbitrary detention of civil society representatives on such grounds, the authorities are likely to first discover the individual's connection to an undesired group or organisation and then designate such a community as an 'extremist formation' to create a formal ground for prosecuting the individual. Additionally, since the initiative '[dzechat](#)' (a map showing the locations of most opposition Belarusian chats) was recognised as an 'extremist formation,' virtually any chat can be considered a structural subdivision of this 'extremist formation. Uniting [1000 channels and 300 000 users](#) at its peak, the initiative would have been one of the largest organised 'extremist' networks, if not for the fact that this label is nothing more than a tool of repression. The detentions for mere membership of a neighbourhood group chat continue unabated. One of the most recent waves of detentions took place just [ahead of the January 2025 presidential election](#), which was widely condemned as [sham](#) by the EU, Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the UK. Mass hearings of the detainees in [neighbourhood chats cases](#) began in June 2025.

Since 2021, Belarusian authorities have been prosecuting individuals involved in the 'Peramoha Plan,' a mobilisation initiative launched via Telegram. The initiative was declared an 'extremist formation' in November 2021, and shortly after, a criminal case was opened under Article 361-1 of the Criminal Code (creation of or participation in an extremist formation). The authorities have accused the project's creators – based abroad in Poland and Lithuania – of organising a group intended to 'overthrow the constitutional order' and 'carry out subversive actions'. A fake Telegram bot allegedly set up by state security forces has been used to entrap users, leading to arrests after they registered or followed instructions. Detainees are often filmed in coercive '[confession](#)' [videos](#), broadcast on pro-government channels. Serious charges follow – for instance, entrepreneur [Alexei Shyshkovets](#) was sentenced to 11 years of imprisonment for allegedly committing 'an act of terrorism' and 'preparing to participate in hostilities on foreign soil' under Articles 289 and 361-3 of the Criminal Code respectively.

In June 2023, Belarusian rights activist [Yana Pinchuk](#), who was extradited to Minsk from Russia in August 2022, was sentenced to 12 years in prison on several politically motivated charges, including inciting social hatred, creating an extremist group, involvement in the creation of a terrorist group, calling for the disruption of the constitutional order, and harming national security. Belarusian authorities accuse

<sup>4</sup> The Law 'On Combating Extremism' contains two forms of 'extremist' groups – organisations and formations. The former designation requires a judicial decision to that effect, while the latter designation can be done extrajudicially upon administrative decision of either Ministry of Internal Affairs or State Security Committee (KGB). There is only one organisation on the respective [list](#) and over 100 formations, including primarily independent media and activists' networks.



Pinchuk of administering the 'Vitsebsk97%' Telegram channel, which was critical of Lukashenko's regime and has been labelled as 'extremist' in Belarus.

Between [July and September 2024](#) alone, human rights defenders documented detentions and new criminal cases against administrators of chats for Belarusians in [Portugal and Madeira](#), [Tarnogaj District in Wroclaw](#), [Syarabryanka District in Minsk](#), [Burdeyny Street in Minsk](#), [Nieman Street in Minsk](#), [the city of Kalisz in Poland](#), [the United States](#), and a [local Minsk chat](#) that published information about the movements of security forces. During this wave of arrests, basketball referee [Aliaksandr Syrytsa](#) was detained and ultimately sentenced to 4 years for creating a basketball-related chat and for his connections to the organisation 'Fund of Belarus Friend LTD,' which provides assistance to victims of repression and was therefore recognised as an 'extremist formation.' In addition to 'creating and participating in an extremism formation,' the charges against him included 'insulting the president,' 'inciting hatred,' and 'slander against the president.'

In October 2024, Bobruisk resident [Maksim Khvashchynski](#) was [sentenced](#) to 7 years in prison for 'creating an extremist formation' after he was found guilty of creating two local pro-democracy Telegram chats, 'Bobruisk 375' and 'Bobr 97%.'

In January 2025, Minsk Regional Court sentenced [Uladzmir Shpak](#), administrator of the Telegram channel Propovednik, to seven years of imprisonment. According to law enforcement, he 'incited national and social hatred, called for violence, and supported radicalisation and terrorism'. This interpretation was based on posts critical of the state, including calls for lustration. He was charged with 'actions grossly violating public order,' 'calls for harm to national security,' and 'creating an extremist formation.'

In February 2025, [Alena Yelkina](#) was sentenced to imprisonment for administering a small Telegram channel called ShapitoDich. It is notable that Alena was detained in May 2024, while the channel was only designated as an 'extremist formation' two months later, in July 2024, further confirming that Article 361-1 is applied [retroactively](#).

In early 2025, the Belarusian authorities launched a wave of repression against individuals who had sent information to the Telegram channel [Belarusian Hajun](#), a monitoring project that collected reports on Russian military movements in Belarus. After the channel's bot was hacked and its database exposed, including personal data of contributors, the regime began prosecuting people under Article 361-4 of the Criminal Code for aiding 'extremist activity' since the channel had been labeled an 'extremist formation' in 2022. According to Viasna Human Rights Center, at least [26 people](#) have been detained with arrests reported across Minsk, Brest, and Homiel regions. Other sources report at least [50 Hajun-related detainees](#) in Brest alone. The platform's founder and blogger [Anton Matolka](#) was sentenced to 20 years of imprisonment in absentia under 14 criminal articles, including high treason. The crackdown highlights the growing risks of engaging with independent digital platforms and the use of anti-extremism laws to criminalise civic reporting.

In Belarus, beyond the persecution of those who administer or contribute to opposition-linked Telegram channels, even simply subscribing to such channels or social media pages can be grounds for punishment. [Natallia Vasilenka](#), a woman with a severe disability and long documented history of hardship and government neglect, was detained in December 2024 for her alleged 'extremist' subscriptions. Previously known for narrowly avoiding eviction with help from Nobel laureate Svetlana Alexievich, Vasilenka had openly [criticised](#) the state for its failure to support people like her. In January 2025, she was convicted for 'slander against the president' and 'discrediting Belarus' and taken into custody despite serious medical conditions. Similarly, another Belarusian, Siarhei, who had just served a 2.5 year prison sentence for sending photos of military equipment to a Telegram bot, was re-arrested shortly after his release and sentenced to 15 days in jail for an inactive subscription to an 'extremist' page, even though he had no access to the account or his phone since his initial arrest in 2022.

In modern-day Belarus, any form of digital activism such as likes, follows, old group memberships can result in detention, lengthy prison sentences, or relentless harassment. The retroactive application of 'extremist' designations further undermines legal certainty, enabling authorities to prosecute actions that were not illegal at the time they were committed. Combined with coercive tactics and broad interpretations of vague legal provisions, this approach has created an environment in which online behavior deemed 'undesirable' can trigger serious repercussions, including the erasure of free expression and the loss of liberty.

## Online donations

Making donations online used to be one of the most accessible ways to show solidarity and support vulnerable groups in Belarus. Not anymore. The *de facto* authorities have [reported](#) identifying 2700 cryptocurrency transactions, related to financing 'extremism' and 'terrorism' involving at least 1445 individuals. At least 44 criminal cases have been initiated in connection with these transactions. Since the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion in Ukraine, online donations have also become a way to support people fighting the invading army and the Belarusian unit within the Ukrainian army (the [Kalinouski regiment](#)). However, Belarusian authorities closely monitor all online donations. Punishments range from '[conversations](#)' at KGB premises where people are coerced into confessing guilt and then forced to pay amounts to state-owned charities that are often 10 times the original donation, to lengthy prison sentences under Article 361-2 of the Criminal Code for 'financing extremist activity', since many of the independent solidarity funds are declared 'extremist formations.'

Since the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, human rights defenders and journalists documented [multiple cases](#) of persecution for making donations to the Ukrainian army or specifically Belarusians fighting on the side of Ukraine:

- In February 2022, a man called Aliaksandr [donated](#) about 2000 EUR to the Ukrainian army. He was taken to the KGB for an interrogation and declared a suspect in the financing of terrorism. His apartment, business, and personal accounts, and even a bank card of his 10-year-old son with a disability were seized.
- In January 2023, [Uladzislau Yatsenka](#) was sentenced to [five years in prison](#) for making a donation in support of the Kalinouski regiment.
- In June 2023, [Anastasia Petrachenka](#) was sentenced to three years in prison for transferring money to Kalinouski regiment.
- In October 2023, programmer from Brest [Leanid Raichonak](#) was [sentenced](#) to six years in prison for transferring 400 USD to Belarusian volunteers fighting on the side of Ukraine, for bulletproof vests the previous year, as well as donating 150 USD for the Prague Support Team – an association of Belarusians in Prague who collect donations for Belarusian volunteers, fighting on the side of Ukraine.
- In April 2024, 57-year-old political prisoner [Aliaksandr Verasovich](#) was sentenced to six years in prison for supporting the Kalinouski regiment with two donations through the BYSOL solidarity fund. His actions were qualified as 'financing extremist activities' and 'preparing to participate in hostilities on foreign soil.'

Even a donation that did not reach its intended recipient can lead to imprisonment. In one of the most striking examples of disproportionate punishment for acts of solidarity, a young woman was sentenced to [three years in prison](#) for attempting to donate 16 USD to the Kalinouski Regiment. Although the transfer was automatically blocked by the Belarusian bank and never went through, the authorities charged her with attempted financing of extremist activity. After returning to Belarus from Poland, where she had fled due to political instability, Polina was arrested, interrogated, and filmed in a coerced 'confession' video. The court dismissed her explanation that she was unaware of the regiment's 'extremist' status and believed the funds were intended for humanitarian purpose. The verdict also

referenced her previous administrative fine for ‘spreading extremist materials’ as an aggravating circumstance.

Some of the harshest sentences for donations include:

- [Pavel Kharytonau](#) was sentenced to [five years in prison](#) for ‘financing extremist activities.’ His conviction stemmed from a single 20 USD donation made in 2021 to an initiative that was not recognised as extremist at the time.
- [Artur Rolich](#) was detained upon returning to Belarus and sentenced to [nine years in prison](#) for financing ‘terrorist’ and ‘extremist’ activities for making his donations to various Belarusian civil initiatives.
- Father and son, [Yury](#) and [Vital Yurenia](#) were both sentenced for making charitable donations to civil initiatives online. The son, Vital, was sentenced to three years of imprisonment for ‘financing extremist formations’ in July 2023 but was pardoned in September 2024. The father, Yury, was convicted on the same charge in November 2023 and remains imprisoned.

## Impact on digital rights

‘Anti-extremism’ and ‘anti-terrorism’ laws in Belarus are undeniably tools for institutionalising political repression,<sup>5</sup> including digital repression. A dense web of vague provisions, blacklists, and extrajudicial designations grant the authorities an unchecked discretion to attach ‘terrorism’ and ‘extremism’ labels to punish any perceived disloyalty, whenever it manifests in a like, comment, post, or subscription.

The implementation of Belarusian anti-extremism laws represents a fundamental violation of international legal standards protecting digital rights, particularly under Article 19 of ICCPR, to which Belarus is a state party. Article 19 protects the right to freedom of expression, including the right to seek, receive, and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers and through any media. Any restriction on this right must meet the cumulative conditions of legality, legitimacy of aim, and necessity and proportionality – unmet by the authorities, using vague and all-encompassing ‘extremism’ and ‘terrorism’ definitions in [national laws](#), openly declaring the aim of [systemically purging the information space](#), and imposing years of imprisonment for the most modest forms of online expression.

Under General Comment No. 34 of the Human Rights Committee, laws criminalising expression must be formulated with sufficient precision to enable individuals to regulate their conduct accordingly. The provisions of Belarusian ‘anti-extremism’ laws (including corresponding provisions of the Criminal Code and Code of Administrative Offenses), routinely used to suppress digital expression, fail this test. These articles contain open-ended terms such as ‘other social hatred,’ and ‘actions harming national security’ which are vaguely undefined in legislation and interpreted expansively by law enforcement and the judiciary. This ambiguity creates a chilling effect on lawful online expression.

The retroactive application of extremist designations further contravenes the non-retroactivity principle enshrined in Article 15 of the ICCPR. Individuals are prosecuted for engaging in digital activity (e.g., subscriptions to Telegram channels, participation in online chats or chatbots) that was lawful at the time but became criminalised *ex post facto* through administrative listings of ‘extremist formations.’ These listings are made without judicial oversight, compounding the illegitimacy of subsequent criminal proceedings.

<sup>5</sup> See, for instance Report of human rights in Belarus, [Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Belarus](#), Nils Mužnieks of 25 April 2025, A/HRC/59/59 and [Report of the Group of Independent Experts on the Situation of Human Rights in Belarus](#), 7 February 2025, A/HRC/58/68

Due process rights are also being systematically undermined. Criminal proceedings are frequently based on [deliberate manipulation and phishing](#) (often provoking users to join lookalike “extremist” chats) screenshots, or chat logs obtained through warrantless searches or coercion. Authorities often rely on screenshots or chat logs that were obtained without a warrant, through coercive interrogations, or during invasive searches that disregard basic procedural safeguards. Individuals are rarely informed about the legal basis for such surveillance and can be denied legal counsel when their devices are confiscated or accounts accessed.

As Belarusian authorities extend the crackdown into online spaces with increasing pace and severity, they are actively policing speech and dismantling social bonds that sustain civic resistance. The disruption of online expression and solidarity foster fear and isolation, further entrenching authoritarian rule. Digital rights must be restored through the repeal of vague anti-extremism provisions, precise and balanced interpretation of law, the cessation of retroactive application of laws, performing independent judicial oversight over ‘extremist’ designations, and the alignment of domestic law with the clear standards established by international human rights instruments and jurisprudence.

It is both essential and urgent to protect digital civic space against tightening authoritarian grip through legal safeguards, international scrutiny, and accessible cybersecurity knowledge. The human rights crisis in Belarus is also a digital rights crisis. Reclaiming digital space is inseparable from the broader struggle for human rights, democracy, and justice in Belarus.