

**LEGAL INITIATIVE.
ACTIVITY REPORT FOR 2023**



**LEGAL
INITIATIVE**

Legal Initiative is a Belarusian human rights organization that has been working to protect human rights since 1996.

Legal Initiative operated domestically up to 2021. Activities included monitoring the trials and the military, human rights courses and training, making submissions to the UN Human Rights Committee, promoting human rights through quizzes and quests, and making human rights films and videos.

Belarus faced record levels of violence in 2020 after protests sparked by fraudulent presidential elections. Between August 9 and August 12 alone, the authorities detained 7,000 peaceful protesters. In response to the wave of violence, the Legal Initiative founded the **International Committee for the Investigation of Torture in Belarus**, a special project that aims to document as many cases of torture as possible and preserve all evidence of the regime's crimes.

In 2021, Legal Initiative had to flee Belarus and continued to operate from Lithuania. Here we continue to carry out education and outreach work, and to help people who have survived torture and ill-treatment at the hands of the Belarusian regime.

FOCUS AREAS OF THE LEGAL INITIATIVE'S ACTIVITIES IN 2023

1. Education
2. Awareness building
3. International Committee for the Investigation of Torture in Belarus
4. International advocacy



EDUCATION

We believe that respect for human rights is only possible in a country where everyone knows their rights. That is why education is one of the key areas of the Legal Initiative's work.

Human Rights Course

Every year we organize several streams of the Human Rights Course. The goal of the course is to teach activists and prospective human rights defenders the basics of human rights theory. On average, there are **15 participants** in each intake. Each course consists of **3 sessions of 3 days** each.

2

streams of the Human Rights Course were carried out this year

3,5

candidates per place applied for the Course

31

people completed the Human Rights Course in 2023

Human Rights in Action

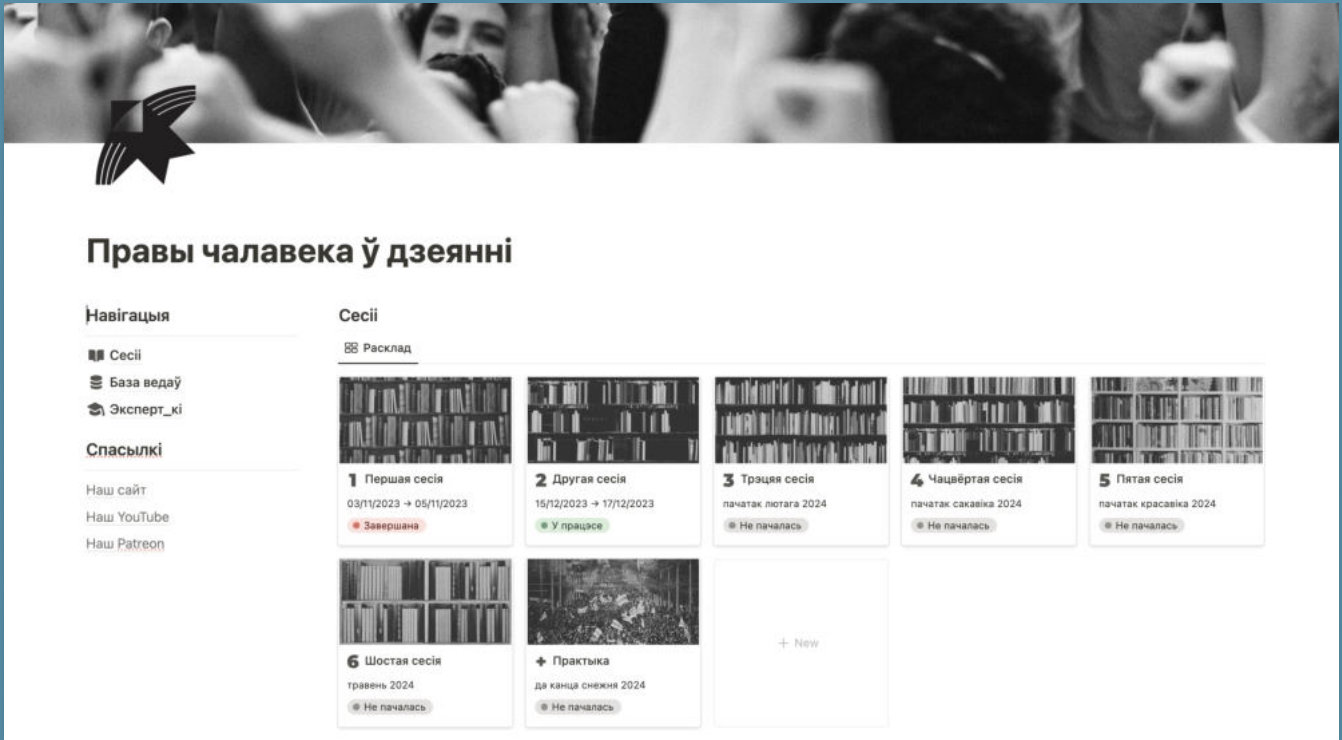
In 2023 we launched a new program — the School of Human Rights in Action. It is an annual program of **6 modules** that offers theory (in-depth study of human rights) and practice (internship in a human rights organization or implementation of your own project). In addition, students are required to submit homework assignments, attend additional online sessions between classes, and use an online platform with a database of supplemental materials.

19

people were selected to participate in the program

2

modules were held this year



This is what an online platform with a database of materials looks like

Human Rights in Action is an advanced level program for those who are already familiar with the concept of human rights, want to learn more and are ready to take real action for human rights to be respected in society. Its goal was to strengthen the Belarusian human rights sector and train new practitioners and professionals.

Alumni Club "Initiate"

It is important to us not only to introduce people to the concept of human rights, but also to help our alumni grow in this field. That is why this year we launched the "Initiate" Alumni Club.

2

offline seminars

5

webinars

32

newsletters

We've already done
this year and we're
not going to stop!

3

The goal of the club is to help alumni build their own careers in the field of human rights. As part of the club, we offer additional webinars and trainings that help delve deeper into the field of human rights, as well as a weekly newsletter with educational and career opportunities.

FilmTrainings

We are constantly looking for new formats and approaches to engage more people in the defense of human rights. That is why this year, in addition to the main schools, we organized Film making Trainings. Our goal was to engage people who are not yet familiar with human rights through creative activities.

2

Film making Trainings we held this year, one on feature films and one on documentaries

6

days was the duration of each program

11

films were created by the participants



Беларусь. Недалёкая будучыня



Screenshots from the films made by the participants

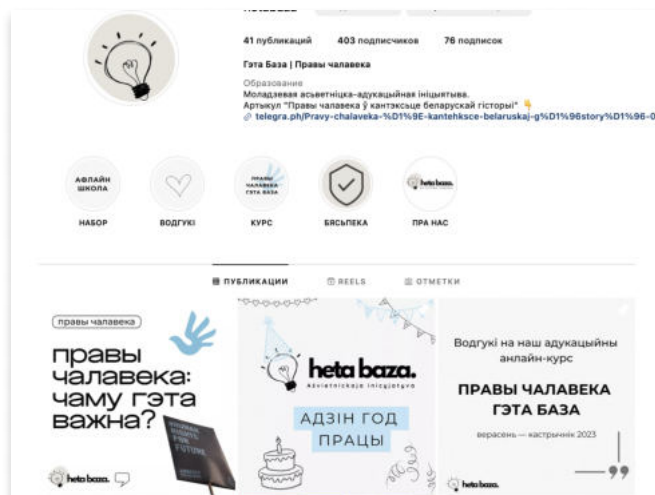


Alumni activities

We are proud of the contributions our alumni are making to the human rights field!

For example, graduates of our programs last year prepared a document **“Lustration of the Judiciary in the Republic of Belarus”** in which they proposed their own vision of lustration.

Also, alumni of our Human Rights Course have created their own school, **“Heta Baza”**, or The Basics. They have launched an online course and are preparing to hold an offline school!



Website and social networks accounts of The Basics

AWARENESS BUILDING

It is important for us not only to train activists and future human rights defenders, but also to empower everyone to confidently answer the question: “What are human rights?”

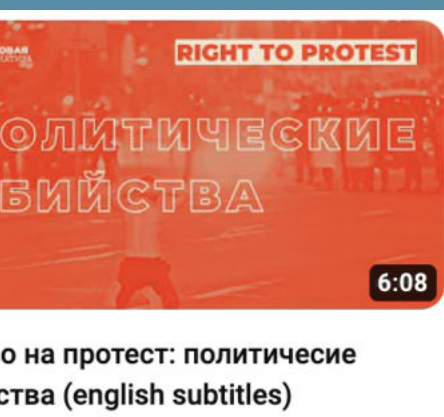
Therefore, we pay a lot of attention to promoting this topic through modern formats: Video, gamification, organization of awareness-raising events and participation in public meetings.

Video content

To make as many people as possible aware of the human rights crisis in Belarus, we make videos and run a [YouTube channel](#). This year we made a series of videos called “The Right to Protest”, in which we talked about how human rights are being violated in Belarus.

17

videos “The Rights to Protest” were made during the year



Previews of 3 videos from “The Right to Protest” series

The Week against Torture

Between June 20 and 26 we held the Week against Torture — a series of events dedicated to the International Day in Support of Victims of Torture.

Our goal was to draw attention to the human rights crisis in Belarus. In order to maximize the outreach and spread the word to as many people as possible, we involved partners and held events in Warsaw, Vilnius, Poznan and online.

The Week was attended by HRC «Viasna», Belarusian Helsinki Committee, DISSIDENTBY, NAM, Museum of Free Belarus, Free Theater, TeamTheatre, Human Constanta, Politzek.me, InshyYa, Respect-Protect-Fulfill, Phoenix, Press Club, Malanka Media, and Polityvazynka.

14

events were organized in cooperation with partners

Offline events organized by the Legal Initiative:

"PRAVO NAPRAVO" quiz dedicated to the right not to be tortured

Torture is a difficult subject. That is why it is so important to talk about it. We have “wrapped” important information about the violation of the right not to be tortured in Belarus and in the world in the form of a pub quiz to make a complicated topic more understandable and comprehensible.

Open Day and sound installation at the Lithuanian Museum of Occupations and Freedom Fights

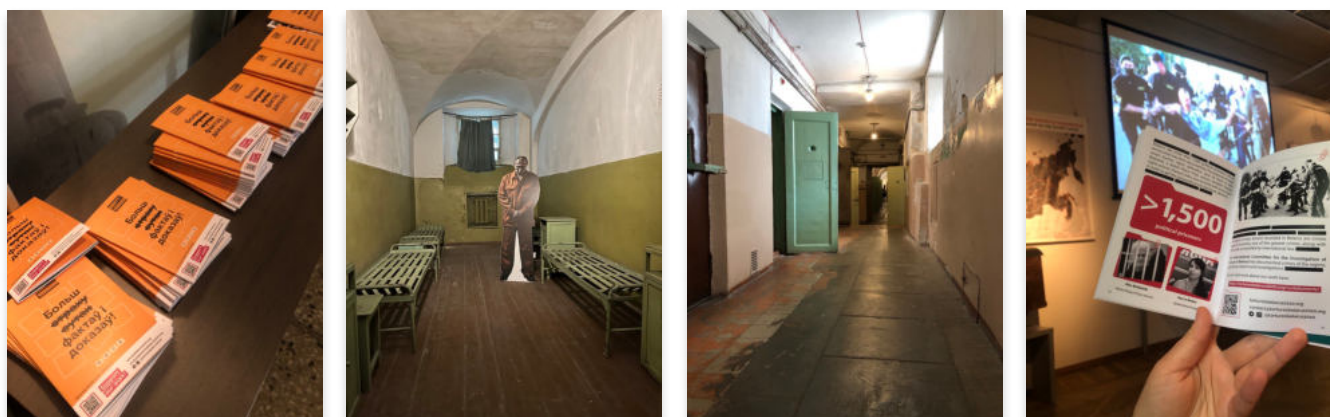


Photo from the event

The Lithuanian Museum of Occupations and Freedom Fights is a former KGB prison. We put loudspeakers in the «cells» of the museum, in which we played pieces of stories of Belarusians who had experienced torture. All the stories were documented by the [International Committee for the Investigation of Torture in Belarus](#), a special project of ours. During the sound installation, visitors could sense what thousands of Belarusians have gone through.

Actress Krystyna Drobysh, journalist Siarhei Shupa, sound engineer Valeria Auchynnika, and musician Pavel Haradnitski contributed to the recording of the stories.

Performance show “375 0908 2334. THE BODY YOU ARE CALLING IS CURRENTLY NOT AVAILABLE”

The performance show [“375 0908 2334. The body you are calling is currently not available”](#) was created by Ihar Shuhaleyev and his team as a protest against repression, dictatorship, fear and stress. It is a kind of invitation to feel yourself imprisoned in Belarus, to physically experience the disempowerment that more than 40 thousand Belarusians have gone through and are still going through every day.



Photo from the event

Film screening of the trilogy "Belarus" and meeting with one of the directors

The trilogy "Belarus" is three documentaries about the events of 2020: "When Flowers Are Not Silent", "What Will We Do Tomorrow?", "How Can I Help You?". After the screening the viewers met with the director of the part "What Will We Do Tomorrow?"

Free Theater's production of "AfterChildhood. AfterEscape."

"Afterchildhood" is a story of Belarusian and Ukrainian children who survived forced emigration (some of them even double emigration) and escaped from the war together with their parents. We held two showings of the play in Warsaw.



Actors of the play

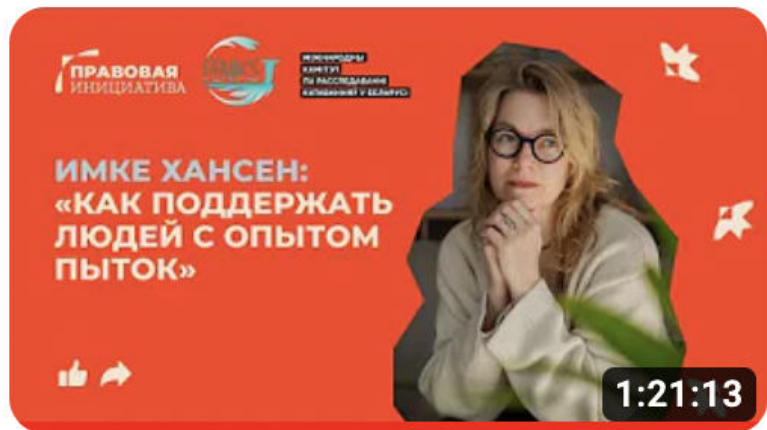
Online events organized by the Legal Initiative:

Presentation of the investigation «Sovetskoye Police Department of Minsk. Torture of detainees in August 2020». Press conference for journalists.

On June 20, we published a new investigation about the torture in Sovetskoye District Police Department of Minsk, which took place from August 9 to 13, 2020. As part of the Week against Torture, we held a closed conference for journalists, where we spoke about the main findings of the investigation.

Online lecture by Imke Hansen "How to Support People with Experience of Torture"

Imke Hansen, PhD, Germany, is a trauma therapist and a human rights activist with experience in providing psychosocial support on the frontline in Ukraine and in the context of repression in Belarus. In her lecture, Imke shared insights on how we can become more aware and responsive to torture survivors.



«КАК ПОДДЕРЖАТЬ ЛЮДЕЙ С ОПЫТОМ ПЫТОК» – ЛЕКЦИЯ...

Preview frame of the lecture

We held this event online, as we thought it was important to provide an opportunity for people from Belarus to join. The [recording](#) of the live broadcast is available to everyone on our YouTube channel.

Online and offline events organized by the Week's partners:

- **The play "Chrystina's Sea"**
Offline, Warsaw. Organized by Team Theatre.
- **"Human Rights in Action" workshop**
Offline, Poznan. Organized by DISSIDENTBY.
- **Film screening of the documentary "Belarusian Process"**
Offline, Warsaw. Organized by NAM and the Museum of Free Belarus.
- **The event "The Sadists' Legacy: Drawing Parallels between Belarus Now and Lithuania in the Soviet Times"**
Offline, Vilnius. Organized by the HRC "Viasna"
- **Readings of stories of torture "I was lucky actually"**
Offline, Warsaw. Organized by the HRC "Viasna".
- **Presentation of the National Human Rights Index's 2022 assessment of the right to be free from torture**
Online. Organized by the Belarusian Helsinki Committee.

EVENTS

This year we really wanted to reach out to people. That's why we actively participated in various cultural events and talked about our work in person.

The Week of Zero Discrimination

Zero Discrimination Week is a week of awareness-raising activities on the issue of discrimination organized by the organization “InshyYa”. As part of the Zero Discrimination Week, two human rights pub-quizzes PRAVO NAPRAVO were held on March 6 in Vilnius and March 7 in Tbilisi.

80

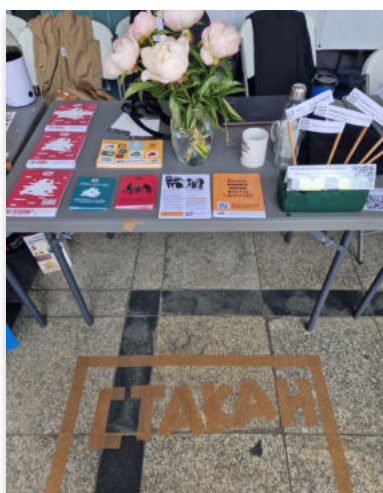
people took part in the quizzes



Photo from the events

Unite!

Unite! — an event for active Belarusians took place on June 14 in Warsaw. It was attended by human rights organizations, public initiatives, and opinion leaders.



Hučna Fest



Photo from the event



On July 9, a free festival of Belarusian culture was held in Warsaw on the banks of the Wisla River. As part of the festival, we had our own space where we talked about our work and mapped the places of detention together with the festival participants.

Rada Market

On August 12, the Rada Market, a festival of activities dedicated to Youth Day, took place in Vilnius. Legal Initiative had an extensive program at the event — together with the participants we mapped the names of law enforcers involved in torture and made custom-made shoppers in our corporate style.



Photo from the event

Global Conference of Investigative Journalists in Gothenburg

The Global Investigative Journalists Network, GIJN, unites 244 non-governmental organizations in 90 countries. All network members support and promote investigative journalism. One of GIJN's goals is to develop and implement best practices in the field of investigative journalism. This year's **conference** gathered a record number of participants — over 2000 people from 130 countries.

We took part in the conference to gain new knowledge and share experiences with colleagues from international organizations. All to make our investigations even better and to ensure accountability for any perpetrators of mass torture.



Photo from the event (GIJN social media)

International Congress of Belarusian Studies

The Congress was founded by representatives of the Belarusian and Lithuanian public as an annual public event targeting experts, journalists, public figures, and students from Belarus and other countries.

This year we presented a special project **“Would Tsimur have gone to war if not for August 2020?”** at the **Congress** within the civil society research section.

The Week for Equality and Inclusion

The Week for Equality and Inclusion is held annually as part of the Different-Equal information campaign initiated by the human rights organization Human Constanta. This year the organizers suggested to look at equality and inclusion from different angles.

The topics of equality and inclusion are important to us. This year we published a report on “Torture of LGBTQ+ people and the regime's homophobic policies”. We were happy to endorse the Week.



SPECIAL PROJECT OF THE INTERNATIONAL COMMITTEE FOR THE INVESTIGATION OF TORTURE IN BELARUS

The International Committee for the Investigation of Torture in Belarus works with the goal of documenting as many cases of torture as possible, preserving the evidence until fair courts can be established, in order to hold the guilty parties accountable in the future.

THE INTERNATIONAL COMMITTEE (IC):

- **Collects evidence of crime**

Documents and compiles victims' stories into a single database.

- **Fights for the rights of those who have suffered at the hands of state agents**

Helps to build cases in other countries through universal jurisdiction mechanism.

- **Reports on developments in Belarus**

Produces reports and carries out investigations based on the stories collected and documented.

“The more facts and evidence, the more perpetrators will be held accountable for their actions!”

Documenting

Documentation is the most important and extensive part of the work of the International Committee. We strive to prove that the mass torture of civilians that took place in Belarus in the year 2020 and continues to this day constitutes a crime against humanity and must be punished under both domestic and international law.

We are collecting evidence and documenting the stories of survivors in order to ensure accountability for every guilty representative of the authorities and power structures.

1726

people were interviewed during the work of the IC

85

people were interviewed and documented in 2023

Investigations, reports, special projects

We believe that talking about what is happening in Belarus is no less important than collecting and documenting information about it. The world community should know that torture does not stop in our country. Just as Belarusians themselves should not forget it.

Investigations and reports are our main tool to expose the developments in Belarus. We analyze hundreds of cases in order to draw a real picture of what is happening and to show it to the public.

5

documents were published this year — 2 inquiries, 1 report, 1 information and analytical review and 1 special project

Our main task is to reconstruct the events of August 2020, to preserve all the evidence of the crimes and the names of the perpetrators. To show the perpetrators that we know what they did. To let the regime know that we will not forget or forgive anything.

Public Inquiry "Mass Torture in the Offenders Isolation Center of Minsk on August 9 - 14, 2020"

We studied **101 stories** — over **1000 pages of text** Each witness was personally present in Akrestsina on August 9-14 and went through this hell.

Based on their stories, we conducted a **civil investigation** — we established a chronology of events, identified the law enforcement officials who committed the crimes, and made a legal assessment of their actions.



Book cover of the inquiry

Public inquiry "Sovetskoye RUVD of Minsk. Torture of detainees in August 2020"



Book cover of the inquiry

We reviewed **52 documented cases** for this [study](#). There are **568 pages of text** and **137 pages of medical certificates and documents**. On the basis of these materials, we created a chronology of events and identified the law enforcement officers involved in the torture of peaceful citizens in the Sovetskoye District Police Department of the city of Minsk on August 9-13, 2020.

Report "Torture of LGBTQ+ People and the Regime's Homophobic Policies"

The rights of LGBTQ+ people have been systematically violated in Belarus, but the situation has dramatically worsened since the August 2020 elections. The [report](#) presents evidence of systematic mass discrimination and torture against LGBTQ+ people, and describes the lack of protection mechanisms for vulnerable groups in Belarus.



Book cover of the inquiry

Information and analytical review "Political killings and deaths perpetrated by the regime"



Book cover of the information and analytical review

On November 12, 2023, the day of Raman Bandarenka's death, we published an [informational and analytical review](#) of deaths that occurred at the hands of the regime. We analyzed **16 deaths** that occurred during and after the 2020 protests. In each case, we review the circumstances and possible causes of death and, where possible, list the alleged perpetrators.

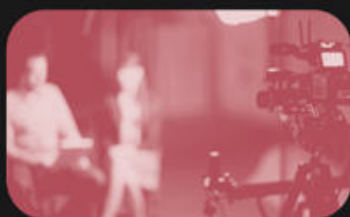


Special Project "Would Tsimur have gone to war if not for August 2020?"

In this [paper](#) we tried to investigate the impact of the events after the 2020 elections in Belarus on the decision of Belarusian volunteers to engage in military action on the side of Ukraine after the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion. Based on the analysis of the responses of the 15 volunteers interviewed, the project team, which included two psychologists, concluded that the post-election events had a significant impact on their decision to become volunteer fighters.

Змест

УСТУП



Як мы рабілі гэты праект

Частка першая – 2020 г.



Першае пытанне:
Уцягнутасць у актывізм да

Частка другая – 2022 г.



Чацвёртае пытанне:
Рэакцыя на

ЗАКЛЮЧЭННЕ



Р. S.: Наша агульная
будучыня

A screenshot from the special project

It is too early to know what long-term effects the events in both Belarus and Ukraine may have on the mental state of the volunteer fighters, as they have not yet ended and a full study, as well as possible treatment, is not yet possible.

Universal Jurisdiction

Mass torture, when committed as part of a widespread or systematic attack against the civilian population, is a crime against humanity. This year, for the first time, the United Nations officially [equated](#) mass torture in Belarus with crimes against humanity.

Atrocities of this magnitude affect everyone. Therefore, thanks to the principle of universal jurisdiction, any country can prosecute and punish them. Anyone who has been mistreated because of his or her political views can turn to the law enforcement authorities of another country.

1

joint criminal investigation has already begun in Lithuania

We help victims submit their stories to the joint investigation — we document, collect evidence, file paperwork, pay for travel and lodging, and arrange for legal counsel.

28

documented cases of victims

4

documented cases of witnesses

We have been shared with the prosecution bodies of Lithuania in 2023.

Accountability

The Belarusian regime is leaving its citizens with fewer and fewer opportunities to protect their rights at the international level. In late 2022, Belarus denounced the Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. This means that victims of human rights violations in Belarus no longer have the opportunity to submit complaints to the Human Rights Committee.

But this is no reason for us to give up! We are looking for new ways to use international mechanisms to protect human rights. In 2023, we began working with the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women.

We analyzed our documented cases of women survivors of torture and ill-treatment to begin the process of applying to CEDAW.

150

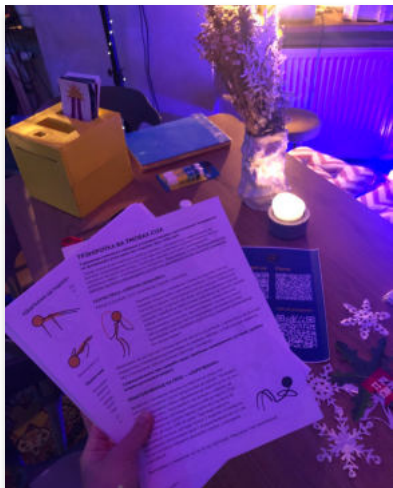
violations of human rights were analyzed by our legal team

3

cases in which women faced discrimination by the regime were selected for further consideration

Work has begun on appealing such actions at the national level.

Workouts for political prisoners



Our work with victims of torture and ill-treatment is of a long-term nature — due to the nature of international mechanisms, it can take years for the first results of the documentation and investigation of cases under universal jurisdiction to emerge.

We thought a lot about how we could help the victims without duplicating the initiatives that already exist and came up with a mini-campaign — we created a **memo for political prisoners how they can work out** in pre-trial detention centers and partnered with initiatives that send letters to political prisoners.



The flyer was developed with a professional trainer, taking into account the conditions of confinement — limited space, low oxygen concentration, lack of sports equipment.

The flyer is posted on the International Committee's website so that anyone can copy the text and attach it to their letter. The design uses simple drawings that are easy to redraw. The site also has a printable version without logos or identifying marks to increase the likelihood of getting past censors.

Workout materials

Working with international organizations

As part of the activities of the International Accountability Platform for Belarus, we continued to support the OHCHR Examination of the human rights situation in Belarus in its third term, following the renewal of its mandate by the UN Human Rights Council.

The Platform provided the OHCHR Examination with access to **294 victims/survivors** and other witnesses from Poland, Lithuania, Georgia and the Czech Republic (180 men and 114 women) and handled the logistical issues necessary to interview some of them.

Research

We are always happy to help our colleagues to help improve the work in the human rights sector. That is why in 2023 we took part in 2 studies carried out by the Belarusian Helsinki Committee.

- **Human Rights Index**

Legal Initiative experts participated in the assessment of compliance with the Right not to be subjected to torture or cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.

- **Non-formal Human Rights Education in Belarusian Civil Society. Status, Problems and Challenges**

We participated in the survey and shared our experiences in human rights education and awareness-raising.

INTERNATIONAL ADVOCACY

52nd Session of the UN Human Rights Council: Side Event “Accountability for International Crimes and Serious Violations of Human Rights in Belarus”

Viktoria Fiodarava, Chair of the Legal Initiative and co-founder of the International Committee for the Investigation of Torture in Belarus, spoke at the [52nd session of the UN](#) Human Rights Council. In 2020, the Human Rights Council has already addressed the critical situation in Belarus. However, the current regime has not taken any measures to remedy the situation.

On March 2nd, the 52nd annual session of the Human Rights Council was held, where Belarusian human rights activists stated the need for international attention to the situation in our country.



Photo from the event

Victoria Fiodarava stated:

"In 2022, the human rights crisis has deepened. We have seen the normalization of torture and ill-treatment, mass persecution of all those suspected of dissent. The Belarusian authorities contributed to the Russian aggression against Ukraine. The position of the Belarusian society against the war was confirmed by the anti-war protests. Arrests, torture and ill-treatment became the order of the day. Recently, we learned that human rights activist Nasta Loika was tortured with a stun gun. Belarus' human rights crisis did not stop in 2020. These are ongoing international crimes."

OSCE Conference in Warsaw: iSANS Side Event on bringing to justice those responsible for crimes against Belarusians and Ukrainians

On October 3, Viktoria Fiodarava represented the Legal Initiative at the [OSCE conference](#) in Warsaw. She focused on the continued impunity of Lukashenka's criminal regime, which remains a serious obstacle to ending repression in Belarus, ensuring justice for victims, and achieving democratic transformation in the country.



Photo from the event

Victoria noted that the International Accountability Platform for Belarus has already collected 17,000 documents from more than 2,200 victims and witnesses and 600,000 files from open sources. These materials are being analyzed with the aim of identifying victims and witnesses who can provide information and evidence to criminal justice authorities and the UN examination.

High-Level Forum on Defending Against Authoritarianism “Future of democracy”

On November 9-10, Vilnius hosted the [third High-Level Forum on the Future of Democracy](#), bringing together democracy advocates from around the world. The focus of the event was on the most serious challenges to democracy today and possible responses to growing authoritarian pressures.



Photo from the event

At the meeting, Victoria Fedorova, a representative of the Legal Initiative, spoke about the needs of democratic activists who work under restrictive conditions. She also discussed the methods of support from state and international organizations in critical situations, such as imprisonment, exile, and lack of necessary material resources. Issues of cooperation between activists from different regions working under various conditions were also addressed.

Reports Prepared:

- **For the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Belarus**

“Alarming trends and challenges in the implementation of the right to freedom of opinion and expression at the national level for the reporting period from April 1, 2022, to March 30, 2023”.

- **For the UN Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association**

“State policies on freedom of peaceful assembly, accountability and reparation mechanisms, the exercise of universal jurisdiction, the role of civil society, victims and victims' representatives/associations as well as civic movements, the role of the International Criminal Court (ICC) or the establishment of other international tribunals (ad hoc courts), the role of third States with regard to serious human rights violations”.

- **For the OSCE Moscow Mechanism Rapporteur**

“Ongoing practice of human rights violations: Violation of the right to freedom from torture, inhuman and degrading treatment, and the right of detainees to humane treatment”, “Human rights violations and abuses in the Republic of Belarus due to Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine”.

- **For the UN Special Rapporteur on Torture**

“On the Violation of Freedom from Torture in Belarus”.

- **For the UN Human Rights Committee**

Coalition Report “Systemic Problems Preventing the Exhaustion of Domestic Remedies in Belarus”.

- **For the UN Human Rights Council**

Coalition Interim Report on Belarus' Implementation of the Recommendations from the Third Cycle of the Universal Periodic Review.

IMPROVEMENT OF INTERNAL MECHANISMS

This year, we have worked not only on changes in society but also on ourselves. As a human rights organization, recognizing our special role in building a society free of discrimination, we developed and adopted the **Legal Initiative's Gender Policy**. This policy is intended to serve as a tool and foundation for maintaining gender equality in the workplace and for integrating gender issues into key organizational practices.

We also developed and implemented the **Legal Initiative's Communication Policy** to ensure effective, open, safe, and constructive communication within the organization and in interactions with external partners and stakeholders.

We are confident that such steps not only improve the internal workings of the organization but also contribute to creating a more peaceful and just society.



