

**LEGAL INITIATIVE:  
ANNUAL REPORT 2025**



**LEGAL  
INITIATIVE**

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

Until 2021, the organization carried out active work in Belarus. Its key areas of activity included monitoring courts and the military, conducting educational courses and training sessions, submitting complaints to the UN Human Rights Committee, engaging with UN special procedures, promoting human rights through quizzes and quests, and producing films and video materials on human rights issues.

In 2020, following protests triggered by the falsification of the presidential elections, Belarus experienced an unprecedented level of state violence. Between 9 and 12 August alone, law enforcement authorities detained around 7,000 peaceful protesters. In response to the wave of violence, **Legal Initiative** established the **International Committee for the Investigation of Torture in Belarus**, a special project aimed at documenting as many cases of torture and ill-treatment as possible and preserving evidence of crimes committed by the regime for future fair trials and the restoration of justice.

In 2021, most of the **Legal Initiative** team was forced to leave Belarus and continue its work from Lithuania, effectively operating in exile.

Today, we conduct educational programs and awareness-raising activities on human rights, run advocacy campaigns, produce human rights video materials, and document and provide assistance to people who have suffered torture and ill-treatment by the Belarusian regime.

On 7 October 2024, the regime designated the **International Committee for the Investigation of Torture in Belarus** (hereinafter — the Committee) as an 'extremist formation,' as well as all of the project's social media accounts and its contact account. Our directors, **Sergey Ustinov** and **Victoria Fedorova**, were publicly named as persons affiliated with the Committee.

We promote the values of human rights in society, protect human rights in Belarus, and work to ensure justice for victims and accountability for perpetrators.

**Our goal** is to build a society in which the value of the rights and freedoms of every individual is recognized and protected by law.

## KEY AREAS OF LEGAL INITIATIVE'S WORK IN 2025

1. Ensuring accountability for torture and ill-treatment (Legal Initiative's special project: the International Committee for the Investigation of Torture in Belarus).
2. Ensuring legal security for Belarusians in forced migration.
3. Promoting a sustainable human rights culture through educational and media content.
4. Human rights education.
5. International advocacy.
6. Gender Program.

# 1. LEGAL INITIATIVE'S SPECIAL PROJECT: INTERNATIONAL COMMITTEE FOR THE INVESTIGATION OF TORTURE IN BELARUS



The **International Committee for the Investigation of Torture in Belarus** works to document as many cases of torture committed by the regime as possible and to preserve evidence until fair trials can take place in the future, ensuring that those responsible are held accountable.

## Key Areas of the Committee's Work

- ▶ Conducting and publishing investigations based on collected and documented testimonies of victims;
- ▶ Raising international awareness about the situation in Belarus and disseminating information at the international level;
- ▶ Supporting judicial processes outside Belarus, including through the use of universal jurisdiction mechanisms;
- ▶ Protecting the rights of victims, including providing assistance to people affected by repression, torture, and violence by law enforcement;
- ▶ Documenting testimonies and collecting evidence, including building a unified database of crimes committed by the regime.

## Results of the Committee's Work:

1964

individuals – the total number of documented survivor testimonies collected throughout our work.

80

individuals – documented cases of torture and ill-treatment in 2025.

We believe that speaking about what is happening in Belarus is no less important than collecting and documenting evidence.

The international community must be aware that torture in the country has not stopped. At the same time, Belarusians themselves must not forget this reality.

Investigations are our primary tool for demonstrating what is happening in Belarus. We analyse hundreds of cases of repression in order to provide an objective account of events and to communicate it to society.

The more facts and evidence are collected, the more perpetrators will be held accountable.

In 2025, we published **five reports** — two public investigations and three analytical studies.

### Public Investigation “Torture and Ill-Treatment in Penal Colony No. 1 in Novopolotsk”

Penal Colony No. 1 in Novopolotsk is known as one of the harshest facilities in Belarus. It is located in a remote industrial area, surrounded on all sides by chemical plants. Even the environment there is hostile to human beings: the air carries a persistent chemical odour, and the water is industrial and contaminated. It is to this facility that the authorities send those they intend to punish most severely.



Since 2020, hundreds of political prisoners have been held there — individuals convicted on fabricated, politically motivated charges. Among them were also some of Lukashenko's most well-known opponents.

*“It is a concentration camp — the proportion of political prisoners there is extremely high — around 30%,”* — testimony of a former political prisoner of Penal Colony No. 1. In practice, the colony has become a site of retribution against those whom the regime considers its personal enemies.

## Public Investigation “Torture and Ill-Treatment in Penal Colony No. 17 in Shklov”

Over several years, a team of documenters, analysts, and lawyers of the **International Committee for the Investigation of Torture in Belarus** recorded and analysed testimonies of former political prisoners who had served unlawful sentences in the men's Penal Colony No. 17 in Shklov. The report identifies a wide range of the most serious human rights violations and indicators of crimes against humanity.



Eyewitness testimonies helped reconstruct a detailed — and at times shocking — picture of what was taking place behind the walls of Penal Colony No. 17: from conditions of detention and forced labour to the mechanisms of pressure and punishment applied to political prisoners.

In preparing the report, we examined testimonies from **18 former prisoners** of the regime who were held in Penal Colony No. 17 between December 2020 and June 2024. The total volume of analysed materials amounted to **836 pages**.

Particular attention in the investigation was given to the death of Vitold Ashurak in May 2021, which provoked significant public outcry. The official cause of death — ‘cardiac arrest’ — was refuted by the conclusions of independent experts, who identified signs of violent death. To date, none of the colony's staff have been held accountable.

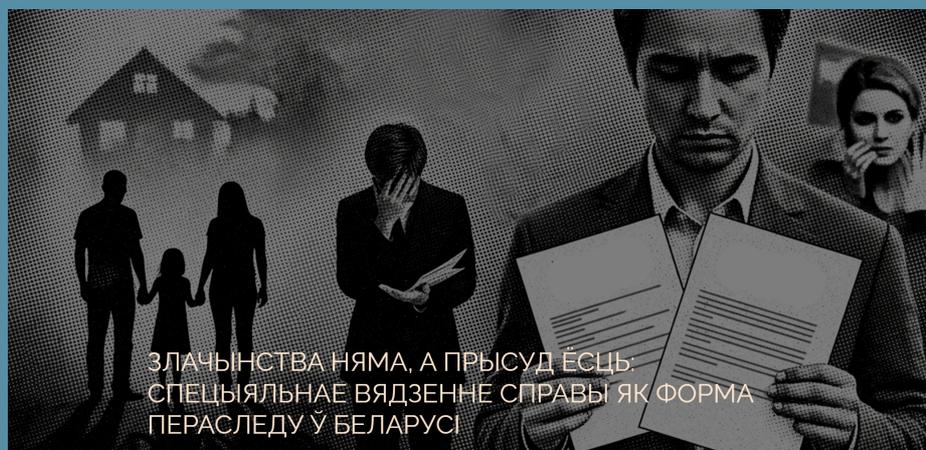


## Analytical Study “Welcome to the Gestapo: GUBOPiK’s Faces”

In recent years, GUBOPiK (Main Directorate for Combating Organized Crime and Corruption of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Belarus) and its officers have become notorious for their particular brutality, systematic violations of human rights and freedoms, the use of torture and other cruel methods of coercion against detainees — practices described in the report of the International Committee for the Investigation of Torture in Belarus “GUBOPiK: A Punitive Unit of the Regime for Combating Dissent”.

The purpose of this study was not only to collect evidence of crimes, but also to document and analyse the actions of each identified GUBOPiK officer involved in abuses, determine their role in the repressive system, and provide a legal assessment of their conduct, with a view to ensuring that the collected data may serve as a basis for future judicial proceedings.

## Analytical Study “No Crime, Yet a Sentence: Special Proceedings as a Form of Persecution in Belarus”



This study comprehensively analyses one of the forms of repression — the so-called “special proceedings” within the Belarusian criminal process — and reaches a clear conclusion: this mechanism constitutes a form of institutionalised persecution and bears the characteristics of crimes against humanity within the meaning of the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court. **As a result of the study, the findings on special proceedings formed the basis of a separate communication submitted to the International Criminal Court on this issue.**

## The Impact on Individuals: An Analysis of Videos of Forced Confessions by Belarusians

This research examines the phenomenon of forced video confessions that became widespread in Belarus after the events of August 2020, from legal, psychological, and socio-value perspectives. The study analyzes international and national legal norms violated by the broadcasting of such videos and also reveals the consequences of these practices for the victims.

Special attention is given to the mechanism of the “breakdown of personality” — the destruction of personal identity structures through systematic violence, psychological pressure, and humiliation. The research analyzes the conflict between the personal values of civic activists — carriers of altruism, justice, and freedom — and the hypertrophied value of power held by representatives of the regime.

Based on the collected materials, the World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT) published an analytical brief explaining how the Belarusian regime turned the public broadcasting of forced confessions into a harsh instrument of psychological torture and political repression.



### **Submission of materials to the International Criminal Court for assessment within the Court’s mandate and possible further procedural consideration**

The submission of materials was carried out within the framework of the Platform’s work on holding perpetrators accountable for crimes committed in Belarus, as one of the practical steps to ensure that the collected testimonies and evidence become part of international legal proceedings.

This is the result of five years of documenting victims’ testimonies and systematizing data. These materials were not left “on the shelf” but were prepared in a working format and used for their intended purpose — in this case, submitted to an international legal mechanism.





## Universal Jurisdiction

Mass torture, when carried out as part of a widespread or systematic attack against the civilian population, constitutes crimes against humanity. In 2023, the United Nations officially recognized mass torture in Belarus as such for the first time.

Crimes of this scale concern everyone. Therefore, under the principle of universal jurisdiction, any country whose legislation provides for it may investigate and prosecute those responsible.

Our organization continues to remain an important part of this process. Thanks to our work, in 2025 twenty applications were submitted to the Lithuanian Prosecutor's Office to initiate criminal proceedings and recognize victims within the framework of universal jurisdiction.



## Database of victims and communication with witnesses who survived torture and ill-treatment

Since August 2020 and up to the present, the **Committee** has been maintaining a database of documented witnesses, containing photos, videos, documents, links to open sources, and evidence of crimes against humanity in Belarus. Communication and maintaining contact are a separate part of the Committee's work. We remain in constant contact with witnesses on various issues — from restoring justice to assisting with applications to migration services.

Within the framework of the International Accountability Platform for Belarus, in which the Committee has been actively participating since March 2021, we have continued to provide support to the UN OHCHR Expert Examination on Belarus in investigating the human rights situation in the country.

Within the framework of the International Accountability Platform for Belarus, we also interact with witnesses to collect evidence of crimes against humanity.



## International Congress of Belarusian Researchers



The Congress was founded by representatives of Belarusian civil society as an annual public event aimed at experts, journalists, public figures, and students from Belarus and other countries.

In 2025, at the Congress in Berlin, within the section “Justice and Access to Justice in Democratic Belarus: analyzing lessons and transforming ideas into legislative initiatives,” we presented a report titled “How people who survived torture and/or ill-treatment perceive justice.”

## Second Congress on Political Prisoners in Belarus

Our representatives took part in the Second Congress, held on September 28 in Poznań. Participants discussed the activities of political and civic initiatives working on the release and support of political prisoners.

During the Congress, we presented a report dedicated to documentation as an element of recording torture and other forms of inhuman treatment, as well as the role of the International Accountability Platform for Belarus in this process. We outlined the main areas of the Platform’s work — its structure, prospects, and opportunities for holding perpetrators accountable.

Representatives also spoke about documentation as a process of collecting and recording facts for the purpose of ensuring accountability.

Side Event:  
“Persecution  
and Forced  
Displacement  
from Belarus:  
a Crime  
Against  
Humanity”  
at the 24th  
Session of the  
Assembly  
of States  
Parties to the  
Rome Statute

A representative of the **International Committee for the Investigation of Torture in Belarus** took part in a side event held during the 24th session of the Assembly of States Parties to the Rome Statute, which took place on December 1–6, 2025, in The Hague, Netherlands.

The event discussed issues related to the legal qualification of the actions of Belarusian officials who systematically and on a large scale persecute Belarusians both inside the country and abroad. It also addressed the problem of the forced displacement of a group of recently “released” political prisoners to Lithuania.



## Psychological Support Groups

We organized in-person psychological support groups in Vilnius and Warsaw — one group in each city — for people who had survived torture and ill-treatment. In addition, two online psychological support groups were conducted, which allowed individuals affected by repression in Belarus and located in different cities and countries to participate.

The work of the groups was aimed at reducing the consequences of psychological trauma, restoring a sense of safety and mutual support, and strengthening the resilience of participants.

All participants of the groups were documented by the **Committee**, which ensured a systematic approach to supporting survivors and enabled the further use of anonymized data in human rights and analytical work.





## Recreational Activities for People Who Survived Torture or Ill-Treatment

In 2025, several creative and culinary workshops were organized to help reduce stress, support emotional recovery, and strengthen social connections among participants.

A ceramics workshop was held, during which participants were able to create a mug or a plate of their choice. Participants noted that working with clay and engaging in manual craft helped them relax, shift attention away from everyday worries, and gain a positive emotional experience.

A workshop on weaving *harlyachki* — traditional Belarusian ornaments — was also organized. In addition to the practical activity, participants learned about the history and cultural context of this decoration and had the opportunity to communicate in a calm and supportive atmosphere.

In addition, a culinary workshop dedicated to Lithuanian cuisine was organized. Preparing dishes together helped reduce tension, strengthen mutual trust among participants, and create an informal space for communication and support.

In December 2025, a three-day retreat was organized for people who had survived torture and ill-treatment and had previously been documented by the Committee.

12

people took part in the retreat.

The event was aimed at restoring the psychological and physical well-being of participants who had been experiencing prolonged stress related to repression, forced emigration, adaptation to a new country, language learning, and the search for employment.

During the retreat, a psychologist with experience supporting survivors of torture and severe forms of violence worked with the participants. Over the course of three days, participants were able to engage in body-based practices, attend psychological lectures, receive individual consultations, and rest and recover in a safe and supportive environment.

The retreat became an important element of the comprehensive support provided to survivors, offering participants space for recovery, reflection, and reduction of the consequences of psychological trauma.



# ПАСЛЯ ЗАУТРА БУДЗЕ ЗАУТРА

ПРАВОВАЯ  
ІНІЦІЯТЫВА

МІЖНАРОДНЫ  
КАМІТЭТ  
ПА РАССЛЕДАВАННІ  
КАТАВАННЯ У БЕЛАРУСІ

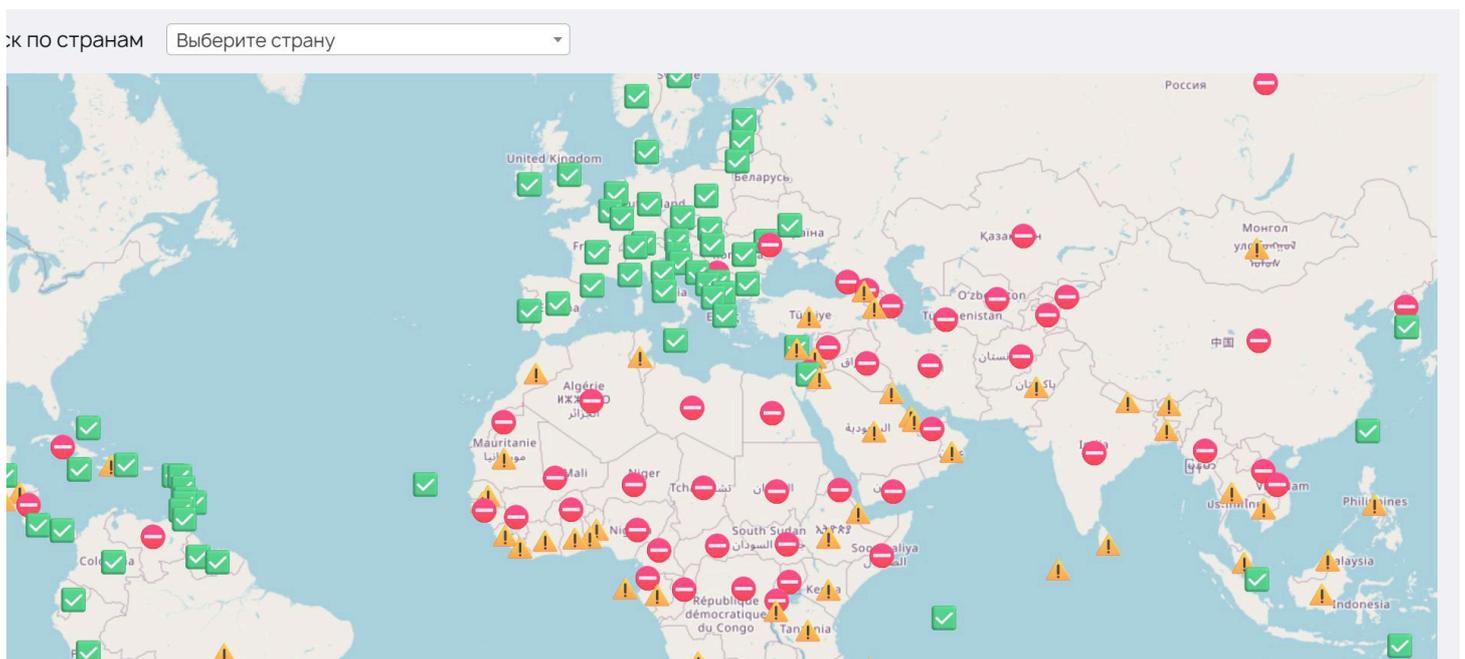
Staging of the  
Play “The Day  
After Tomorrow  
Will Be Tomorrow”  
(dir. Pavel  
Gorodnitsky)  
in Portugal at the  
Municipal Theatre  
of Sintra

The performance of the monodrama “The Day After Tomorrow Will Be Tomorrow” at the Municipal Theatre of Sintra in Portugal became a logical continuation and development of a successful project implemented in 2024. The production, based on the real story of political persecution, had previously been presented in a number of European cities and received a wide public and professional response.

International tours confirmed the sustained interest of foreign audiences in the play and its significance as a tool for drawing attention to human rights violations in Belarus. The continuation of the play’s touring life in 2025 demonstrates the long-term impact of the project and its ability to remain relevant in an international context.

## 2. ENSURING LEGAL SECURITY FOR BELARUSIANS IN FORCED MIGRATION

### Interactive Map “Safe Travel Navigator”



This map was created by lawyers of **Legal Initiative** and shows the risks associated with visiting different countries for Belarusians who are in forced migration.



#### HOW TO USE THE MAP?

Each country or territory is marked according to the level of danger and the risk of extradition upon request from Belarus:



– Safe country with a low risk of extradition;



– Certain risks of extradition exist;



– High risk of extradition.



Here you will find an analysis covering 193 UN member states and 8 partially recognized territories, which includes:

- ▶ the country's political relations with Belarus, the regime, and democratic forces;
- ▶ the search databases used and their impact on safety;
- ▶ international agreements that may affect extradition;
- ▶ state authorities responsible for making extradition decisions;
- ▶ precedents of detention and extradition of Belarusians;
- ▶ the general human rights situation within the country.

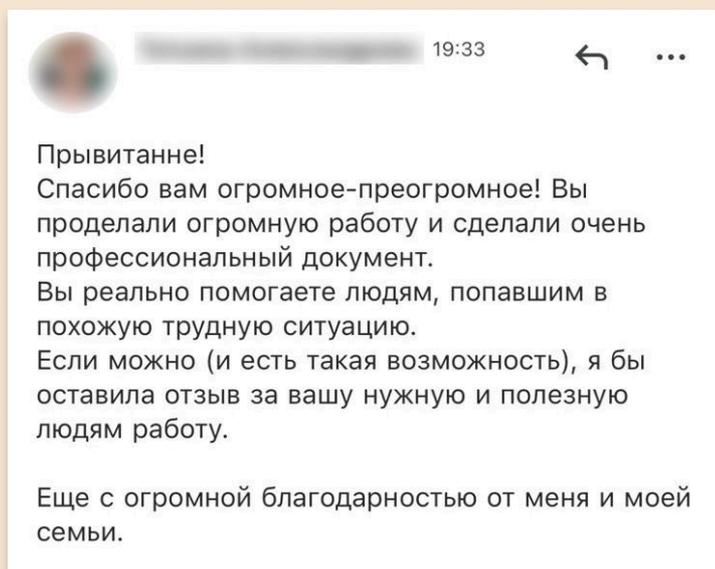
This analysis is based on the opinions of experts from **Legal Initiative** and is of a recommendatory nature. The final decision regarding travel or relocation should be made independently, taking into account a person's legal status, the possible existence of a criminal case in Belarus, inclusion in search databases, and other individual circumstances.

## **Migration Consultation Service**

**Legal Initiative** assists Belarusians who are in forced migration and who:

- ▶ have experienced discrimination in migration processes;
- ▶ face difficulties obtaining international protection status or other humanitarian statuses;
- ▶ face the risk of deportation or extradition, as well as detention abroad at the request of the Belarusian regime;
- ▶ experience political persecution related to participation in protests, civic or political activity, or activity on social media;†
- ▶ need legal support in the context of the migration crisis.

200+



people received assistance over the year through consultations and the preparation of legal opinions for migration authorities.

## Migration Education

An offline course on forced migration issues, “*Migration and Human Rights: From Standards to Protection Practices*,” was conducted. The course included three days of theoretical and practical sessions held in Vilnius.

The **main goal** of the course was to provide participants with the knowledge and skills necessary to understand and work in the field of migration and international law, particularly in the context of the forced migration of Belarusians.

The course was designed for lawyers and activists interested in migration as a professional field or as a direction within their organization’s work.

## Communication with States

During the year, official inquiries regarding the activities of Interpol in relation to Belarusians were sent to **80 countries**.

320

total number of inquiries.

Within the migration program, communication was established with government authorities in six countries (Ukraine, Lithuania, Poland, Germany, the Czech Republic, and Bulgaria) in order to achieve a positive shift in the international community’s response to cases of politically motivated detention of Belarusians in migration.

15

As a result, **six positive responses** were received, indicating that these states either already apply or are prepared to apply enhanced scrutiny and additional safeguards. In particular:

- 1. Ukraine** suspended the application of the Minsk Convention with Belarus and Russia;
- 2. Lithuania** introduced a detailed multi-stage review of requests with guarantees of judicial oversight;
- 3. Poland** began conducting mandatory reviews of materials in each case without automatic extradition;
- 4. Germany** requires detailed examination of all cases before issuing arrest warrants;
- 5. The Czech Republic**, since 2020, has effectively suspended extradition to Belarus and participates in decision-making based on information from NGOs;
- 6. Bulgaria**, following consultations, confirmed the detailed examination of each request with due regard for legal safeguards.

## **Information Materials and a Resource Library for Migration Cases**

A database of systematized materials was created on the organization's website, which can be used to substantiate the safety risks of returning to Belarus when applying for international protection, refugee status, or political asylum.

It includes official reports of international organizations, reports by human rights defenders, analytical materials, journalistic articles, and expert studies reflecting the human rights situation in Belarus.

11

information materials on migration issues were produced and published on the website as well as on social media.

A dedicated section was also created on the organization's website.

### 3. BUILDING A SUSTAINABLE HUMAN RIGHTS CULTURE THROUGH EDUCATIONAL MEDIA CONTENT

Over the past year, the **Legal Initiative** YouTube channel achieved:

**588,000+**

views.

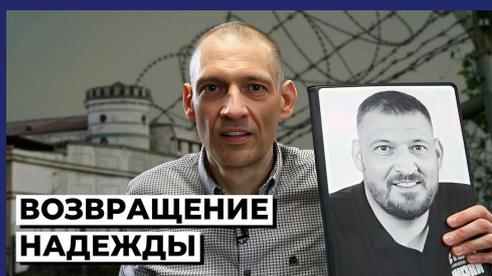
**16,500**

hours of watch time.

**1,800+**

subscribers.

Throughout the year, we experimented with different formats: producing videos on women's rights and history, creating film reviews and series from a human rights perspective, breaking down current events step by step, covering breaking news, and even releasing a musical chanson-style video dedicated to a political prisoner.

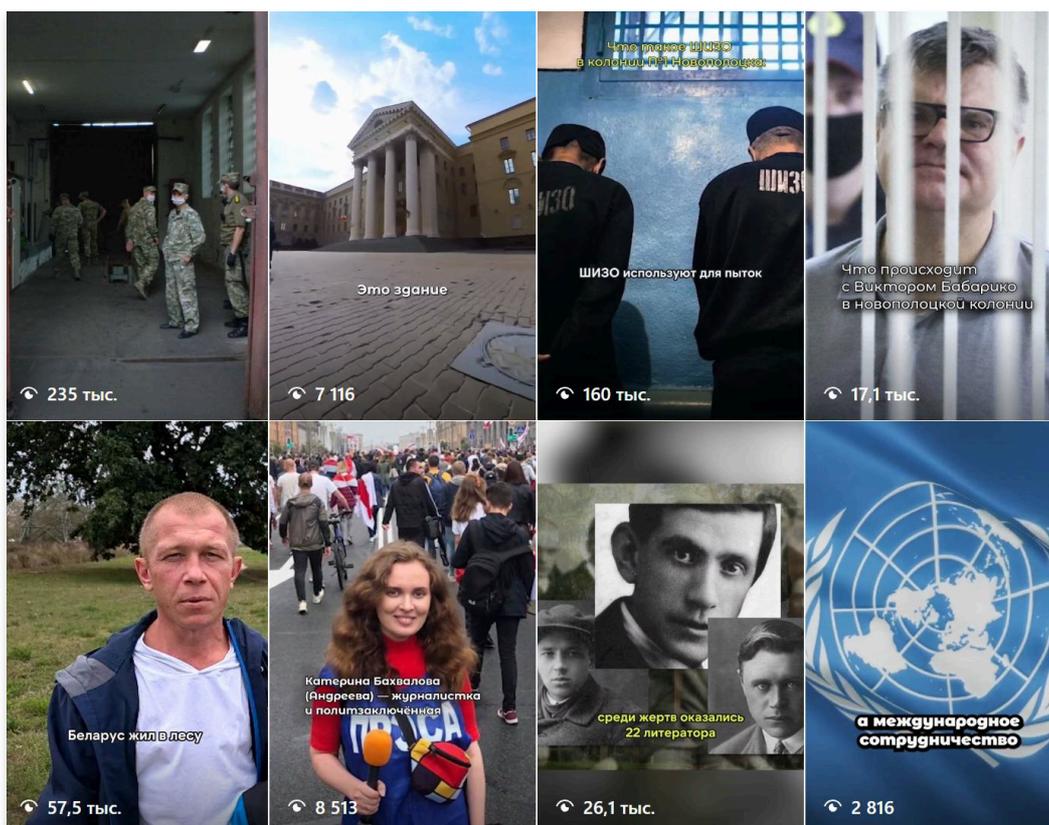


Our investigations also entered a new stage of development — they are no longer dry materials with dates and names, but full-fledged true crime-style investigations that document the crimes of the regime. Importantly, despite the sensitivity of the topics and the ongoing repression in Belarus, **the majority of views (75–85%) come from Belarus itself.** This once again demonstrates how important it is to continue speaking about repression regardless of statutes of limitations, and shows that Belarusians continue to seek truth and justice even under conditions of repression and dictatorship.



In 2025, the organization's social media became more visible. We focused on video content and were able to generate a stronger response from the audience. The number of reactions and subscribers on Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok increased significantly, and some of our videos on human rights topics collected **hundreds of thousands of views** for the first time.

Our social media platforms also became spaces for collaboration. Over the past year, we published a number of posts in co-authorship with other human rights channels and produced content featuring political prisoners and Belarusian media figures.



## 4. HUMAN RIGHTS EDUCATION

We proceed from the understanding that the protection of human rights is impossible without access to knowledge about rights and the mechanisms for their protection. Therefore, education is one of the key areas of activity of **Legal Initiative**. In 2025, we organized educational activities to provide participants with practical knowledge and tools for protecting their rights and developing human rights initiatives.

### Summer School on International Humanitarian Law

The school was held in June 2025 with a focus on documenting Russian war crimes in Ukraine.

**Goal of the School** — to train participants in the methods and practices of collecting, documenting, and analyzing evidence of war crimes in order to build a reliable evidentiary base that can be used in national and international justice mechanisms.

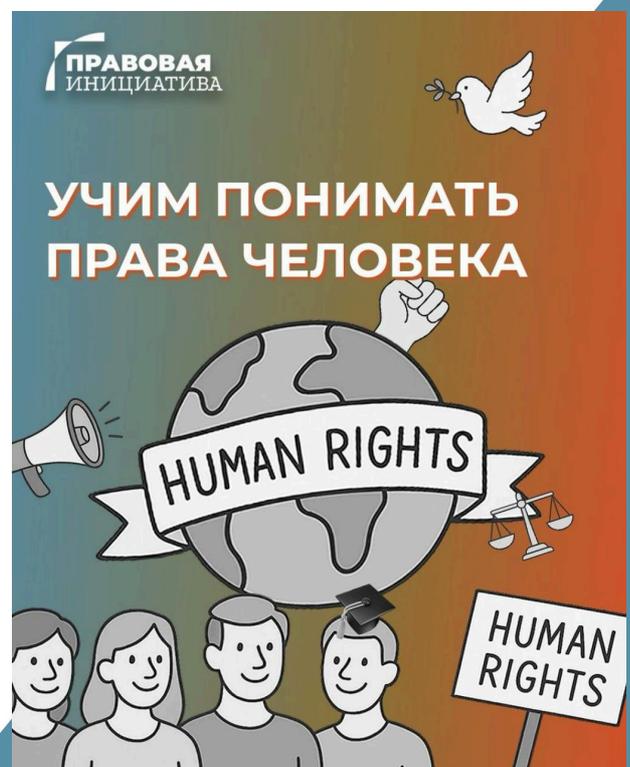
### School Results

29

applications for participation were submitted.

15

participants were selected and successfully completed the program.



## School “Human Rights in Action”

28

applications for participation were submitted.

The educational course was held in August–September 2025. It consisted of three educational sessions and took place in Vilnius.

16

participants were selected, 12 of whom successfully completed the program.

**Program goal:** strengthening the Belarusian human rights sector and preparing new specialists.

The course became an important platform for training qualified human rights defenders capable of contributing to the strengthening of civil society and the promotion of human rights.

### Internships

In 2025, one round of internships was organized. In total, 3 graduates of the “Human Rights in Action” School were selected to participate. The internships took place in Belarusian human rights organizations: **Legal Initiative, the International Committee for the Investigation of Torture in Belarus, and LegalHub.**

During the internships, participants assisted teams in conducting research and preparing analytical materials, took part in drafting texts and materials, and supported ongoing projects. As a result, the interns gained practical experience and a better understanding of how human rights organizations operate in practice.

### Human Rights Projects Implemented by Graduates

After completing the “*Human Rights in Action*” School, graduates implemented **three projects** supported by **Legal Initiative.**

- ▶ “Belarusians in Lithuania after 2020: risks, rights, and integration in new conditions” — a study of the situation of Belarusian political migrants in Lithuania, focusing on legal risks and human rights.
- ▶ “Integra-L” — an informational and educational program for Belarusians in forced migration in Lithuania covering three areas: the Lithuanian language, the Constitution of the Republic of Lithuania, and practical aspects of everyday life.
- ▶ “RIGHTS — YOUR SUPERPOWER!” — an educational program (online intensive) on human rights for teenagers aged 14–18, including interactive sessions with mini-lectures, group tasks, practical case studies, and a social hackathon.

## Events for Alumni

In 2025, we continued to support the community of graduates of our educational programs in order to maintain connections, exchange experience, and support the development of their human rights activities.

We renewed the newsletter for the **Initiate alumni network** and organized four online meetings during which alumni presented their projects, shared the results of their work, discussed challenges, and received feedback from colleagues and the Legal Initiative team. These meetings contributed to professional development, mutual support, and the strengthening of horizontal connections within the community.

In addition, one offline meeting took place in Vilnius, where alumni were able to meet in person, discuss joint plans, and exchange experiences.

# 5. INTERNATIONAL ADVOCACY

## UN Special Procedures

In 2025, **Legal Initiative** actively engaged with a number of UN Special Procedures. We submitted **7 thematic communications**, including to:

- ▶ the Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions;
- ▶ the Committee on Enforced Disappearances;
- ▶ the Independent Expert on human rights and international solidarity;
- ▶ the Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association;
- ▶ the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders;
- ▶ the Special Rapporteur on torture;
- ▶ the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism.

These submissions addressed systemic human rights violations in Belarus, including torture, arbitrary detention, and the persecution of human rights defenders and civil society. They were aimed at drawing international attention and using UN mechanisms to protect victims.

### Communication to CEDAW

In 2025, **Legal Initiative** initiated an inquiry procedure before the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in accordance with Article 8 of the Optional Protocol to the Convention.



We submitted an official communication requesting the initiation of an investigation into serious and systematic violations of women's rights in places of detention in Belarus, including torture, ill-treatment, humiliation, and gender-based discrimination. The materials presented demonstrate that these violations are systemic and widespread, particularly with regard to women political prisoners.

The legal analysis revealed violations of a number of provisions of the CEDAW Convention and the state's failure to implement the Committee's previous recommendations (2009 and 2020). The submission was prepared with the support of a coalition of Belarusian human rights organizations and received broad institutional backing. It became an important element of international advocacy aimed at increasing pressure on the Belarusian authorities and combating impunity.

## 60th Session of the UN Human Rights Council

Within the framework of the 60th session of the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva in September 2025, a representative of **Legal Initiative** participated in a side event dedicated to documenting and analyzing crimes against humanity in Belarus. The event brought together leading experts engaged in collecting evidence, analyzing human rights violations, and promoting accountability processes.

During the discussion, participants presented current results of documenting torture and ill-treatment, assessed the human rights situation from the perspective of international criminal law, and discussed opportunities for cooperation with international mechanisms to ensure justice.

## Warsaw Human Dimension Conference 2025



Within the framework of the Warsaw Human Dimension Conference in October 2025, a representative of **Legal Initiative** participated in a side event together with representatives of other Belarusian NGOs. The discussion focused on systemic human rights violations in Belarus, including the persecution of political activists and human rights defenders, as well as opportunities for international cooperation to strengthen monitoring, document violations, and promote accountability measures.

### Universal Periodic Review of the UN Human Rights Council



**Legal Initiative** actively participated in the preparation for the fourth cycle of the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) of the Republic of Belarus. We prepared a submission addressing Belarus's failure to comply with international standards on the prevention of torture and cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment. We also contributed to the preparation of a coalition report by Belarusian non-governmental organizations assessing Belarus's implementation of its international human rights obligations.

## Participation in an International Conference at Vilnius University

In September 2025, representatives of **Legal Initiative** took part in the international conference 'Belarus and Belarusians in Times of Geopolitical Instability: Global Perception and Domestic Realities,' organized by the Institute of International Relations and Political Science at Vilnius University.

During the conference, participants discussed issues of the Belarusian regime's transnational repression, including the use of extradition mechanisms and Interpol against Belarusians in forced migration, as well as the practice of trials in absentia as a tool of pressure on Belarusian activists abroad.

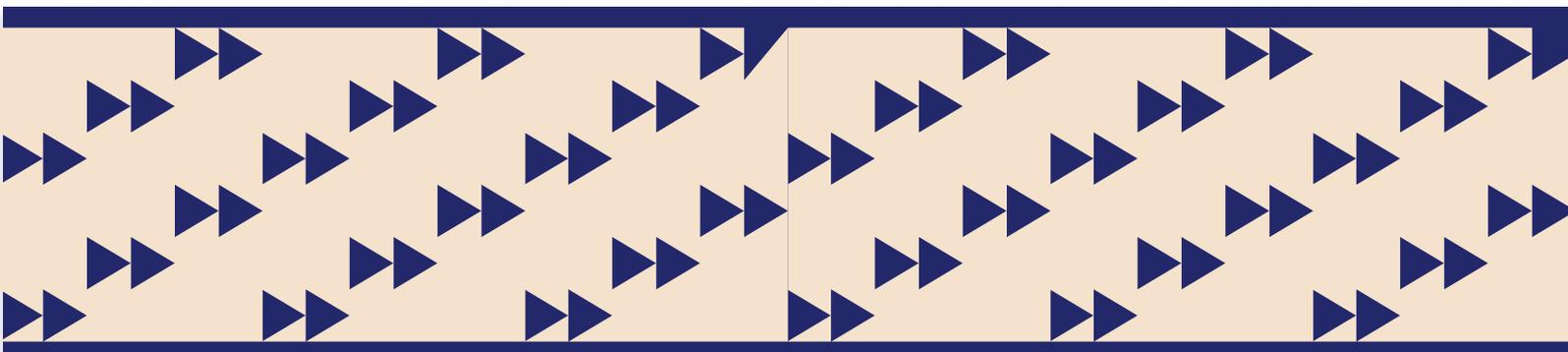
Participants exchanged experiences, discussed international legal approaches to protecting victims, and explored ways to counter repression at the transnational level.

## International Criminal Court

The Director of **Legal Initiative**, Viktoria Fedorova, took part in the seminar "Strategy on Victims 2025: Renewed Commitment," held at the International Criminal Court.

For Belarusian human rights defenders, this represents an important opportunity to keep the issues of repression and torture in Belarus on the international agenda.

Such meetings are designed to allow experts to present reports, exchange experiences, and discuss current issues related to the work of the ICC. It is an inclusive platform for cooperation and joint research in the field of human rights protection.



## 6. GENDER PROGRAM

In 2025, **Legal Initiative** began actively developing a gender program as one of the key areas of its work. This focus became a natural continuation of our human rights activities and a response to growing gender inequality, discrimination, and the vulnerability of women and LGBTQ+ people both inside Belarus and among those who have been forced into migration.

We approached the development of this area systematically: strengthening public discussion of gender issues, expanding educational and awareness-raising activities, and launching initiatives aimed at supporting those affected by discrimination and violence. This allowed us to draw attention to issues that had previously remained insufficiently visible and to create space for safe dialogue and solidarity.

The gender program has become an important part of our mission — strengthening respect for the dignity of every person and protecting the right to freedom from discrimination.

### Queer Agenda

In 2025, together with Belarusian queer organizations, we held **three online events** aimed at supporting and ensuring the safety of Belarusian LGBTQ+ people.

#### 1. “How to Make the Queer Community Safer?”

Topic: Safety of the queer community, responses to discrimination and violence within the community, and the creation of supportive and safe spaces for LGBTQ+ people.

#### 2. “Queer.Secure: Safety in the Online Space”

Topic: Digital security for queer people in unsafe environments, protection of personal data, risks of online persecution, and basic practices of self-protection.

### 3. “LGBTQ+ in Belarus: How to Live Under Discriminatory Laws?”

Topic: State repression against LGBTQ+ people, systemic insecurity, pressure, the impossibility of living openly, and forced emigration.

Within the framework of the queer agenda, informational and educational materials were prepared and published to increase the visibility of the problems faced by LGBTQ+ people and to raise awareness about repression and discrimination.



#### Countering Gender-Based Violence

As part of the international campaign “16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence,” **Legal Initiative** implemented an online awareness campaign aimed at increasing awareness of gender-based and sexualized violence, as well as expanding access to information about assistance for Belarusians, including those in migration.



#### International Directory of Supporting Organizations by Country

A separate page was created and published on the **Legal Initiative** website with an interactive list of organizations providing support to people who have experienced gender-based violence in different countries.



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The list includes organizations from different countries (including Belarus), presented in the format of an expandable catalogue and designed for regular updates. It also provides a feedback option to add new organizations or correct information.



## Countering Sexualized Harassment

In 2025, Legal Initiative consistently developed a direction focused on countering sexualized harassment and creating a safe and respectful environment within the Belarusian civil society in exile.

A core document, “Principles of Safe and Respectful Cooperation: Countering Sexualized Harassment,” was developed as a comprehensive framework document for organizations and initiatives. The document is available in Russian, English, and Belarusian.

A shorter version of the document was also prepared for signing — “Principles of Zero Tolerance for Sexualized Harassment in Civil Society.” This version is intended to serve as a public declaration of values and standards of zero tolerance toward sexualized harassment within civil society. The document is available in Russian, English, and Belarusian.

These documents include:

-  a unified conceptual framework (definitions of harassment, consent, retaliation, victim-blaming, etc.);
-  a description of responsibilities and sanctions;
-  transformative and restorative approaches;
-  recommendations for implementation in both formal and informal teams.



## Meeting “Supplementary Human Dimension Meeting (SHDM)”

The Gender Program Coordinator from **Legal Initiative** took part in the “Supplementary Human Dimension Meeting” (SHDM), organized by the OSCE, on the topic “Inclusion as a Path to Advancing Tolerance and Non-Discrimination.”

For Belarus, this is particularly relevant — independent NGOs in the country have been dismantled, human rights defenders are either in exile or imprisoned, and any initiatives related to gender equality, LGBTQ+ rights, or the promotion of inclusivity are persecuted.

International platforms such as SHDM remain rare spaces where the voices of Belarusian activists and human rights defenders can be heard. Rights, inclusion, and respect for diversity are the foundations of peace and democracy.

## Council of Europe Roundtable “Safety is not a luxury, ignorance is not protection”

On September 19, a roundtable of the Council of Europe titled “Safety is not a luxury, ignorance is not protection” was held in Strasbourg.

## International Conference “PRIDE FOR PROGRESS”

Our team participated in the international conference “PRIDE FOR PROGRESS,” organized in partnership with EPBN. The event took place on June 6–7 in Vilnius and brought together business leaders, human rights defenders, HR specialists, and policymakers to discuss how to create truly inclusive workplaces.

For Legal Initiative, participation in this conference provided an opportunity to exchange experiences and better understand the European context and the challenges faced by LGBTQ+ people in the workplace.



The Gender Program Coordinator of Legal Initiative presented her experience and research related to gender safety and countering sexualized harassment.

Together with researchers, journalists, and experts, participants discussed why the safety of women journalists remains marginalized within the Belarusian media in exile and what steps are necessary to change the situation.

## Meeting of the Advisory Board of the network “Women Against Violence Europe”

At the beginning of May, a representative of **Legal Initiative** took part in a meeting of the Advisory Board of the network Women Against Violence Europe (WAVE) — a European network working in the field of women’s rights and combating gender-based violence. The meeting brought together representatives from more than 40 countries.

During the Assembly, key topics were discussed, including the prevention of gender-based violence, discrimination, assistance to vulnerable groups — migrants, refugees, and women with disabilities — as well as support for women’s organizations. Issues of equal pay and inclusive education were also raised. Particular attention was given to the update of the WAVE ‘Find Help’ database, a unique tool that brings together nearly 2,000 specialized services across European countries that provide assistance to women and girls who have experienced violence.

For **Legal Initiative**, participation in this event provided an opportunity to inform the international community about efforts to protect women’s rights and document violence in Belarus.

## WAVE Conference “Feminist Solidarity and Collective Action: Reclaiming our Power to End Violence Against Women”

On September 22–23, the 27th annual WAVE conference titled “Feminist Solidarity and Collective Action: Reclaiming our Power to End Violence Against Women” was held in Bucharest. The conference brought together more than 180 participants from 46 countries. Our organization was represented by the Gender Program Coordinator.

Over the course of two days, participants discussed feminist solidarity and collective action in the context of a rollback of rights; the resilience of women’s organizations facing political pressure and financial challenges; and new strategies for supporting and protecting women and LGBTQ+ communities in different countries.

Establishing communication, building new connections, and sharing with the Belarusian context of repression and exile the need to protect vulnerable groups even in times of crisis was a key objective of our participation. The conference became a powerful space for exchanging experiences, building strategic alliances, and strengthening international solidarity.

## ILGA-Europe Conference

On October 22–26, 2025, the Gender Program Coordinator of **Legal Initiative** took part in the annual ILGA-Europe conference, which brought together more than 400 participants from Europe and Central Asia to discuss strategies for advancing LGBTQ+ rights in the context of growing political instability.

We discussed how concepts of safety, care, and solidarity are being rethought in exile and shared the experience of **Legal Initiative** in documenting human rights violations against LGBTQ+ people in Belarus and supporting activists in the diaspora.

The conference focused on the theme “Face Forward,” inviting participants to reflect on the future:

- ▶ how to maintain political clarity in the context of repression and backlash;
- ▶ how to build sustainable movements despite limited resources;
- ▶ how to support marginalized groups within communities — including trans people, people with migration experience, and racialized activists.

# OUR PRODUCTS:

## Week Against Torture

From June 23 to 29, the team of **Legal Initiative** and the **International Committee for the Investigation of Torture in Belarus** held the seventh “Week Against Torture” campaign, dedicated to the UN International Day in Support of Victims of Torture (June 26).

Torture in Belarus remains a systemic crime despite international prohibitions, the attention of human rights defenders, and thousands of documented cases.

Together with our partners, we prepared a series of events held both online and offline (in Warsaw and Vilnius).

**We are convinced that it is necessary to continue speaking about this in order to achieve justice and prevent impunity from taking root.**

### 1. Public Lecture by Professor Christopher J. Einolf on Torture

**Legal Initiative**, together with the European Humanities University, organized a public lecture by Professor Christopher J. Einolf (USA) in Vilnius. The lecture discussed contemporary practices of torture and mechanisms for countering them, with a particular focus on the situation in Belarus.

The event attracted a wide audience and contributed to raising awareness of the problem and of international approaches to the protection of human rights.



## 2. Presentation of the Music Video “I’m Not in Prison for Myself”

As part of the “Week Against Torture,” a special event was held — the presentation of the music video “*I’m Not in Prison for Myself*,” created by the organization’s team and dedicated to political prisoners in Belarus. The event aimed to draw attention to torture, inhuman conditions of detention, and the experiences of pain, fear, and injustice, using creative forms of expression while emphasizing the preservation of hope.

## 3. Publication and Presentation of the Investigation “Torture in Penal Colony No. 17”

As part of the “Week Against Torture,” **Legal Initiative** and the **International Committee for the Investigation of Torture in Belarus** presented a large-scale investigation into detention conditions and ill-treatment of prisoners in Penal Colony No. 17, based on the analysis of 18 interviews with former political prisoners. The document provides a detailed description of the atmosphere of fear and violence, living conditions, labor and medical care, the informal hierarchy supported by the administration, as well as the role of specific prison staff members.

## 4. Public Discussion “Experiences of Violence and Paths of Support: The Voice of the Queer Community”

The discussion was organized by TG House in cooperation with **Legal Initiative** and was dedicated to the experiences of queer people who had suffered from repression, violence, and persecution.

The discussion included activists, human rights defenders, and queer individuals who shared their personal stories.

## Documentary Film “Between Home and Self”

The film tells the stories of two Belarusian representatives of the LGBTQ+ community living in exile (in Vilnius and Warsaw), about their lives in Belarus, the repression they faced, forced departure, and the challenges of adapting to life in Europe.

“Between Home and Self” became an important step toward a deeper dialogue about LGBTQ+ rights both in the Belarusian context and internationally. By the end of 2025, the film had reached **39,000 views on YouTube**. In addition, our team organized **offline screenings in Vilnius, Warsaw, and Tbilisi**, which brought together members of the community and interested audiences.

Through these two stories, we highlighted both the personal and collective experiences of the LGBTQ+ community, drawing attention to the need for legal and social protection and offering support to those who continue to face discrimination and internal trauma even after migration. The film shows how state repression, social stigma, and personal hardship shape the unique experiences of Belarusian LGBTQ+ people and give a voice to those who often remain unseen. It also strengthens solidarity between those who have left the country and those who remain.

The film is used as a tool for visibility, public dialogue, and advocacy on the situation of Belarusian LGBTQ+ people.

## Conference “Paths to Accountability: Legal, Psychological, and Migration Consequences of Repression in Belarus”

In December 2025, **Legal Initiative** organized a conference dedicated to practical mechanisms for holding perpetrators accountable for torture and cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment in Belarus. The event brought together more than 30 researchers, human rights defenders, psychologists, lawyers, journalists, activists, and people who had survived torture and ill-treatment.

**Three panels** were organized within the conference:

- ▶ **Migration consequences of repression** — discussions focused on deportations, forced migration, legalization and legal protection of victims, as well as the specifics of adaptation and social integration of Belarusians in Poland, Lithuania, and the Czech Republic.
- ▶ **Legal accountability mechanisms** — discussions covered universal jurisdiction, the International Criminal Court, the UN International Court of Justice, and the role of civil society in ensuring the principle of accountability for torture and other serious human rights violations.
- ▶ **Psychological and physical consequences** — participants analyzed long-term support and recovery for survivors, the effectiveness of therapeutic programs, psychotherapy, and medical consultations, and identified needs and gaps in access to assistance.

The conference enabled experts and organizations to exchange experiences and discuss current challenges in providing legal, psychological, and migration-related support to victims.

