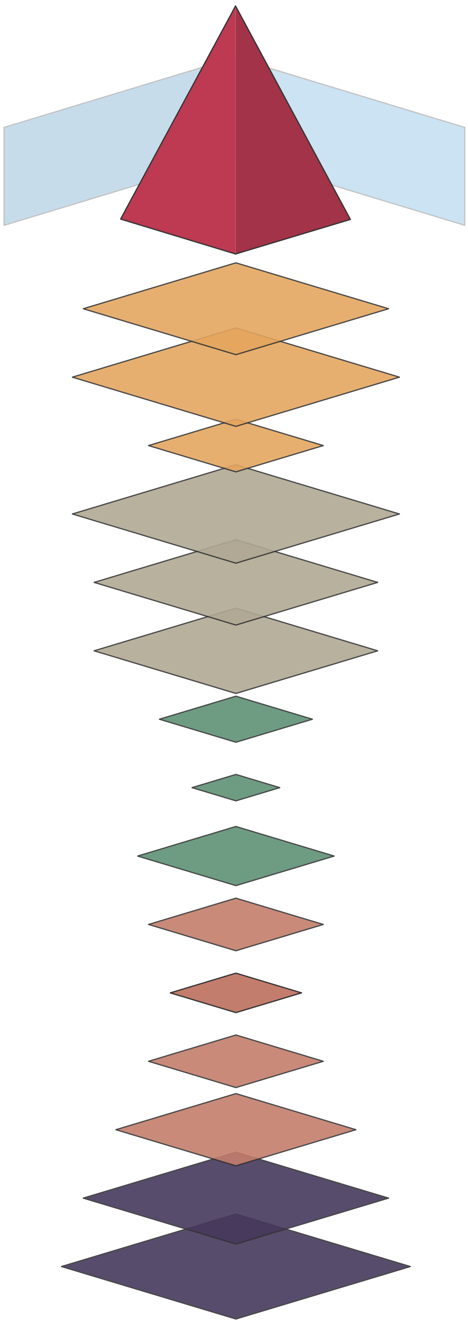
GLOBAL ORGANIZED CRIME INDEX

GLOBAL INITIATIVE AGAINST TRANSNATIONAL ORGANIZED CRIME

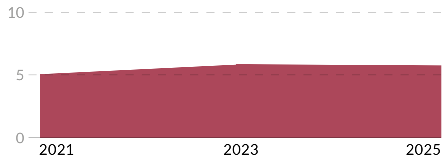
BELARUS



5.83 ↘0.03

CRIMINALITY SCORE

63rd of 193 countries ↘7
9th of 44 European countries ↘2
5th of 17 Central and Eastern European countries -



CRIMINAL MARKETS	**5.37**	↗0.03
HUMAN TRAFFICKING	7.00	0.00
HUMAN SMUGGLING	7.50	0.00
EXTORTION & PROTECTION RACKETEERING	4.00	0.00
ARMS TRAFFICKING	7.50	0.00
TRADE IN COUNTERFEIT GOODS	6.50	0.00
ILLICIT TRADE IN EXCISABLE GOODS	6.50	↗0.50
FLORA CRIMES	3.50	0.00
FAUNA CRIMES	2.00	↘0.50
NON-RENEWABLE RESOURCE CRIMES	4.50	↘0.50
HEROIN TRADE	4.00	0.00
COCAINE TRADE	3.00	↗0.50
CANNABIS TRADE	4.00	0.00
SYNTHETIC DRUG TRADE	5.50	↗0.50
CYBER-DEPENDENT CRIMES	7.00	0.00
FINANCIAL CRIMES	8.00	0.00

CRIMINAL ACTORS	**6.30**	↘0.10
MAFIA-STYLE GROUPS	3.50	↘0.50
CRIMINAL NETWORKS	5.00	0.00
STATE-EMBEDDED ACTORS	9.00	0.00
FOREIGN ACTORS	6.50	0.00
PRIVATE SECTOR ACTORS	7.50	0.00

This project was funded in part by a grant from the United States Department of State.

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Funded by the European Union

ENACT is funded by the European Union and implemented by the Institute for Security Studies and INTERPOL, in affiliation with the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime.

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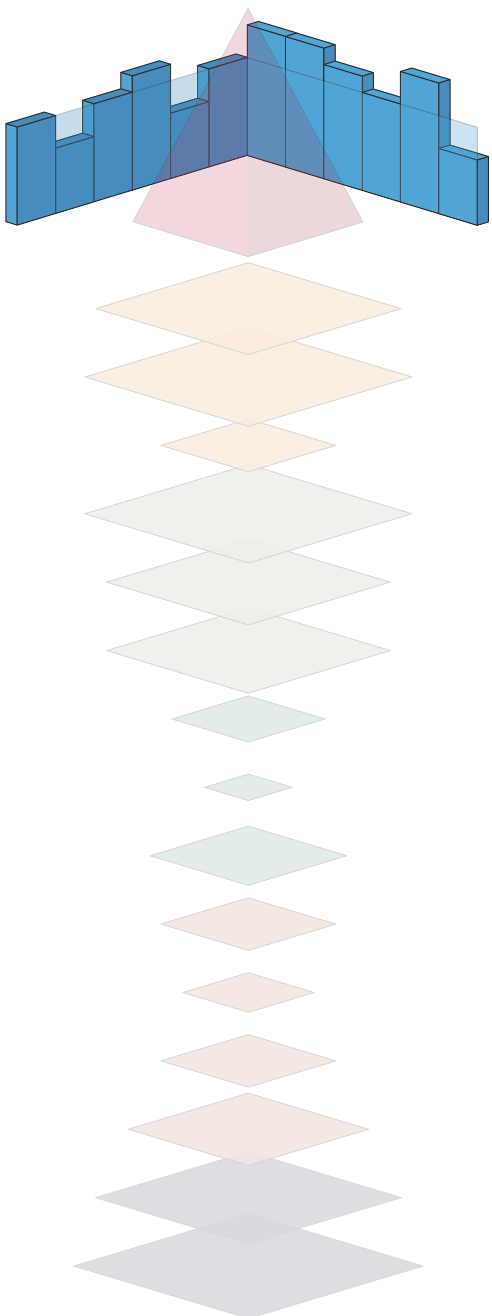
GLOBAL INITIATIVE AGAINST TRANSNATIONAL ORGANIZED CRIME

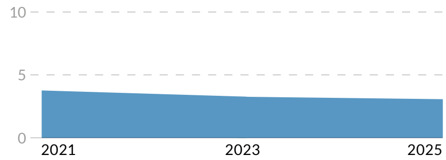
BELARUS



3.08 ↘0.17

RESILIENCE SCORE

163rd of 193 countries ↘4
44th of 44 European countries -
17th of 17 Central and Eastern European countries -



POLITICAL LEADERSHIP AND GOVERNANCE	**3.00**	0.00
GOVERNMENT TRANSPARENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY	**2.00**	0.00
INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION	**3.00**	0.00
NATIONAL POLICIES AND LAWS	**3.50**	↘0.50
JUDICIAL SYSTEM AND DETENTION	**2.00**	0.00
LAW ENFORCEMENT	**3.00**	0.00
TERRITORIAL INTEGRITY	**4.00**	0.00
ANTI-MONEY LAUNDERING	**4.00**	↘0.50
ECONOMIC REGULATORY CAPACITY	**3.50**	↘0.50
VICTIM AND WITNESS SUPPORT	**3.00**	0.00
PREVENTION	**4.00**	↘0.50
NON-STATE ACTORS	**2.00**	0.00

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CRIMINALITY

CRIMINAL MARKETS

PEOPLE

Human trafficking continues to be a significant issue in Belarus, with the country acting as a source point for trafficked individuals. Belarusian nationals are particularly vulnerable to trafficking for sexual exploitation and forced labour, primarily in Russia, Poland and other European countries. The restrictive political climate and economic hardships have intensified these vulnerabilities, making it easier for traffickers to exploit individuals seeking better opportunities abroad. Organized criminal networks, often with transnational connections, coordinate the recruitment, transportation and exploitation of victims. While Belarus has laws prohibiting human trafficking, enforcement remains inconsistent, and victim support services are limited.

Human smuggling is a significant issue, with Belarus serving as a transit country for migrants attempting to reach the EU. Since 2021, the government has reportedly been involved in coordinating migrant smuggling through affiliated entities, using irregular migration as a political tool. This strategy facilitates the movement of foreign nationals toward EU borders during periods of heightened political tensions. Criminal actors, typically individuals or small groups recruited through encrypted messaging platforms and operating with the tacit approval of state actors, assist migrants in crossing borders illegally. Border police are often complicit in facilitating these crossings. Migrants are flown into Belarus and then transported to the borders with Poland, Lithuania and Latvia in attempts to cross. The securitization of borders and stricter controls imposed by EU neighbours have made irregular migration through Belarus increasingly complicated and perilous. Additionally, the involvement of government-affiliated actors further complicate efforts to dismantle these smuggling networks.

Extortion and protection racketeering are prevalent, particularly among businesses. Criminal groups have been known to demand payments from private enterprises in exchange for protection or to evade regulatory scrutiny. The economic downturn and declining foreign investment have led to an increase in instances of businesses being coerced into paying illicit fees to maintain their operations. Reports indicate that political elites and law enforcement officials have been complicit in extortion schemes, targeting both local and foreign businesses. The blurred lines between state authority and organized crime complicate efforts to address these practices effectively.

TRADE

Arms trafficking in Belarus is closely linked to state-embedded actors, with reports indicating that military-grade weapons are being sold to conflict zones. The country has long faced accusations of supplying arms to sanctioned states and non-state actors, with illicit arms exports facilitated by shell companies and intermediaries. While official arms sales are tightly regulated, the presence of corrupt officials within military and customs agencies has allowed for the diversion of weapons into illicit markets. Smuggling routes frequently involve transit through Russia and other Eastern European countries before reaching their final destinations in Africa and West Asia.

The counterfeit goods market in Belarus is well established, with the country serving as a key hub for both transit and production. Counterfeit products, including pharmaceuticals and luxury items, are often smuggled into Belarus from Russia before being distributed throughout Europe. Illicit operations thrive due to weak enforcement of intellectual property rights and corruption within regulatory agencies.

The illicit trade of excise consumer goods, particularly tobacco and alcohol, represents a significant criminal enterprise in Belarus. The country has been identified as a major producer of illicit cigarettes destined for markets in Russia, the UK and the EU, especially Poland, Germany and the Baltic states. Smuggling operations are often linked to state-embedded actors, with reports indicating that officials facilitate the movement of untaxed products across border crossings. The tobacco industry in Belarus has faced criticism for its role in enabling this illicit trade, with certain manufacturers allegedly producing excess quantities that are subsequently funnelled into the black market. Although law enforcement efforts in the EU have resulted in large-scale seizures, the trade remains lucrative primarily due to the substantial tax differentials between Belarus and neighbouring EU states, the involvement of state-embedded actors in the market and the significance of the tobacco trade as a revenue stream for the regime.

ENVIRONMENT

Flora crimes, particularly illegal logging, remain a significant concern in Belarus. The country's extensive forests are exploited for timber, with both domestic and foreign actors participating in illegal logging operations. Reports indicate that corrupt forestry officials have facilitated the extraction and sale of timber in violation of environmental regulations. A substantial portion of the illegally harvested wood is smuggled into EU countries, where demand remains high. Following the EU's 2022 sanctions on the import of Belarusian timber, shipments have been rerouted through Central Asia.

Fauna crimes, including illegal hunting and wildlife trafficking, are prevalent in Belarus, with illegal trophy hunting and unregulated fishing identified as ongoing issues. Despite legal restrictions, illegal hunting persists, particularly in the context of trophy hunting. Reports of bribery within the wildlife sector, hinder enforcement efforts. The limited availability of data complicates the assessment of the full extent of wildlife crimes; however, reports indicate that enforcement efforts encounter significant challenges.

The majority of non-renewable resource crimes are linked to illegal amber extraction. Other offences, particularly those involving oil and minerals, may develop into significant issues due to smuggling activities related to sanctions on mineral products, including crude oil. This situation largely stems from Belarus's involvement in Russia's war against Ukraine, as well as the economic integration between Russia and Belarus. However, direct evidence of the smuggling of these resources remains quite limited.

DRUGS

Belarus serves as a transit country for heroin trafficking, with shipments moving from Iran and passing through Russia into the EU. However, heroin trafficking through the northern route has been declining since 2014. While domestic consumption of heroin has decreased in recent years, there has been a rise in demand for synthetic opioids.

Cocaine trafficking has surged in Belarus, primarily due to its position as a transit hub for shipments arriving from Latin America through Russia. Criminal networks exploit Belarus's strategic location, utilizing logistics hubs and transport corridors to funnel cocaine into European markets. Although seizures of cocaine have increased in recent years, enforcement efforts have been impeded by corruption and weak border controls.

Cannabis is the most commonly used illicit drug in Belarus, with domestic production primarily meeting local demand. While small-scale cultivation operations have been discovered, the majority of cannabis is imported from Russia and Ukraine. Organized criminal groups oversee distribution, while the drug is increasingly sold through online platforms and encrypted communication channels. Despite periodic crackdowns, cannabis remains widely available.

The synthetic drug trade in Belarus is on the rise, with synthetic cannabinoids and amphetamine-type stimulants becoming increasingly prevalent. In recent years, 'street methadone' has been posing new challenges to law enforcement. Authorities have uncovered production facilities often linked to organized crime groups with international connections. The emergence of darknet markets has facilitated the sale of synthetic drugs, leaving Belarusian authorities struggling to keep pace with evolving trafficking methods. Law enforcement agencies have primarily targeted low-level actors involved in drug distribution, who are often minors or young adults, and have disrupted some online illicit drug marketplaces. However, more influential players have typically evaded enforcement, allowing the trade to continue expanding.

CYBER-DEPENDENT CRIMES

Cybercrime in Belarus is an escalating concern, as hacking and ransomware attacks have become increasingly sophisticated. State-embedded actors and criminal networks have been implicated in cyber offences, particularly in targeting foreign financial institutions and government entities. The rise in the use of cryptocurrency for money laundering has further complicated efforts to track illicit financial flows. Although law enforcement agencies have enhanced their cyber capabilities, enforcement remains selective, with certain actors enjoying impunity due to their political connections.

FINANCIAL CRIMES

The criminal economy in Belarus is sustained by a diverse range of financial crimes, ranging from corrupt practices to fraudulent schemes. Phone scams have also proliferated, with criminals posing as law enforcement or bank officials to deceive victims into taking out loans or transferring funds under false pretences. Meanwhile, cyber-enabled crimes, such as phishing and vishing, constitute a significant portion of reported cybercrimes in Belarus. These methods primarily involve fraud and financial theft by obtaining personal information through deceptive online or voice communications.

CRIMINAL ACTORS

Mafia-style groups in Belarus, historically linked to the 'thieves-in-law' culture, a hierarchical and deeply entrenched criminal subculture that stems from the Soviet era, have significantly declined since the post-Soviet era. Their influence waned under the Lukashenko regime in the late 1990s due to law enforcement crackdowns and alleged extrajudicial actions. Despite this, a limited presence remains: as of 2024, six identified 'thieves-in-law' remain in the country, three of them in police custody. Though their organizational strength has weakened and formal criminal enclaves have disappeared, these figures retain symbolic importance and are closely monitored. Authorities argue that allowing a controlled presence of domestic 'thieves-in-law' helps block more disruptive foreign actors from gaining influence. Today, remnants of these groups persist as scattered individuals rather than cohesive enterprises, with Belarus actively managing them to prevent resurgence and maintain security.

Criminal networks in Belarus have adapted to shifting geopolitical and economic conditions, particularly following the outbreak of the war in Ukraine. The border regions of Belarus have become particularly significant for these activities, with Belarusian criminal actors reportedly among the primary beneficiaries. Furthermore, these networks play a substantial role in the growing synthetic drug trade within Belarus, often collaborating with Russian and other foreign criminal actors. These groups exploit digital marketplaces, especially dark web platforms, to facilitate sales and distribution. Belarusian criminal networks demonstrate flexibility, engaging in various illicit enterprises while maintaining relatively low levels of violence.

The Belarusian state exerts significant control over criminal markets, actively engaging in and facilitating illicit activities to circumvent international sanctions and maintain economic stability. The government has been implicated in sanction evasion schemes, notably rerouting sanctioned Belarusian timber through Central Asian nations to obscure its origin. Additionally, the Belarusian Special Economic Zone, established in 2019, has served as a conduit for contraband smuggling, including the movement of sanctioned goods into and out of Russia. The state's involvement in organized crime extends to the trafficking of 'illicit white' cigarettes into Russia, the EU and the UK, as well as alleged participation in grey-market arms transactions with undemocratic regimes and militant groups. The Lukashenko regime maintains strict control over organized crime, ensuring that criminal enterprises operate within the boundaries defined by the state. While official rhetoric condemns corruption, elite figures within the government reportedly exploit their positions to engage in illicit business protection schemes. Allegations of state-sponsored cyberattacks further underscore the government's dual role in both combating and facilitating criminal activities. The regime also manipulates counter-organized crime legislation to suppress political opposition, as opposition figures have been imprisoned on charges of corruption and involvement in organized criminal groups. This consolidation of power blurs the lines between governance and organized crime, reinforcing the state's pervasive control over illicit activities.

While Belarusian authorities actively restrict the presence of foreign organized crime leaders, particularly those from Russia, Georgia and Ukraine, these groups have historically played a significant role in illicit arms trafficking and transnational smuggling operations. Law enforcement agencies report that foreign 'thieves-in-law' are effectively prevented from establishing bases in Belarus, with past operations resulting in dozens of annual detentions. Despite these efforts, geopolitical shifts have transformed the organized crime landscape, especially in the wake of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Reports indicate that criminal groups have relocated their operations to Belarus since 2022, taking advantage of new trafficking routes. The Belarusian Ministry of Foreign Affairs has confirmed a notable increase in drug trafficking through Belarus, as previous routes through Ukraine have been redirected.

The interplay between private-sector actors and state-embedded criminals in Belarus is particularly pronounced, with businesses often serving as vehicles for laundering illicit proceeds and evading sanctions. Companies connected to individuals close to the political elite receive preferential treatment, allowing them to engage in large-scale smuggling operations. Although the private sector in Belarus operates under strict state oversight, the blurred distinction between government-affiliated businesses and criminal enterprises complicates accountability. Reports indicate that these entities operate with the regime's authorization, particularly in industries such as construction, healthcare and logistics. This dynamic creates an environment where major private-sector actors not only enable organized crime but also strengthen state-sanctioned illicit economic activities. The symbiotic relationship between the regime and select business elites ensures the continued entrenchment of organized crime within Belarus's economic and political framework.

RESILIENCE

LEADERSHIP AND GOVERNANCE

Belarus continues to operate under an authoritarian regime, with the political elite exerting strict control over governance and policymaking. The political landscape is characterized by severe restrictions on civil liberties, suppression of opposition and widespread human rights violations. The government claims to prioritize the fight against organized crime and corruption while implementing national strategies to address public safety threats. However, these efforts are often undermined by the misuse of anti-crime laws to stifle political dissent. Since 2020, the government has continued to detain individuals for their participation in protests, highlighting the ongoing political repression. Belarusian authorities have been implicated in illicit activities, including sanctions evasion and the trafficking of goods such as timber, illegal tobacco and weapons. Reports indicate that the government plays a role in these activities, particularly by facilitating smuggling operations that circumvent international restrictions. Furthermore, Belarus has been accused of orchestrating irregular migration crises to exert pressure on the EU, further illustrating the state's use of illicit activities to achieve political objectives. Public trust in governance remains exceptionally low, as Belarusians no longer believe that the state prioritizes their welfare. This marks a shift from previous decades when political stability was viewed as an acceptable trade-off for restricted freedoms. The electoral system remains heavily manipulated, with constitutional amendments introduced in 2022 allowing President Lukashenko to stay in office until 2035.

Government transparency and accountability in Belarus are significantly undermined by systemic corruption and the suppression of independent oversight. Although the country has anti-corruption laws integrated into its Criminal Code and other legal frameworks, enforcement is often selective and frequently influenced by political considerations. The state controls over 70% of the economy, enabling high-ranking officials and state-affiliated oligarchs to benefit from preferential treatment and opaque business dealings. Political opponents and human rights activists frequently face fabricated charges of bribery and financial crimes, which reinforce the regime's control over the economy. Despite some basic government transparency measures, such as the publication of budget and procurement contracts, meaningful access to information remains severely limited. The absence of independent oversight, coupled with selective law enforcement, ensures that corruption remains deeply entrenched in Belarus's governance structure.

Despite its limited engagement with international institutions, Belarus remains a signatory to key treaties, including the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime and the United Nations Convention against Corruption. The country actively participates in regional security initiatives, such as the Collective Security Treaty Organization, with a focus on countering terrorism and combating illicit trafficking. However, its cooperation with international anti-crime bodies is often met with scepticism due to its poor human rights record and history of political imprisonment. The EU and the US have increasingly imposed sanctions on Belarusian officials and institutions, further isolating the country on the global stage.

Belarus has established national policies and laws to combat organized crime, including regulations targeting human trafficking, irregular migration, drug trafficking and cybercrime. However, the enforcement of these policies remains inconsistent and often politically motivated. Although the country's drug laws were amended in 2024 to reduce penalties for certain drug-related offences, they continue to be among the harshest in the region, imposing severe sentences without differentiating between various types of substances. Reports indicate that thousands of individuals have been imprisoned under these stringent drug laws, many for personal use rather than trafficking. Additionally, Belarus's intellectual property rights policies have faced criticism for permitting the unauthorized use of copyrighted works from specific foreign states, raising concerns about state-sanctioned violations of international trade laws. In addressing financial crime, recent government decrees have aimed to enhance coordination between law enforcement and the banking sector; however, the effectiveness of these measures remains uncertain. While Belarusian legislation criminalizes extortion and other organized crime-related offences, the legal framework lacks clarity in key areas, allowing for selective enforcement that aligns with the political interests of the regime.

CRIMINAL JUSTICE AND SECURITY

The judicial system in Belarus lacks independence, with courts routinely serving as instruments of political repression. Judges are appointed by the president and operate under executive influence, particularly in politically sensitive cases. Human rights organizations report widespread abuse in detention centres, including the mistreatment of political prisoners and inhumane conditions. The country has one of the highest incarceration rates in the region, with 1 200 individuals classified as political prisoners as of April 2024. Reports indicate that forced labour is prevalent within the prison system, with detainees contributing to state-run industries.

Law enforcement agencies, particularly the Main Directorate for Combating Organized Crime and Corruption (GUBOPiK), have been accused of diverting their focus away from combating organized crime to suppressing dissent. Following the protests in 2020, GUBOPiK has faced widespread criticism for its involvement in arbitrary arrests, harassment, and violence against opposition figures and activists. The agency has been granted substantial power to operate extrajudicially, which undermines the legitimacy of its crime-fighting mandate. This shift in priorities has adversely impacted Belarus's ability to combat organized criminal activities.

Belarus faces ongoing challenges in maintaining its territorial integrity. Its border with Russia remains open and largely unregulated, allowing for the unrestricted movement of goods and individuals, including those engaged in criminal activities. Since the onset of the war in Ukraine, Belarus has become a significant transit hub for drug trafficking, with routes that previously passed through Ukraine now redirected through Belarus. The porous nature of its borders also facilitates the smuggling of sanctioned goods, including microchip-laden electronics intended for military use. Belarusian border guards have been accused of complicity in migrant smuggling operations, allegedly orchestrated by state authorities to destabilize neighbouring EU countries. Incidents at the Polish border, including violent confrontations, underscore the broader regional security implications of Belarus's border policies.

ECONOMIC AND FINANCIAL ENVIRONMENT

Belarus's anti-money laundering (AML) framework exists primarily on paper and is weak in practice. The country has garnered international recognition for enhancing coordination between financial institutions and law enforcement in combating financial crimes. However, its AML laws have been employed as a means to target political opposition. Transparency remains a significant concern, with limited independent oversight of financial transactions and regulatory bodies.

The economic regulatory environment in Belarus is highly restrictive, characterized by extensive state control over key industries. The government maintains control over more than 70% of the economy, with state-affiliated oligarchs receiving preferential treatment. This monopolization has fuelled corruption, as businesses with political connections benefit from opaque government contracts and access to illicit economic opportunities. Belarus also functions as a hub for sanctions evasion, with state-affiliated companies playing a crucial role in rerouting restricted goods into Russia and other markets. The imposition of Western sanctions has had significant economic repercussions, deepening Belarus's reliance on Russia. The country's deteriorating economic conditions have led to an increase in illicit financial activities, with companies engaging in smuggling schemes to circumvent restrictions. Regulatory gaps and opaque financial practices have further entrenched Belarus's reputation as a high-risk jurisdiction for illicit financial flows.

CIVIL SOCIETY AND SOCIAL PROTECTION

Victim and witness support mechanisms in Belarus are significantly underdeveloped. The government does not offer dedicated shelters for trafficking victims, instead placing them in general crisis centres that are often underfunded and inadequately equipped. Access to legal and psychological assistance is inconsistent, prompting many victims to seek support from NGOs or international organizations. However, the government has systematically targeted civil society groups engaged in victim assistance. As a result, many organizations have been compelled to close, further restricting the availability of independent support services.

Government-led prevention initiatives are often performative, with public awareness campaigns prioritizing the reinforcement of state narratives over the effective combating of organized crime. While Belarus participates in regional crime prevention efforts through the Commonwealth of Independent States, its domestic strategies have faced criticism for their punitive approach. The government frequently criminalizes drug users and other vulnerable populations, resulting in high incarceration rates for non-violent offenders.

Non-state actors, particularly civil society organizations and independent media, play a crucial role in combatting organized crime in Belarus. However, state repression has significantly undermined their ability to function effectively. Since the protests in 2020, over 900 NGOs have been forcibly dissolved, while many others have chosen to close voluntarily or relocate abroad in response to escalating government pressure. Journalists investigating corruption and organized crime face imprisonment, with dozens currently detained under severe conditions. The independent media landscape has been nearly obliterated, leaving state-controlled outlets as the primary source of information. Independent journalists and civil society actors investigating corruption face imprisonment and state-controlled media dominate public discourse.

This summary was funded in part by a grant from the United States Department of State. The opinions, findings and conclusions stated herein are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the United States Department of State.