

# Lawyers face growing global threats



*The Belarusian lawyer Maxim Znak, right, acted for the opposition activist Maria Kolesnikova and was sentenced to ten years in jail in 2021; she was sentenced to 11 years in prison*

*SERGEI GAPON/AFP/GETTY IMAGES*

Lawyers face growing dangers around the world — from harassment and intimidation to death threats.

Attacks are rising, the Bar Council argued last week, as the professional body for barristers in England and Wales highlighted reports from lawyers, who claim to have been traduced by politicians and other public figures in the media, subjected to surveillance, arrest, detention and disciplinary action.

There is also a rise in cyber harassment, including threatening or impersonating emails, repeated hacking attempts, death and rape threats via email or social media, and “privilege phishing”, which tries to persuade those targeted to divulge sensitive information.

Such threats, the council says, are “not just an attack on the legal profession but have a chilling effect on access to justice and the rule of law”.

That chilling effect is being felt globally by hundreds of lawyers working under oppressive regimes. Last week legal bodies around the world marked the “Day of the Endangered Lawyer 2025”, which has been observed annually for the past 15 years and is organised by a coalition of 35 organisations to highlight the plight faced by lawyers.

The coalition issued a report on Belarus, this year’s chosen focus, where since the presidential election of 2020, a government crackdown has produced a “persistent and disturbing trend” of lawyers facing criminal sanctions, arbitrary detention and “systemic interference in their professional duties”. The regime has [just been re-elected](#) in what western observers have claimed was not a free and fair process.

The report notes that 11 lawyers are being prosecuted, six are in jail, four were allegedly tortured during detention, three forced to film so-called confession videos and at least 139 have been deprived of their right to practise.



Dominic Grieve KC is the president of the Alliance for Lawyers at Risk, which provides support to lawyers and human rights defenders around the world  
TOLGA AKMEN/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

As part of events last week a protest was held outside the Belarusian embassy. Burak Batuhan Karakus, a Turkish lawyer and aspiring UK solicitor who heads the legal affairs committee of Human Rights Solidarity, said that lawyers and their families in Belarus were operating in a “climate of terror”, facing harassment, arrest and detention — and many were now leaving and not being replaced.

Karakus cites the case of [Maxim Znak](#), a Belarusian lawyer, who represented political opposition leaders including a presidential candidate. In 2021 Znak was tried behind closed doors and sentenced to ten years in jail. For nearly two years he has been held in solitary confinement.

The Law Society of England and Wales held its own one-day event last week. Richard Atkinson, the society president, said: “We are gravely concerned about the hostile environment for lawyers in Belarus as they face criminal sanctions, arbitrary detention and systematic harassment.”

The society acted in 42 cases relating to mistreatment of lawyers in 14 countries in 2024 alone. Lawyers are being targeted by governments looking to dismantle justice systems and erode the independence of legal professions, he added.

Professor Sara Chandler, a member of the society’s council and co-founder of Colombia Caravana, a network of jurists supporting Colombian lawyers at risk, said the situation for lawyers seemed to have worsened. “It has certainly become more visible, partly through the work of organisations such as ours,” she says. “But it could also be that lawyers have become much more exposed through defending unpopular clients.”

However, in the UK there is growing support for endangered lawyers among heavyweight judicial figures. The Alliance for Lawyers at Risk boasts among its members two former Supreme Court presidents — Baroness Hale of Richmond and Lord Phillips of Worth Matravers. Also on board are Lord Thomas of Cwmgiedd, a former lord chief justice, and two former lord chancellors, David Gauke and Alex Chalk KC.

The alliance grew from a committee set up in 2017 to assist the UK branch of Peace Brigades International in seeking the help of UK lawyers. It operated loosely with Sir Henry Brooke as president but without support. It is now a



registered charity with the former attorney-general Dominic Grieve KC as president and donated administrative help from the City law firm Slaughter and May.

Mr Justice Roth, the chair of trustees, said the alliance was becoming a powerful voice, intervening with ministers and officials of foreign governments, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, and ambassadors in the UK and with UK ambassadors abroad.

Next Monday, Lord Neuberger, another former Supreme Court president, will present the alliance's annual Sir Henry Brooke award. It goes this year to Virginia Laparra Rivas, a former state prosecutor in Guatemala who tackled organised crime and corruption, until a new regime came to power and turned against her.



In Guatemala, Virginia Laparra Rivas, a former state prosecutor who tackled corruption and organised crime, was imprisoned for two years. She has been awarded this year's Sir Henry Brooke award

She was arrested, prosecuted for "abuse of authority" and imprisoned for two years. On release, Rivas sought asylum in Mexico. The award, she says, is "of great support to me in my campaign against corruption and for the rule of law in Guatemala".

The alliance is making common cause with other bodies to protect all such lawyers, whether outside the UK or within it. "There must be no impunity for governments or non-state actors who continue to harass and intimidate lawyers carrying out their professional duties whether at home or abroad," says Hugh Mercer KC, chairman of the Bar Council's international committee. "Our global legal profession is made up of individuals united by an interest in the legal system, the rule of law and access to justice."