

# CRS Report for Congress

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## Belarus: Country Background Report

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### Summary

This short report provides information on Belarus's history, political and economic situation, human rights record, foreign policy, and U.S. relations with Belarus. It will be updated when necessary.

### History

Belarusians are descendants of Slavic tribes that migrated into the region in the ninth century. The beginnings of their development as a distinct people can be traced from the 13th century, when the Mongols conquered Russia and parts of Ukraine, while Belarusians became part of (and played a key role in) the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. In 1569, the Grand Duchy merged with Poland, ushering in over two centuries of Polish rule. Poland itself was divided in the late 18th century, and Belarusian territories fell to Russia.

Ruling powers (i.e. Poles and Russians) tried to culturally assimilate Belarusians and pushed them to the lowest rungs of the socio-economic ladder. As a result, Belarus did not develop a substantial national movement until the late 19th century. In the chaos in the final months of World War I, the Belarusian Democratic

#### Belarus at a Glance

**Land Area:** 80,154 sq. mi., slightly smaller than Kansas.

**Population:** 10 million (2000 estimate)

**Ethnic Composition:** 77.9% Belarusian, 13.2% Russian, 4.1% Polish and 2.9% Ukrainian.

**Gross Domestic Product (GDP):** \$12.67 billion in 1999 (EIU estimate at market exchange rate).

**Political Leaders:** President: Aleksandr Lukashenko; Prime Minister: Vladimir Yermoshin; Foreign Minister: Mikhail Kvtsov; Defense Minister: Leonid Maltsev

**Sources:** World Bank, International Monetary Fund, Economist Intelligence Unit.

Republic was established in March 1918, with German military assistance. After the defeat of Germany in November 1918, the Red Army seized the country and established the Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic in January 1919. In 1922, Belarus became one of the republics of the U.S.S.R. Its territory almost doubled when Stalin annexed parts of Poland to Belarus in 1940 as part of the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact with Hitler's Germany. (After the war, part of this territory was returned to Poland.) Belarus was devastated by World War II, which killed 25% of its population. Until the dissolution of the U.S.S.R. at the end of 1991, Belarus' leadership strongly supported maintaining the Soviet Union. In a nationwide referendum in March 1991, 83% of the Belarusian electorate voted in favor of preservation of the Union. Belarus was one of the founding members of the Commonwealth of Independent States.

## **Political Situation**

Virtually all political power in Belarus is in the hands of strongman Aleksandr Lukashenko. In Belarus's July 1994 presidential elections, Lukashenko, who was running on a populist, anti-corruption platform, crushed Prime Minister Vyacheslav Kebich, taking 80.34% of the vote. Conflict between a new Belarusian parliament elected in 1995 and an increasingly authoritarian president led Lukashenko to call a national referendum on November 24, 1996 to approve a new constitution drafted by the Belarusian leader. Under the new charter, Lukashenko's original five-year term would be extended until 2001. He would also gain the right to appoint half of the constitutional court and the electoral commission (both of which have shown some independence from Lukashenko in the past). The new constitution would create a smaller, weaker, two-chamber parliament, some of whose members would be appointed by Lukashenko. Lukashenko's plan provoked strong opposition in the parliament and anti-Lukashenko demonstrations in Minsk. However, Lukashenko prevailed in the referendum by an overwhelming majority of over 70% of the vote. Lukashenko opponents, including the former head of the electoral commission, claimed the vote was marked by fraud. Lukashenko signed his constitution into law and dissolved the old parliament. The Council of Europe, the European Union (EU) and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) condemned the November 1996 referendum as illegitimate and unfair.

In October 2000, Belarus held parliamentary elections. Many opposition figures refused to participate, after the Lukashenko regime refused to allow them access to state-run electronic media or participate in the central or local electoral commissions. Once again, the Council of Europe, the EU and the OSCE strongly criticized the elections as not free and fair. The OSCE and Western governments have demanded that Lukashenko address the institutional weakness of the parliament as compared to the vast powers held by Lukashenko and his administration.

Belarus held presidential elections on September 9, 2001. Belarusian opposition groups chose trade union leader Vladimir Goncharik as their joint candidate to run against Lukashenko. Lukashenko was declared the winner, with 75.6% of the vote over Hancharyk, with 15.4%. OSCE observers condemned the vote as not free and fair, due to a lack of media freedom, harassment of opposition candidates and supporters, a lack of independence and transparency in the counting of votes, and other factors.

While Lukashenko may not have won a free and fair vote, nevertheless he appears to retain significant support among some sectors of the population. In a May 2001 survey

commissioned by the State Department, 42% of those polled said that they would vote for Lukashenko, if elections were imminent. No opposition leader scored higher than 2.5%. Lukashenko's support is strongest among voters over 60, those with less than a secondary education, and those living in rural areas. He enjoys less support among those under 30, among those with college degrees, and residents of the capital, Minsk. One clue to this social split in support for Lukashenko may be the fact that, while two-thirds of those polled said economic conditions in Belarus were "fairly bad" or "bad," 91% gave Lukashenko credit for ensuring that pensions were paid on time.<sup>1</sup> While younger people are dismayed at the lack of economic opportunity in Lukashenko's Belarus, many elderly voters may be content that they can eke out a predictable, if very modest, existence. Lukashenko also espouses Soviet-era values (social egalitarianism, suspicion of the West) that are popular with elderly voters.

## Human Rights and Freedoms

The 2000 State Department Human Rights report said that Belarus's human rights record is "very poor." It notes that government security forces arbitrarily arrested and detained citizens, beat detainees, and monitored the activities of opposition politicians and other segments of the population. The government harassed independent media and forced them to close. The government used force to break up political demonstrations. The judiciary is not independent. The State Department report notes that trafficking in women is a problem in Belarus.

One of the most disturbing human rights issues in Belarus is the fate of former parliament chairman Viktor Gonchar, his associate Anatoly Krasovsky, former Interior Minister Yuri Zakharenko, and Russian television cameraman Dimitry Zavadsky. All of them disappeared in 1999; all had been involved in opposition activities or criticized the Lukashenko regime. Gonchar disappeared in September 1999, hours after Lukashenko delivered a speech ordering the security services to crack down on "opposition scum." In July 2001, two investigators from the Belarusian prosecutor's office charged that the four men were killed by death squads created by the Lukashenko regime. A State Department spokesman said that the United States found these charges to be "credible."<sup>2</sup>

In February 1998, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) opened a mission in Belarus. The mission's task is to monitor Belarus's progress toward democracy and respect for its obligations as a member of the OSCE, and advise Minsk on how to improve its record in these areas. The mission has had very limited success in persuading Lukashenko to move toward a more democratic political system. During the September 2001 presidential election campaign, Lukashenko accused the mission of being a nest of spies aimed at overthrowing him.

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. Department of State, Office of Research, "Belarusians Divide By Age Over Lukashenko and Their Country's Future," July 10, 2001.

<sup>2</sup> U.S. State Department press statement, "Department Officials Meet with Wives of 'Disappeared' Belarusian Politicians," July 18, 2001.

## Economy

Belarus has one of the most unreformed economies in the former Soviet Union. Although some small enterprises have been privatized, the industrial and agricultural sectors of the economy remain almost entirely in government hands. The private sector made up only 20% of GDP in 1999. Reliance on lax fiscal and monetary policies to prop up inefficient state-owned industry and agriculture has led to an increase in inflation, despite government wage and price controls. Average annual consumer price inflation was estimated at 168% for 2000. Belarus's currency, the rubel, has plummeted nearly 40% in value against the U.S. dollar since 1998. Cumulative direct foreign investment in Belarus remains low, a mere \$290 million through February 2001. Economic output has been artificially sustained by government subsidies; real GDP grew by 6% in 2000. These measures have also permitted Belarus to keep official unemployment levels at just over 2%, although real unemployment is likely significantly higher. Real wages and pension have also gradually increased, although they remain at very low levels.<sup>3</sup> Belarus is burdened by the consequences of the 1986 Chernobyl nuclear disaster. Chernobyl spewed large amounts of radiation over one-fifth of the country's arable land.

The Belarusian economy has been propped up by cheap energy imports from Russia, as well as the ability to export its products to Russia under advantageous terms. The Russian natural gas firm Gazprom has accepted Belarusian goods in exchange for gas deliveries and subsidized prices. Belarus nevertheless has managed to accumulate debts, even under this favorable arrangement. In June 2001, the Russian government announced that it was releasing \$32 million of a \$100 million loan to Belarus to stabilize its currency. The International Monetary Fund and World Bank cut off loans to Belarus in 1996 due to the country's lack of reform efforts. In April 2001, the IMF started a program to monitor Belarus's economy in cooperation with the Belarusian government. In September 2001, the World Bank approved a \$22 million social infrastructure project.

## Foreign Policy and Defense

Lukashenko's main foreign policy priority has been increasing integration with Russia. Lukashenko strongly favors close political, economic and military ties with Russia, which he sees as a way to help Belarus surmount its economic difficulties and as a natural development for two peoples with a common history. Since 1995, Lukashenko has signed several agreement and treaties with Russia to establish a "union" between the two states. The most recent treaty was signed in December 1999. Its calls for steps toward forming with Moscow an economic union with a common market, currency, monetary, budget, tax and customs systems. The treaty calls on the two countries to coordinate their policies in a wide variety of other fields, including foreign policy, defense, human rights, social policy, and many other areas. The treaty calls for the setting up of Union institutions, including a Supreme State Council that includes the heads of state, a joint Council of Ministers, and a joint parliament. The treaty makes clear that both states will retain their own sovereignty and national institutions.

However, Russian-Belarusian integration has remained largely rhetorical so far. The main obstacle to integration is Belarus's poor economic reform record and the reluctance

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<sup>3</sup> EIU Country Profile, Belarus, May 31, 2001.

of Russian economic reformers to provide additional, massive subsidies to Belarus's ailing economy. Unless Belarus engages in economic reform along Russian lines, integration may continue to lag. Russian firms have reportedly opened discussions with Belarusian leaders about acquiring key Belarusian enterprises, if the Lukashenko regime decides to privatize them in the near future.

The Belarusian leader has moved his country's defense and foreign policies into close alignment with Russia's. Lukashenko strongly opposes NATO enlargement and was a fierce critic of NATO air strikes against Serbia in 1999. A small number of Russian troops remain in Belarus, in part to run a naval radio station and an early warning radar station. In 2000, Russian strategic bombers returned to bases in Belarus, but no nuclear weapons are reportedly stored there. The union treaty calls for a joint defense doctrine, joint arms procurement and a regional group of Belarusian and Russian forces, but progress toward these goals has been slow.

## **U. S. Policy**

United States recognized independent Belarus on December 25, 1991. President Clinton, during a January 1994 visit to Belarus, praised Belarus for its commitment to a non-nuclear status. U.S. officials hailed the removal of all nuclear weapons from Belarus in November 1996. However, U.S.-Belarus relations deteriorated as Lukashenko became increasingly authoritarian. A State Department spokesman sharply criticized Lukashenko's November 1996 referendum, saying it was not conducted in a "free or fair" manner and that it "lacked legitimacy." The United States and other Western governments do not recognize the legitimacy of the new constitution and legislature approved in 1996, or of Lukashenko's tenure as President after the expiration of his original term in July 1999. In March 1997, a State Department spokesman announced a policy of "selective engagement" with Belarus on issues of U.S. national interests. In other areas, "we'll have very limited dealings with them," he said. In July 2000, the United States suspended Belarus's participation in the Generalized System of Preferences (GSP) program, which permits poor countries to export goods to the United States at reduced tariff rates, due to the country's failure to respect internationally-recognized worker rights.

According to State Department data, from FY 1992 to FY 2000, the United States obligated \$373.74 million in aid to Belarus. Of this total, \$218.2 million was in food aid, \$74.88 million in Cooperative Threat Reduction (Nunn-Lugar) aid to help remove nuclear weapons from Belarusian soil, and \$31.15 million aid to promote political and economic reform in Belarus. In FY 2001, the Administration has budgeted \$10 million in aid to support political and economic reform in Belarus, and requested \$11 million for the same purpose in FY 2002.

U.S. officials have demanded that the Belarusian government bring to justice those involved in the disappearances of the four members of the opposition in 1999. The United States reportedly provided advice and assistance to the Belarusian opposition during the September 2001 presidential election campaign, on the model of its aid to the Serbian opposition's successful campaign to unseat Milosevic. After Lukashenko's victory, the Administration sharply criticized Lukashenko, charging that he had "stolen" the elections and calling him "Europe's last dictator." The Administration statement added that the United States would not recognize the legitimacy of the vote or of the Lukashenko regime. However, some European members of the election monitoring delegations, while noting

that the elections were not free and fair, expressed the opinion that the current Western policy of isolating Belarus may actually be strengthening Lukashenko’s dictatorship, rather than weakening it. They called for greater Western engagement with Belarus as a better way to encourage it to move toward democracy and free markets. Belarus condemned the September 11 terrorist attacks on the United States and offered its cooperation in the fight against terrorism, but has ruled out participation in military actions.

Congress has strongly condemned the Lukashenko regime for its human rights record. In 2000, Congress passed H. Con. Res. 304. H. Con. Res. 304 condemned the Lukashenko regime for the disappearances of the four opposition members, the jailing of other opposition supporters, and many other undemocratic actions. It called on the Administration to provide assistance to the Belarusian opposition, independent media and trade unions, and civil society groups; and to raise with Russia the issue of its financial and other support to the “illegitimate” Lukashenko regime. It also called on the Administration to report to Congress on the political and economic situation in Belarus, the steps taken by the Administration to persuade Russia to stop helping Lukashenko, and the status of Russia-Belarus military integration. In October 2000, the Senate passed S. Con. Res. 153, which condemned the October 2000 parliamentary elections in Belarus as not free and fair, and described the new parliament as illegitimate. It also sharply criticized many other undemocratic actions undertaken by the Lukashenko regime.



Map adapted from Magellan Geographics by CRS 07.01 mtc



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