



Belarus: An Overview

Since 2020, Belarusian politics and society have undergone a transformation many observers view as both tragic and inspiring. Before Belarus’s August 2020 presidential election, opposition candidate Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya mounted an unexpectedly strong campaign against Aleksandr Lukashenko, who has ruled Belarus for more than 26 years. Protests against allegedly widespread electoral fraud and a brutal crackdown on protestors led to the rise of a mass opposition movement, on a scale unseen since Belarus became independent in 1991. Human rights activists and monitors report more than 32,000 Belarusians, including journalists, have been temporarily detained or imprisoned and consider about 200 to be political prisoners. At least 10 demonstrators and others have been killed or died under suspicious circumstances.

The United States, the European Union (EU), and others have called for an end to the crackdown and for the government to conduct a dialogue with the opposition and hold democratic presidential elections.

Political Background

In past years, observers have debated whether Lukashenko could be encouraged to preside over a “softer” and more development-oriented authoritarian regime, but political openings in Belarus have been modest and short-lived. Prior to the 2020 election, Lukashenko appeared to be interested in tightening Belarus’s authoritarian system. In 2019 elections, pro-government candidates won all 110 seats in parliament. In June 2020, Lukashenko appointed an official from the security sector as prime minister.

From May 2020, Belarusian authorities tried, but failed, to suppress an unexpectedly energetic electoral opposition. Tsikhanouskaya was a political novice who entered the race after her spouse, Siarhei Tsikhanousky, a popular antigovernment video blogger, was denied candidate registration when he and dozens of other government critics were in temporary detention. After his initial release, Siarhei Tsikhanousky was arrested again while collecting signatures for his wife’s candidacy; he remains in prison.

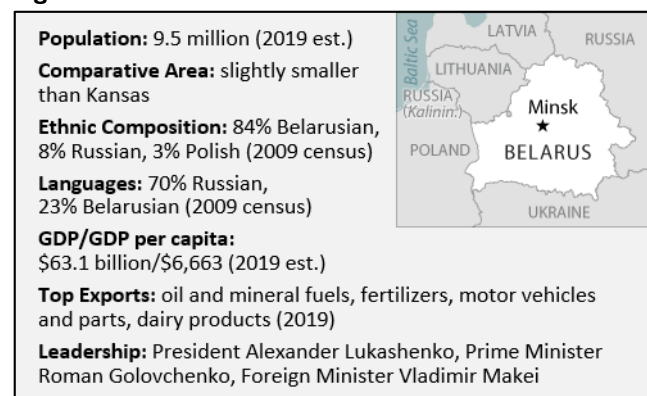
Tsikhanouskaya became the united opposition candidate after two prominent figures were denied registration. Viktor Babaryka, the longtime head of a bank owned by Russian energy company Gazprom, was arrested on charges of bribery and money laundering that observers considered politically motivated. Valery Tsapkala, a former ambassador to the United States and head of Belarus’s Hi-Tech Park, an information and communications technology (ICT) hub, left the country under threat.

Tsikhanouskaya pledged to be a transitional figure who would reintroduce democracy to Belarus. Babaryka’s campaign manager, Mariya Kalesnikava, and Tsapkala’s

wife, Veranika Tsapkala, joined her on the campaign. The three women attracted tens of thousands to demonstrations.

Given Lukashenko’s authoritarian rule, observers did not expect Tsikhanouskaya to win the election. However, the official pronouncement that Lukashenko won with an evidently exaggerated 80% of the vote (to 10% for Tsikhanouskaya) quickly led to protests. The brutal crackdown that followed led to larger protests that many observers characterized as “leaderless” and sometimes attracted hundreds of thousands. Protests have since dwindled in frequency and size, but activists have adopted new methods of protest and engagement.

Figure 1. Belarus at a Glance



Sources: World Bank; U.N. Comtrade Database.

Exile, imprisonment, and persecution have imposed challenges for the opposition. Tsikhanouskaya and her children left Belarus after she was detained and threatened with imprisonment. In exile, Tsikhanouskaya formed a Coordination Council to help lead the opposition. Five of the council’s seven senior members were detained after it was established. In September 2020, Kalesnikava was abducted and dispatched to the Belarus-Poland border. She was imprisoned after she refused to leave the country. Kalesnikava and another council member, Maxim Znakh, remain in prison. Others have left Belarus.

The opposition has organized various actions to increase pressure on the government of Belarus and secure international attention. The opposition has been supported by a network of former law enforcement officials who reportedly quit their jobs in protest (or were dismissed) and who seek to expose alleged government crimes, including against opposition figures and protesters. The opposition also has been supported by members of Belarus’s once-burgeoning ICT industry, many of whom have left the country, along with several ICT companies.

Relations with the West

The United States, the EU, and others condemn state-sponsored violence against protestors and detainees in Belarus and the widening crackdown. U.S. officials have conveyed support for the Belarusian people's "right to free and fair elections" and called on Belarusian authorities to "engage in meaningful dialogue with the Coordination Council and Belarusian civil society." The European Council, composed of the leaders of EU member states, stated the EU does "not recognize the results" of the 2020 election.

In December 2020, Congress passed and the President signed into law the Belarus Democracy, Human Rights, and Sovereignty Act of 2020 (P.L. 116-260, Division FF, Title III). The act amends the Belarus Democracy Act of 2004 (22 U.S.C. §5811 note). Among other things, the act states it is the policy of the United States to reject the "invalid results" of the 2020 presidential elections. The Belarus Democracy Act of 2004, as amended, grants the President authority to impose sanctions on persons in Belarus for human rights abuses and for undermining democracy.

In the 117th Congress, a bipartisan group of Members introduced H.Res. 124, supporting the people of Belarus and their democratic aspirations. The House Committee on Foreign Affairs ordered an amended resolution to be reported on February 25, 2021.

Since 2008, the United States has had no ambassador and a limited diplomatic presence in Belarus, originally due to restrictions imposed by Minsk. In December 2020, the Senate confirmed the appointment of Julie D. Fisher to be the first U.S. ambassador to Belarus in more than a decade. As of March 12, 2021, Ambassador-Designate Fisher had not yet presented her credentials to the government of Belarus.

In recent years, U.S. assistance to Belarus has focused on independent media and civil society, private sector development, and vulnerable populations. From FY2015 to FY2019, the United States provided a total of about \$49 million in obligated foreign assistance to Belarus. For FY2020, the State Department allocated \$9.67 million in aid to Belarus. Since 2016, EU assistance to Belarus has amounted to about €30 million (\$36 million) a year.

Sanctions

The United States and the EU have imposed sanctions on those they consider responsible for violence, repression, and election fraud in Belarus. In October and December 2020, the U.S. Department of the Treasury designated nine officials and four entities for sanctions pursuant to Executive Order 13405 of June 16, 2006, which established sanctions on those who engage in human rights abuses, corruption, or the undermining of democracy in Belarus. Since October 2020, the U.S. Department of State also has imposed visa restrictions on a total of at least 109 Belarusian officials pursuant to a related Presidential Proclamation 8015 of May 15, 2006.

The EU also has imposed sanctions in response to the recent crackdown in Belarus. From October to December

2020, the EU imposed new economic sanctions and visa restrictions on a total of 88 Belarusians, including Lukashenko, and seven entities.

Prior to 2020, the United States had designated 16 Belarusians, including Lukashenko, pursuant to EO 13405. These individuals remain subject to sanctions. The United States also designated a major Belarusian state-owned petrochemical company and subsidiaries. After the Belarusian government released several political prisoners in 2015, the Treasury Department authorized certain transactions with these entities. In 2016, the EU lifted most of its existing sanctions on 170 individuals and three entities for human rights abuses and undermining democracy.

Relations with Russia

Belarus's closest security and economic partner is Russia. Tensions between Belarus and Russia have increased in recent years, with the two countries at odds over energy, debt, trade, and transit. Lukashenko also has rejected Russian efforts to secure an airbase in Belarus. Many observers believe Moscow's preference is for a weakened Lukashenko to stay in power and remain dependent on Russia. Some believe Moscow might be satisfied by a political change that would not reduce Russia's influence.

Belarus is a member of the Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organization and shares an air defense system with Russia. Belarus also is a member of the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) and has relied heavily on Russian subsidized natural gas and oil and Russian (and Chinese) loans. Belarus and Russia also are members of a bilateral "union state" that came into effect in 2000. This union is largely aspirational; a common labor market is the main characteristic distinguishing it from the economic integration Belarus and Russia have via EEU membership.

In 2019, Russia began reducing subsidies for Belarus's crude oil imports from Russia, leading to a decline in Belarus's own revenues from refined oil exports. The Russian government said compensation for Belarus's losses would be possible only as part of an agreement to deepen the integration of the two countries, something Lukashenko has sought to avoid.

Since the 2020 election, Lukashenko has sought Russian support. Russian media and propaganda workers reportedly were deployed to support Belarusian state media when employees went on strike in support of the protests. Russian President Vladimir Putin announced the creation, at Lukashenko's request, of a "reserve of law enforcement officers" that could be sent to Belarus. Since August 2020, the Russian government reportedly has provided Belarus with a few billion dollars' worth of new loans.

In 2020, almost half of Belarus's merchandise trade was with Russia. The EU as a whole was Belarus's second-largest trading partner, making up 20% of its merchandise trade. Less than 1% of Belarus's total trade is with the United States. In 2020, Belarus's main exports were mineral fuels (mainly refined oil products, 14%), potassium

fertilizers (potash, 11%), dairy products (9%), and motor vehicles and parts (8%).

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IF10814

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