



Belarus: An Overview

Belarus, located in eastern Europe, is a close ally of Russia. Belarus's authoritarian leader, Alexander Lukashenko, has served as president for 31 years. Lukashenko increased Belarus's dependency on Russia starting in 2020, when a government crackdown on political opposition and civil society that UN human rights monitors called "unprecedented" and "catastrophic" led to U.S. and European sanctions. Lukashenko's government has provided support to Russia's war against Ukraine, including by allowing Belarus to be used as a launchpad for the invasion in 2022.

During the first half of 2025, Trump Administration officials met with Belarusian officials and attributed the release of some detained U.S. citizens and political prisoners to U.S. engagement. The first Trump Administration and the Biden Administration, together with the European Union (EU) and other U.S. allies, condemned the Lukashenko government's crackdown on dissent starting in 2020 and imposed sanctions in response. The Biden Administration condemned Belarus's support for Russia's war against Ukraine and joined the EU in imposing further sanctions on Belarus.

Members of the 119th Congress may evaluate aspects of U.S. policy toward Belarus, including the potential costs and benefits of Trump Administration engagement with Belarus, the role of Belarus sanctions in promoting U.S. policy goals, implications of Belarus's alliance with Russia for U.S. and European security, and U.S. engagement with Belarus's democratic movement abroad.

Political Background

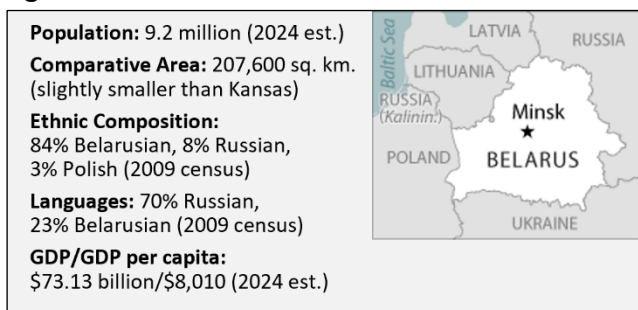
Belarus, previously part of the Soviet Union, became independent after the Soviet Union's dissolution in 1991. Lukashenko was first elected president in 1994, and he subsequently established an authoritarian system of governance. Lukashenko was reelected to a seventh presidential term on January 26, 2025, in an environment that observers generally considered nondemocratic. According to official results, Lukashenko received 87% of the vote with 86% turnout; four nominal competitors each received 2%-3% of the vote. The EU and other U.S. allies issued a statement condemning Belarus's "sham presidential elections."

The 2020 government crackdown in Belarus was a response to the rise of the country's largest mass opposition movement since independence. The movement arose out of protests against seemingly widespread electoral fraud in that year's presidential election, in which opposition candidate Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya mounted an unexpectedly strong campaign against Lukashenko. The official pronouncement that Lukashenko won the August 2020 election with 80% of the vote led to protests. The crackdown that followed led to larger protests that, at their height, attracted hundreds of thousands.

Five years later, the 2020 crackdown has led to more than 50,000 arrests or detentions; 7,300 convictions; and 4,060 political prisoners (including more than 1,180 still in prison as of August 2025), according to the Viasna Human Rights Center, a Belarusian nongovernmental organization. The UN Human Rights Office estimated in 2024 that up to 300,000 people had fled Belarus since 2020, including Tsikhanouskaya. Since 2020, Belarusian authorities have further tightened restrictions against the exercise of human rights and freedoms. In 2021, authorities forced the landing of a commercial airliner to capture a Belarusian journalist who allegedly had facilitated protests in 2020.

Starting in July 2024, Belarusian authorities initiated a series of pardons, freeing more than 330 prisoners by July 2025, according to Viasna. In June 2025, Siarhei Tsikhanouski, a prominent prisoner and Tsikhanouskaya's husband, was released after five years of imprisonment (also see "U.S. Policy and Congressional Interests").

Figure 1. Belarus at a Glance



Sources: IMF; National Statistical Committee of Belarus.

In neighboring Lithuania, Tsikhanouskaya formed a Coordination Council, "a collective representative body of the democratic part of Belarusian society," and a United Transitional Cabinet, a self-declared interim government in exile. In 2023, a Belarusian court sentenced Tsikhanouskaya in absentia to 15 years in prison for allegedly "conspiring to overthrow the government" and other charges. In May 2024, Belarus's democratic movement abroad organized direct elections to the Coordination Council; about 6,700 online votes were cast.

Belarus's most recent parliamentary elections, to the lower chamber of the National Assembly, were held in February 2024 with the participation of pro-government parties and candidates (elections to the upper chamber are indirect). These elections took place after Belarusian authorities did not renew the registration of opposition parties they deemed in noncompliance with new requirements.

In 2022, amendments to Belarus's constitution, among other changes, altered the status of a 1,200-member All-Belarusian People's Assembly (composed of central and local government officials and other appointed delegates), elevating it to the "highest representative body of people's

power.” The amendments granted the assembly authority to appoint members of Belarus’s Constitutional Court, Supreme Court, and Central Election Commission, as well as to remove the president under certain conditions. The Assembly selected Lukashenko as its chairperson.

Relations with Russia

Belarus and Russia are members of a supranational *union state* that the two governments established in 2000 to promote their countries’ integration. Belarus also is a member of a Russia-led security alliance, the Collective Security Treaty Organization; the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union; and, since 2024, the Russia- and China-led Shanghai Cooperation Organization.

Some observers suggest Russian authorities used Belarus’s 2020 crackdown to increase influence over Belarus. The Russian government reportedly offered Belarus more than 1 billion dollars in loans, and the two governments committed to deepening their integration within the union state framework. A 2021 Union State Military Doctrine established a framework for closer military coordination. In 2023, Lukashenko and Russian President Vladimir Putin stated that Russia had deployed tactical nuclear weapons in Belarus. The two countries share an air defense system and frequently hold joint military exercises, including nuclear exercises in 2024.

Belarus has provided support for Russia’s war against Ukraine. Four days before the start of the war, Belarusian authorities announced that an estimated 30,000 Russian troops who had concluded joint military exercises in Belarus would remain in the country indefinitely; these troops constituted part of Russia’s initial invading force. The Belarusian government permitted Russia to launch missile strikes and deploy bombers from Belarus. It has provided military equipment to Russia; hosted Russian forces; received children that Russian authorities removed from occupied Ukraine; and, according to the U.S. Department of the Treasury, helped Russia evade sanctions.

Belarus’s economic dependency on Russia has increased in particular since 2022. Belarus relies heavily on subsidized natural gas and oil from Russia. In 2024, according to the International Monetary Fund (IMF), about two-thirds of Belarus’s trade was with Russia, up from about 50% before 2022. European sanctions against top Belarusian exports—oil products and potash (fertilizer)—have led Belarusian firms to redirect exports to Russia and, via Russia, to non-sanctioning countries.

Belarus’s gross domestic product (GDP) grew by about 4% a year in 2023 and 2024, after declining by almost 5% in 2022. About 11% of Belarus’s trade was with the EU in 2024; 8% was with China. Less than 1% of Belarus’s total trade is with the United States.

U.S. Policy and Congressional Interests

Since 2008, the United States has had a limited diplomatic presence and no ambassador in Belarus, originally due to restrictions imposed by the Belarusian government. In 2020, the Senate confirmed the appointment of a new U.S. ambassador to Belarus, but the government of Belarus retracted an agreement to receive her. The ambassador instead served as the U.S. Special Envoy for Belarus until 2022. The Department of State established a Belarus

Affairs Unit at the U.S. Embassy in Lithuania in 2021 and suspended operations of the U.S. Embassy in Belarus in 2022. Section 6406 of the Department of State Authorization Act of 2023 (P.L. 118-31, Division F), as amended, directs the President to appoint a Special Envoy for Belarus.

Since January 2025, Trump Administration officials have met with Belarusian officials in Belarus and attributed to U.S. engagement the release of at least three detained U.S. citizens and some Belarusian political prisoners, including Tsikhanouski and two journalists who worked for Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, a U.S.-funded media organization. Tsikhanouski was among 14 prisoners released in June 2025 after a meeting of U.S. Special Presidential Envoy for Ukraine Keith Kellogg and Belarusian President Lukashenko in Minsk.

Some Members of the 119th Congress have introduced legislation intended to promote democracy and human rights in Belarus (H.Res. 73, H.R. 3225, H.R. 4804). The Belarus Democracy, Human Rights, and Sovereignty Act of 2020 (P.L. 116-260, Division FF, Title III) amended the Belarus Democracy Act of 2004 (P.L. 108-347, as amended; 22 U.S.C. §5811 note), which grants the President authority to impose sanctions on persons in Belarus for human rights abuses and for undermining democracy.

The United States has joined the EU in imposing sanctions in response to Belarusian authorities’ human rights abuses and support for Russia’s war against Ukraine. The U.S. Department of the Treasury has imposed economic sanctions on more than 300 persons, including Lukashenko, other officials and businesspeople, and major state-owned companies. The United States has suspended normal trade relations with Belarus (P.L. 117-110), restricted transactions in new sovereign debt, imposed export controls on military and dual-use goods and technology, and restricted air travel. The Department of State has imposed visa restrictions on a few hundred Belarusian officials.

Most Belarus sanctions have been imposed pursuant to Executive Order (E.O.) 14038 of August 9, 2021, which President Biden issued to take action against those who engage in human rights abuses, electoral fraud, corruption, and other harmful activities in Belarus, and to E.O. 13405 of June 16, 2006, which President George W. Bush issued in response to similar activities. Some Belarus sanctions have been imposed under E.O. 14024 of April 15, 2021, which President Biden issued in response to harmful foreign activities of the Russian government.

The State Department convened annual strategic dialogues with Belarus’s democratic movement in 2023 and 2024. In December 2024, the State Department stated that the United States had provided more than \$140 million “in support of the Belarusian people and civil society” since 2020. According to partial official reporting as of July 31, 2025, U.S. agencies had obligated about \$1 million in Belarus assistance in FY2025, down from about \$30 million in FY2024.

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