

CRS Report for Congress

Belarus: Background and U.S. Policy Concerns

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Summary

In a little over a decade, Belarusian President Aleksandr Lukashenko has snuffed out Belarus's modest progress toward democracy and a free market economy and created an authoritarian, Soviet-style regime. Belarus held presidential elections in March 2006. In a vote condemned by the U.S., EU and OSCE as falling well short of international standards, Lukashenko won re-election by an overwhelming margin. Belarus's economy is the most unreformed in Europe, according to an assessment by the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD).

Belarus has close historical and cultural ties to Russia. Efforts to establish a political and economic "union" between the two countries have had substantial public support in Belarus. Nevertheless, the pace of integration between Belarus and Russia remains slow, in large part because of Lukashenko's refusal to undertake economic reforms. Current Russian policy toward Belarus appears to be focused on gaining control of Belarus's economic assets (particularly oil and natural gas pipelines), while reducing the costs of subsidizing the Belarusian economy. This Russian policy was evident in a conflict in late 2006 and early 2007 over Russian energy supplies to Belarus, which ended in a sharp reduction in Russian energy subsidies to the Lukashenko regime.

U.S. officials have criticized Lukashenko as "Europe's last dictator." They have also expressed concerns about Belarus's arms sales and other ties to rogue regimes, such as Saddam Hussein's Iraq. The United States pursues a policy of "selective engagement," which limits ties to the regime, while providing modest support to pro-democracy organizations in Belarus. The United States and the European Union have imposed sanctions on top Belarusian leaders.

Congress has responded to the situation in Belarus with legislation. The Belarus Democracy Act, signed by President Bush in October 2004 (P.L. 108-347), authorizes aid for pro-democracy forces in Belarus and funding for increased broadcasting to Belarus by Voice of America and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. The bill supports sanctions on Belarus and top leaders of the Lukashenko regime until Belarus meets specific democratic and human rights criteria. The bill also requires the President to report within 90 days and every year thereafter on the sale by Belarus of weapons or weapons-related assistance to regimes supporting terrorism, and on the personal wealth of Lukashenko and other senior Belarusian leaders. The 109th Congress passed several resolutions criticizing human rights abuses and calling on Belarus to hold free and fair elections. In January 2007, President Bush signed the Belarus Democracy Reauthorization Act (P.L. 109-480), which reauthorized and updated the provision of the 2004 law.

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Belarus: Background and U.S. Policy Concerns

Introduction

Over a little more than a decade, Belarusian President Aleksandr Lukashenko has snuffed out Belarus's modest progress toward democracy and a free market economy and created an authoritarian regime. His regime, in rhetoric and policies a throwback to the Soviet era, is increasingly an anachronism located among a Central Europe integrated into Euro-Atlantic institutions, a Ukraine that has made strides in democratization, and a Russia that is increasingly authoritarian but moving forward with economic modernization. Those advocating a stronger U.S. role in trying to bring democratic change to Belarus say that the country is important to the United States because, as what U.S. officials have called "Europe's last dictatorship," Belarus is an obstacle to the U.S. goal of making Europe "whole and free." Another concern is Belarus's support for pariah regimes, in particular through arms sales.

Political and Economic Situation

Lukashenko dominates the Belarusian political scene, controlling the parliament, government, security services, and judiciary through a large presidential administration and substantial extra-budgetary resources. He has reduced potential threats from within his regime by frequently removing or transferring officials at all levels, often claiming they are incompetent or corrupt. Former regime figures who move into opposition are singled out for particularly harsh punishment. His tight control over an unreformed economy has prevented the rise of powerful "oligarchs," as has occurred in Ukraine and Russia. The Lukashenko regime also controls almost all of the media, which it uses to burnish Lukashenko's image and attack real and imagined adversaries. Lukashenko is known for his political unpredictability and for making rambling and rhetorically colorful public statements.¹

Lukashenko was elected as President of Belarus in 1994 on a populist, anti-corruption platform. He called a referendum in 1996 to approve a new constitution to dramatically increase his powers and weaken those of the legislature and judiciary and extend his term until 2001. The proposal was approved by an overwhelming majority. Lukashenko won re-election in September 2001. Observers from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) condemned the 1996 referendum and 2001 vote as not free and fair. Belarus held parliamentary elections in 2000 that were also condemned by international observers as not free and fair.

¹ Vitalii Silitski, "The Tsar and His Boyars," *Transitions Online*, June 4, 2004, [<http://www.tol.cz>].

The State Department's Country Reports on Human Rights for 2006 judged Belarus's human rights record to be "very poor." It says the government has harassed, arrested, and beaten opposition figures. The regime has forced the closure of independent media and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) dealing with political issues and human rights, pushing these sectors to the brink of extinction. The regime sharply restricts activities of independent trade unions and some religious groups.

An important human rights issue in Belarus has been the disappearances of former parliament chairman Viktor Gonchar, his associate Anatoly Krasovsky, former Interior Minister Yuri Zakharenko, and Russian television cameraman Dimitry Zavadsky in 1999. All had been involved in opposition activities or criticized the Lukashenko regime. U.S. officials have demanded that the Belarusian government bring to justice all those involved in the disappearances. In March 2002, the regime convicted four Interior Ministry soldiers for the murder of Zavadsky. The 2005 State Department human rights report said that the government did not make a "serious effort" to investigate the cases. Indeed, the report noted that Lukashenko gave a medal to an official named in a report by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) as a key figure in the crimes.

Belarus held parliamentary elections on October 17, 2004. An OSCE observation mission found the election to fall well short of international standards. Government-supported candidates won all 110 seats in the lower house of the parliament. Simultaneously with the parliamentary vote, Lukashenko held a referendum on lifting the two-term limit for the Presidency in the Belarusian constitution, allowing Lukashenko to run for additional terms. Belarusian election officials claimed that 77% of all registered voters approved the referendum.

On March 19, 2006, Belarus held presidential elections. According to monitors from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), the elections failed to meet OSCE standards for free and fair elections. The observers noted many serious shortcomings in the elections, including harassment, arrests, and police violence against opposition campaign workers, including the beating and arrest of presidential candidate Aleksandr Kazulin. (Kazulin was later sentenced to five and a half years in prison for "hooliganism" and disorderly conduct, charges U.S. and European officials denounced as politically motivated.)

The observers also noted that the largely government-controlled media was heavily biased against opposition candidates; domestic election observers were arrested; and almost no opposition figures were included in the administration of the elections, resulting in a vote count that was not "transparent." The observers said that the KGB (Belarus's security service) issued statements just before the vote associating opposition and civil society groups with terrorism and charged that they were plotting a violent uprising.²

² "Statement of Preliminary Findings and Conclusions on the Presidential Election of Belarus," at [<http://www.osce.org/odihr/>].

Belarusian election officials announced that Lukashenko had won the election, with over 82% of the vote. His closest opponent, opposition leader Aleksandr Milinkevich, won only 6%. Milinkevich and other opposition candidates denounced the vote as fraudulent and called for massive demonstrations to force the authorities to hold a new, free, and fair election. More than 10,000 persons attended the first demonstrations in the capital, Minsk. The size of the protests soon dwindled, however. The regime refrained from a massive, violent crackdown on the demonstrators, but scores of persons were arrested, including opposition campaign leaders. Russian officials praised the conduct of the election and congratulated Lukashenko on his victory.

Economic Situation

Belarus's economy is the most unreformed in Europe, according to most observers. Lukashenko has refused to privatize state-owned firms or collective farms. However, Belarus's economy appears to be doing quite well, at least on paper. Belarus's Gross Domestic Product grew by a reported 9.9% in 2006. Despite loose monetary policies, Belarus has avoided the hyperinflation it suffered during the 1990s. Consumer price inflation in 2006 was 6.6%. The official unemployment rate is 1.2%, although experts believe the real figure is substantially higher, because the very low amounts offered as unemployment compensation mean that few Belarusians bother to register for benefits. Real wages increased by 11.4% in December 2006, year-on-year.

There are several explanations for Belarus's apparent economic success. Belarus's economy is buoyed by exports to a growing Russia, and, until recently, Belarusian refineries have profited from refining cheap Russian crude oil and exporting it to Western countries. In addition, many experts doubt that Belarusian statistics are entirely accurate. Production figures may be exaggerated by officials to avoid punishment by Lukashenko for not meeting planned targets. Growth in industrial production is made possible by subsidies to ailing state firms. Wage increases are mandated by the government. Collective farms are also propped up by subsidies, although private plots held by peasants are more productive.

Lukashenko's policies have provided a low but stable standard of living for many Belarusians and are a key reason for the public support that he enjoys, particularly among older and rurally based Belarusians. However, it is unclear how long Lukashenko can continue such policies without cheap energy supplies from Russia. Some Belarusian economic officials have suggested liberalizing constraints on small businesses, privatizing some state firms, and encouraging foreign investment, but it is unclear whether Lukashenko will permit these ideas to move past the discussion phase.³

³ *Economist Intelligence Unit Country Report: Belarus*, March 2007.

Relations with Russia

Belarus has close historical and cultural ties with Russia. Efforts to establish a political and economic “union” between the two countries have had substantial public support in Belarus. However, the pace of integration between Belarus and Russia remains slow. During the 1990s, Russia and Belarus adopted a large number of documents on the establishment of political and economic “union” between the two countries, most of which remain unimplemented. Putin has been openly contemptuous of Lukashenko’s grandiose rhetoric about integration. Lukashenko has apparently also feared that Russia would try to replace him with a more pliable figure. Lukashenko has harassed opposition figures reportedly linked to Moscow and replaced senior intelligence officials having especially close ties with their Russian counterparts with staunch loyalists.

Efforts to move forward on economic union, although given strong rhetorical support by Lukashenko, have been stymied by Belarus’s reluctance to cede control of monetary policy to Moscow as a condition for a currency union, which would involve the adoption of the Russian ruble by Belarus. Russian policy toward Belarus appears to be focused on gaining control of Belarus’s economic assets, while reducing subsidies to the unreformed Belarusian economy.

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia’s state-owned natural gas firm Gazprom has supplied Belarus with natural gas at Russian domestic prices, providing a large indirect subsidy to the Lukashenko regime. In late 2006, Gazprom strongly pressured Belarus to sell to it control of the Beltransgaz natural gas firm (which controls the pipelines and other infrastructure on Belarusian territory) and other key Belarusian energy firms, or face the quadrupling of the price Belarus would pay for Russian natural gas, or a cut-off in supplies on January 1, 2007, if Belarus did not agree to pay the higher price. Just hours before the deadline, however, the two sides reached agreement that averted a gas shutoff. Belarus agreed to pay \$105 per 1000 cubic meters in 2007, more than double the \$46.48 it paid in 2006. Moreover, prices are scheduled to rise steadily over the next few years, reaching world market levels in 2011. Belarus also agreed to sell Gazprom a majority stake in Beltransgaz. Gazprom will pay for its share in installments between 2007 and 2010.

After settling the gas dispute, the two countries were soon embroiled in conflict over oil supplies. In addition to receiving cheap natural gas, Belarus has also benefitted from inexpensive and duty-free crude oil supplies that are processed at Belarusian refineries. The bulk of these refined products were then sold to EU countries at a hefty profit. In January 2007, Russia moved to sharply reduce this subsidy to the Belarusian economy. Russia imposed a tariff on oil exports to Belarus. Belarus retaliated by increasing transit fees for Russian oil supplies to Western Europe. When Russia refused to pay, Belarus cut off oil supplies to Western European countries, angering their governments. Belarus and Russia ended the crisis by agreeing that Belarus would raise its export duty on crude and refined oil products to Western Europe to match that imposed by Russia. Russia would then exempt Belarus from most of the new Russian oil export duty. Perhaps most significantly, Belarus agreed to hand over to Russia 70% of the proceeds that it receives from its

exports of refined oil products to the Western market. This figure will be gradually increased to 85% in 2009.

Despite the conflict over energy supplies, Lukashenko has said that he still favors integration with Russia. However, he has called for diversification of Belarus's energy supplies by imports from such countries as Venezuela, Iran, and Azerbaijan.

Russia and Belarus have close military ties. Russian and Belarusian air defenses are closely integrated, and Russia has supplied Belarus with its best air defense equipment. Although they do not have joint armed forces, a regional task force of Belarusian and Russian ground forces conducts joint military exercises. A small number of Russian troops remain in Belarus, in part to run a naval radio station and an early warning radar station.

NATO, the European Union, and Belarus

Belarus's relations with NATO are poor. Belarus strongly opposed NATO enlargement, often with more bitterness than Russia did. In 2004, after the second wave of enlargement, Lukashenko continued to say that NATO represents a military threat to Belarus. Belarus is a member of the Partnership for Peace program, but has not been very active in it.

Belarus's ties with the European Union have also been difficult. Although Lukashenko has often called for closer economic ties with the EU, he has condemned EU criticisms of his regime as interference in the country's affairs. Since 1997, the EU has followed a policy of limiting its official contacts with the Lukashenko regime. Belarus is the only ex-Soviet country without a Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) with the EU in force. Because of this, Belarus is excluded from the EU's "European Neighborhood" policy, which seeks to improve ties with countries around the EU. The strategy includes "action plans" for Ukraine, Moldova and countries in the Middle East and North Africa, but not Belarus.⁴

The EU budgeted 10 million Euro in aid to Belarus's population under the TACIS program for 2005-2006. The aid assists NGOs, as well as efforts in such areas as health, the environment, and the regions affected by the Chernobyl nuclear accident. In January 2006, the EU started a modest program to beam independent information via radio and television into Belarus from Poland, Lithuania, and Russia. It has also provided funding for scholarships abroad for Belarusian students, as well as support for the European Humanities University, formerly located in Belarus, but relocated in Lithuania, owing to harassment from the Lukashenko regime.

On August 6, 2004, the EU announced that it had agreed that Yuri Sivakov, the Minister of Sport of Belarus should be barred from entering Greece to attend the Olympic Games in Athens. The statement noted that Sivakov, formerly Interior Minister of Belarus, had been identified as one of the key figures in the 1999

⁴ *RFE/RL Newslines*, Part II, May 13, 2004.

disappearances of Viktor Gonchar, Anatoly Krasovsky, Yuri Zakharenko, and Dimitry Zavadsky, in an April 2004 Council of Europe report. After the announcement, Sivakov announced that he would not attend the Games. Belarusian officials angrily denounced the EU move.

In September 2004, the EU barred from its territory high officials involved in the murder of the four murdered and disappeared journalists and politicians, as well as those involved in subsequent cover-ups. In December 2004 elections, the EU announced an extension of its visa ban to “persons who are directly responsible for the fraudulent elections and referendum in Belarus on October 17, 2004 and those who are responsible for severe human rights violations in the repression of peaceful demonstrators in the aftermath of the elections and referendum in Belarus.”⁵ After the March 2006 presidential elections, the EU imposed a visa ban and an asset freeze on 31 high-ranking Belarusian officials, including Lukashenko, key members of the Belarusian presidential administration, parliament, law enforcement ministries, and election authorities.

However, the EU has so far not supported economic sanctions on Belarus as a whole. Indeed, Belarus currently enjoys EU tariff reductions under the Generalized System of Preferences (GSP). In 2006, the European Commission recommended that these benefits be revoked because of Lukashenko’s repression of independent trade unions, but no final decision has been made. The EU also maintains contacts with mid-level and local Belarusian officials in order to ease the country’s isolation.

Many analysts have asserted that some EU countries are reluctant to take tougher actions against Lukashenko for fear of antagonizing Russia or provoking Lukashenko to cause trouble on the lengthy EU-Belarus border. Belarus could make the situation uncomfortable for Poland by allowing more human trafficking to occur through Belarus to Poland or by creating obstacles for goods transiting Belarus to or from Poland. Belarusian border guards have reportedly seized and confiscated cargos in the past, often with dubious legal justification.⁶ Even if Belarus did not take these steps, the economies of the Baltic states and Poland could still be negatively affected by sanctions against Belarus.

A significant factor in EU policy is the long-standing historical relationship between Belarus and neighboring EU states, especially Poland. Belarus has a significant Polish ethnic minority. Polish-Belarusian ties have deteriorated in recent years owing to Lukashenko’s efforts to exert more control over ethnic Polish organizations in Belarus. Poland and the Baltic states have worked closely with Belarus’s pro-democracy media, labor unions and political parties, including by sponsoring international conferences on Belarus. They have pressed for more EU and U.S. engagement in bringing democracy to Belarus. Polish officials have spoken in

⁵ “EU’s Relations with Belarus,” EU Commission website, [http://europa.eu.int/comm/external_relations/belarus/intro/index.htm#initiatives].

⁶ Mikhail Vanyashkin, “Rubber-Stamped Daylight Robbery,” *Transitions Online*, January 30, 2004.

favor of eventual EU membership for a reformed Belarus, albeit in the “very long term.”⁷

The conflict over energy prices between Belarus and Russia has led the EU to explore the possibility of improved relations with Belarus in exchange for political and economic liberalization in Belarus. In November 2006, the EU presented a document to Belarus reminding Minsk of the benefits it would receive under the European Neighborhood program if it engaged in political reforms. However, Lukashenko rejected the EU approach, saying that while he favored better relations with the EU and the United States, he would not allow any changes in Belarus’s political system.

U.S. Policy

The United States recognized independent Belarus on December 25, 1991. U.S. officials hailed the removal of all nuclear weapons from Belarus in November 1996. However, U.S.-Belarus relations deteriorated as Lukashenko become increasingly authoritarian. In March 1997, a State Department spokesman announced a policy of “selective engagement” with Belarus on issues of U.S. national interests and “very limited dealings” on other issues.

U.S. aid to Belarus has been meager in recent years, reflecting the selective engagement strategy. The United States provided \$11.73 million in bilateral aid to Belarus in FY2006. Belarus will likely receive close to the Administration-requested \$10.2 million for FY2007. The Administration has requested \$10 million in aid for Belarus for FY2008. U.S. aid is focused on supporting pro-democracy NGOs and independent media, fighting HIV/AIDS (a serious problem in Belarus) and trafficking in persons, and bolstering Belarusian border guards’ ability to detect weapons of mass destruction. The Administration has noted that the regime’s harassment of NGOs, including by banning foreign aid to NGOs even remotely dealing with politics and jailing members of NGOs not registered with the authorities, makes the delivery of U.S. aid difficult.⁸

The United States has been strongly critical of Belarus’s failures in democratic development and human rights. After Lukashenko’s victory in the September 2001 presidential election, the Administration sharply criticized Lukashenko, charging that he had “stolen” the election and calling him “Europe’s last dictator.”⁹ U.S. officials have demanded that the Belarusian government bring to justice all those involved in the disappearances of the four members of the opposition in 1999. In November 2002, the United States announced that it would join 14 EU countries in imposing a visa ban against Lukashenko and other top Belarusian officials due to Belarus’s

⁷ “Polish Foreign Minister: Eastern Dimension Must Become Key EU Policy,” *Ukraine Business Report*, April 29, 2004.

⁸ State Department FY2008 Congressional Presentation on Foreign Assistance, February 2007.

⁹ *Associated Press* wire dispatch, September 17, 2001.

closure of an OSCE human rights monitoring mission in the country. The visa ban was lifted in April 2003 after the OSCE office was reopened.

In addition to U.S. opposition to Lukashenko's domestic policy, the United States has criticized Belarus's relations with rogue regimes. In April 2003, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Stephen Pifer charged that substantial evidence existed that Belarus had provided weapons and training to countries and groups that support terrorism, including Iran and Saddam Hussein's Iraq.¹⁰ Belarus's assistance to Saddam's regime may have also extended beyond the regime's collapse. One high-ranking aide to Saddam was reportedly captured by U.S. forces with Belarusian passports for himself and other key regime leaders, including Saddam's sons.¹¹

On October 20, 2004, in a statement announcing his signing of the Belarus Democracy Act of 2004 (P.L. 108-347), President Bush said the October 17 Belarusian elections were undertaken "in a climate of abuse and fear," noting that OSCE and other observers found that Lukashenko's victory "was achieved by fraudulent means." He added that "at a time when freedom is advancing around the world... there is no place in a Europe whole and free for a regime of this kind." The President stressed that "the fate of Belarus will rest not with a dictator, but with the students, trade unionists, civic and religious leaders, journalists, and all citizens of Belarus claiming freedom for their nation." In December 2004, the United States, in concert with the EU, enacted a visa ban on Belarusian officials involved in electoral fraud and human rights violations. A March 2006 Administration report, required by Congress as part of the Belarus Democracy Act, accused Lukashenko and his regime of corruption on a massive scale and selling arms to state supporters of terrorism such as Iran and Sudan.

U.S. officials were sharply critical of the conduct of the Belarus presidential election. On March 20, 2006, a White House spokesman said that the United States "does not accept the results of the election," saying that it was conducted in a "climate of fear" and adding that the U.S. supported opposition calls for a new vote to be held. In May 2006, at a meeting of post-communist nations in Lithuania, Vice President Dick Cheney called Belarus "the last dictatorship in Europe," echoing similar statements made by Administration officials in the past. Cheney noted that "peaceful demonstrators have been beaten, dissidents vanished, and a climate of fear prevails under a government that subverts free elections. There is no place in a Europe whole and free for a regime of this kind."¹²

The United States imposed sanctions on key members of the Lukashenko regime after the 2006 Belarusian presidential elections. On May 15, 2006, President Bush announced a visa ban for the travel of senior Belarusian leaders to the United States. On June 19, 2006, the United States froze the assets of these officials. In addition to Lukashenko himself, the measures affect such persons as Lukashenko's closest

¹⁰ AP wire dispatch, April 16, 2003

¹¹ Andrei Sannikov and Mark Lenzi, "Belarus's Terrorist Ties," *Washington Post*, June 12, 2004, 21.

¹² Reuters news agency dispatch, May 4, 2006.

advisors, the head of the Belarusian KGB, the Ministers of Justice and Interior, the head of the Belarusian state television and radio company, and the head of the central election commission. In a message to Congress, the President said that these persons were chosen because they undermined democratic processes in Belarus, violated human rights of Belarusians, or engaged in corruption.¹³

The United States is also concerned about human trafficking in Belarus. According to the State Department's 2006 Trafficking in Persons report, Belarus is a country of origin and transit for women and children trafficked for sexual exploitation. It is listed as a "Tier 2" country. This means that it does not meet minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking, but is making "significant" efforts to do so. The report says Belarus has demonstrated "political will" to fight trafficking, but needs to do more in the protection and assistance to victims.

Congressional Action

Members of Congress have spoken out strongly against human rights abuses in Belarus in Congressional hearings, floor statements, speeches and proposed legislation. In the first session of the 108th Congress, the Belarus Democracy Act was introduced. On February 25, 2004, the House International Relations Committee unanimously approved a modified version of the bill. It authorizes aid for pro-democracy forces in Belarus, as well as funds for increased broadcasting to Belarus by Voice of America and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. The bill calls for sanctions on Belarus, including expressing the sense of the Congress in favor of a visa ban against senior Belarusian officials; a prohibition on strategic exports to Belarus; a prohibition on U.S. financial assistance to the Belarusian government; and expressing the sense of the Congress that the United States should oppose multilateral financial aid to Belarus. These conditions would remain in place until Belarus meets specific democratic and human rights criteria. The President can waive the sanctions if he certifies that it is in the U.S. "national interest" to do so. The bill expresses the sense of the Congress that the President should coordinate with European countries to take similar measures against Belarus.

The bill also requires the President to report within 90 days and every year thereafter on the sale of weapons or weapons-related assistance to regimes supporting terrorism, and on the personal wealth of Lukashenko and other senior Belarusian leaders. While supporting the bill's objectives, the Administration opposed mandated sanctions included in previous versions of the bill, saying they would reduce needed diplomatic flexibility.¹⁴ The President signed the modified Belarus Democracy Act on October 20, 2004 (P.L. 108-347). On July 22, 2004, the House passed H.Res. 652 by a vote of 421-0. The resolution called on Belarus to hold free and fair parliamentary elections.

Before the Belarusian presidential election, the House and Senate each passed resolutions in March 2006 calling on Belarus to hold a free and fair vote. The House

¹³ White House press release, June 19, 2005, available online from the White House website at [<http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2006/06/20060619-4.html>].

¹⁴ Discussions with U.S. officials.

resolution (H.Res. 673) listed the shortcomings of the election campaign, called for specific improvements before the vote, and held out the possibility of better relations between Belarus and the United States if the election were free and fair. The Senate resolution (S.Res. 401) contains similar provisions but adopts a more critical tone, sharply condemning the “tyranny” of the Lukashenko regime. S.Res. 530, which dealt with U.S.-Russian relations on the eve of the G-8 summit in Moscow, criticized Russia for being the only G-8 country to applaud the outcome of the Belarusian presidential election.

On July 27, 2006, Representative Christopher Smith introduced the Belarus Democracy Reauthorization Act of 2006 (H.R. 5948). The bill contains many of the same provisions as the 2004 law, such as authorizing U.S. aid for pro-democracy groups, banning U.S. aid to the Belarusian government, supporting U.S. broadcasting to Belarus, and proposing sanctions against high-level Belarusian officials. The bill was approved by the House by a vote of 397-2 on December 8 and by the Senate by unanimous consent on the next day. It was signed by the President on January 12, 2007 (P.L. 109-480).

Policy Options

Many policy options have been proposed to deal with the problems posed by the Lukashenko regime. These options are not mutually exclusive and may be used in combination. Unilateral U.S. action, while it may put some pressure on the regime, could be less effective than actions supported by the European Union and, if possible, Russia, because of the greater economic and other links they have with Belarus.

- One approach would be to bolster the Belarusian opposition. The United States and its allies could increase aid to Belarusian independent media and non-governmental organizations from current, modest levels. There may be a limit to how much additional aid the relatively weak, oppressed, and internally divided opposition to Lukashenko’s regime can absorb. Moreover, Lukashenko has taken every opportunity to paint pro-democracy groups as taking orders from foreign powers because of the aid they receive and has barred foreign aid to such NGOs.
- One could try to ease the isolation of the Belarusian population by expanding exchange programs to permit more Belarusians to be exposed to changes taking place in neighboring Poland and the Baltic states. However, the regime has taken steps to restrict foreign travel for Belarusians. The United States and the EU could also expand broadcasts from neighboring countries to break the regime’s media monopoly.
- Another possible course of action would be to impose additional sanctions on Belarus or the Lukashenko regime. The United States and the EU have imposed a visa ban on top Belarusian leaders. However it is unclear whether increased sanctions against the leadership would have any effect, other than causing it to dig in its heels. Sanctions against Belarus as a whole could cause hardship to ordinary Belarusians.

- The United States could also try to enlist the assistance of Russia, arguing that Russia would be better off with a democratic, market-oriented Belarus than a sometimes unpredictable dictatorship. Russia's support, overt or tacit, would be very valuable, given Belarus's economic and psychological dependence on Russia. However, Russia has tended to view Belarus as lying within its own sphere of interests, in which it would prefer to act without Western interference. Moreover, as noted above, Russian policy has focused on gaining control of Belarus's key economic assets, not in ousting Lukashenko. If Russia decided to try to remove Lukashenko (for standing in the way of asset transfers, for example), it would likely opt for a regime like its own — quasi-authoritarian with democratic trappings — not for a truly democratic system.
- The United States and its allies could attempt to re-engage with the Lukashenko regime as a way to encourage it to move toward a democratic course. Russia's reduction in subsidies to the regime may seem to make this option somewhat more viable than in the past. However, although Lukashenko has made some rhetorical gestures toward better relations with the West, he has clearly stated that he does not intend to promote democratization under any circumstances.