



Belarus: An Overview

In 2020, protests against allegedly widespread electoral fraud and a brutal crackdown on protesters led to the rise of a mass opposition movement in Belarus, on a scale unseen since the country became independent in 1991 (Belarus previously was part of the Soviet Union). The protests emerged in the wake of Belarus’s August 2020 presidential election, during which opposition candidate Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya mounted an unexpectedly strong campaign against Aleksandr Lukashenko, who has ruled Belarus for more than 26 years.

Since August 2020, about 35,000 Belarusians reportedly have been detained or imprisoned. More than 500, including 62 women, are considered political prisoners. Several individuals have been killed or have 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 hold free and fair presidential elections.

Forced Diversion of Ryanair Flight 4978

On May 23, 2021, Belarusian authorities alleged a bomb threat against Ryanair Flight 4978 (en route from Athens to Vilnius) and required the plane to land in Minsk with a military escort. The diversion was widely characterized as a bomb hoax, and a senior EU official referred to it as an “act of state piracy.” The apparent purpose of the diversion was to capture flight passenger Raman Pratasevich, co-founder of Nexta, a popular Belarusian online news channel that facilitated 2020 postelection protests in Belarus. Authorities arrested Pratasevich and his companion, Russian national Sofia Sapega, after the plane landed. The United Nations’ International Civil Aviation Organization launched an investigation of the incident. After the EU imposed related sanctions in June 2021, authorities transferred Pratasevich and Sapega to house arrest.

Political Background

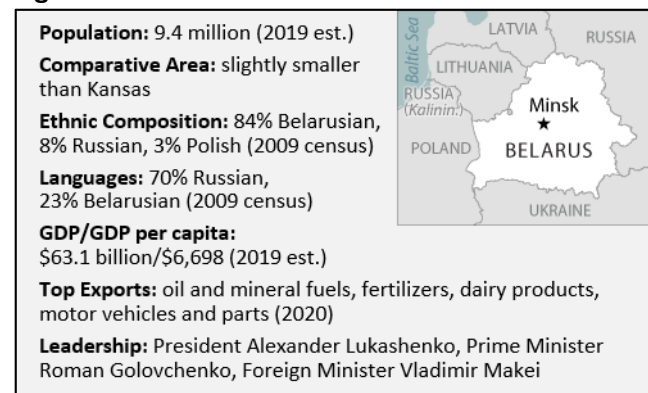
In past years, observers debated whether Lukashenko could be encouraged to preside over a “softer” and more development-oriented authoritarian regime, but political openings in Belarus were modest and short-lived.

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 anti-government video blogger, was denied candidate registration when he and dozens of other government critics were in temporary detention. After his initial release, Tsikhanousky was arrested again while collecting signatures for his wife’s candidacy. In June 2021, trial proceedings began against the imprisoned Tsikhanousky and other political prisoners, including Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty consultant Ihar Losik.

Tsikhanouskaya became the united opposition candidate after two prominent potential candidates were denied registration. On the campaign trail, Tsikhanouskaya pledged to be a transitional figure who would reintroduce democracy to Belarus. One denied candidate’s campaign manager, Mariya Kalesnikava, and the spouse of another denied candidate 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 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.

Figure 1. Belarus at a Glance



Sources: World Bank; Trade Data Monitor.

Tsikhanouskaya left Belarus after she was detained and threatened with imprisonment. From neighboring Lithuania, she formed a Coordination Council to help lead the opposition; five of the council’s seven senior members were detained after it was established. Former campaign manager 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 remain in prison. Others have left Belarus.

The opposition has organized various actions to increase pressure on the government of Belarus and to secure international attention. A network of former law enforcement officials who seek to expose alleged government crimes has supported the opposition. Members of Belarus’s once-burgeoning information and communications technology industry, many of whom have left the country, also have supported the opposition.

Relations with Russia

Belarus’s closest partner is Russia. Belarus is a member of the Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organization, and

the two countries share an air defense system. Belarus also is a member of the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union and relies heavily on Russian subsidized natural gas and oil and on Russian (and Chinese) loans. In addition, Belarus and Russia are members of a largely aspirational bilateral “union state” that formally came into effect in 2000. Some 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.

Observers have speculated that Russian authorities are using the political crisis in Belarus to deepen the two countries’ integration, something Lukashenko has sought to avoid. The Russian government reportedly has provided Belarus with new loans worth hundreds of millions of dollars. Russian media workers were deployed to support Belarusian state media when employees went on strike in support of the protests. Military cooperation between Belarus and Russia has increased, including plans to establish joint military training centers.

About half of Belarus’s merchandise trade is with Russia. In 2019, Russia began to reduce subsidies for Belarus’s crude oil imports from Russia, leading to a decline in Belarus’s revenues from its own refined oil exports. Although the dispute was eventually resolved, Belarus began to seek alternative suppliers to supplement oil imports from Russia.

The EU as a whole is Belarus’s second-largest trade partner, with 20% of its merchandise trade in 2020. Less than 1% of Belarus’s total trade is with the United States. Belarus’s main exports are mineral fuels (mainly refined oil products, 14%), potassium fertilizers (potash, 11%), dairy products (9%), and motor vehicles and parts (8%).

Relations with the United States and Europe

The United States, the EU, the Group of Seven (G7), and others have condemned the crackdown in Belarus and the forced diversion of Ryanair Flight 4978. U.S. officials have conveyed support for the Belarusian people’s “right to free and fair elections” and have called on 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.

The Belarus Democracy, Human Rights, and Sovereignty Act of 2020 (P.L. 116-260, Division FF, Title III) was enacted in December 2020. 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, the House of Representatives agreed to H.Res. 124, supporting the people of Belarus and their democratic aspirations.

Since 2008, the United States has had no ambassador and a limited diplomatic presence in Belarus, originally due to restrictions imposed by Minsk. In 2020, the Senate confirmed the appointment of Julie D. Fisher as the first U.S. ambassador to Belarus in more than a decade. As of June 2021, Ambassador 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 FY2016 to FY2020, the United States provided a total of about \$47 million in obligated foreign assistance to Belarus. For FY2021, the State Department allocated \$10.2 million in aid to Belarus. The President’s FY2022 State and Foreign Operations budget request includes \$15 million “to support the democratic aspirations of the Belarusian people.”

U.S. and EU Sanctions

The United States and the EU have imposed sanctions in response to state-sponsored violence, repression, and election fraud in Belarus, as well as to the forced diversion of Ryanair Flight 4978. As of June 25, 2021, the U.S. Department of the Treasury had designated 25 officials and 9 entities for sanctions pursuant to Executive Order (E.O.) 13405 of June 16, 2006, which established sanctions on those who engage in human rights abuses, corruption, or the undermining of democracy in Belarus. The State Department also has imposed visa restrictions on at least 155 individuals. Sixteen Belarusians that the United States designated prior to 2020, including Lukashenko, remain subject to sanctions.

In addition, on April 19, 2021, the Treasury Department announced the revocation (as of June 3, 2021) of a Belarus-related general license that had authorized U.S. persons “to engage in certain transactions with nine sanctioned Belarusian state-owned enterprises,” including a major petrochemical company, Belneftekhim, and subsidiaries.

In addition to new sanctions in response to the Ryanair flight diversion, the Biden Administration said the Department of Justice, including the Federal Bureau of Investigation, is working on the matter and the United States is suspending application of a 2019 U.S.-Belarus Air Services Agreement. In response, Belarusian authorities said they would reduce the number of permitted staff at the U.S. Embassy in Belarus, tighten visa procedures, and revoke permission for the U.S. Agency for International Development to work in the country.

As of June 25, 2021, the EU had imposed sanctions on 166 individuals and 15 entities in Belarus. The EU also has imposed sectoral sanctions that, among other restrictions, prohibit trade in petroleum products and potash, Belarus’s leading exports. The EU and other European states have prohibited Belarusian airline carriers from overflights of their airspace and access to their airports. The EU Aviation Safety Agency has called on member states to restrict flights through Belarusian airspace.

Cory Welt, Specialist in Russian and European Affairs

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