

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	105
Land:	Belarus
Kilde:	Freedom House
Titel:	Freedom in the World 2010 – Belarus
Udgivet:	3. maj 2010
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	6. januar 2011

Title	Freedom in the World 2010 - Belarus
Publisher	Freedom House
Country	Belarus
Publication Date	3 May 2010
Cite as	Freedom House, <i>Freedom in the World 2010 - Belarus</i> , 3 May 2010, available at: http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/4c0ceb067.html [accessed 5 January 2011]

Freedom in the World 2010 - Belarus

Capital: Minsk

Population: 9,662,000

Political Rights Score: 7 *

Civil Liberties Score: 6 *

Status: Not Free

Overview

Despite incentives from the European Union to introduce reforms, President Alyaksandr Lukashenka maintained a tight grip over Belarus's political and economic systems in 2009. He continued to use police violence and other forms of harassment against the political opposition, and blocked independent media from covering demonstrations through systematic intimidation. After releasing all of its political prisoners in 2008, the regime incarcerated more activists in 2009. The country made no substantial progress in reforming its electoral code, and overall hopes for an improvement in the political situation went unrealized.

Belarus declared independence in 1991, ending centuries of rule by Poland, Russia, and the Soviet Union. In 1994, voters made Alyaksandr Lukashenka, a member of parliament with close links to the security services, Belarus's first post-Soviet president. He pursued reunification with Russia and subordinated the government, legislature, and courts to his political whims while denying citizens basic rights and liberties. A widely criticized 1996 referendum approved constitutional amendments that extended Lukashenka's term through 2001, broadened presidential powers, and created a new bicameral parliament (the National Assembly).

In October 2000, Belarus held deeply flawed elections to the lower house. State media coverage of the campaign was limited and biased, and roughly half of all opposition candidates were denied registration. Following a boycott by seven opposition parties, only three opposition candidates were elected.

Lukashenka won a second term through disputed elections held in September 2001, amid accusations by former security-service officials that the president was directing a death squad aimed at silencing his opponents. Four politicians and journalists who had been critical of the regime disappeared during 1999 and 2000. By 2002, Lukashenka had launched a campaign of political retribution against those who had opposed him during the presidential campaign.

Legislative elections and a parallel referendum on the presidency were held in October 2004. According to official results, not a single opposition candidate entered the National Assembly, while voters ostensibly endorsed the government's proposal to allow Lukashenka to run for a third term in 2006. As with previous votes, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) declared that the parliamentary elections fell "significantly short" of Belarus's commitments. Following Ukraine's Orange Revolution, in

which protesters helped overturn the results of a fraudulent election, Lukashenka bolstered the law enforcement agencies and purged their ranks of potential dissenters. Amendments to the Law on Interior Troops introduced in February 2005 allowed for the discretionary use of firearms against protesters on orders from the president.

The March 19, 2006, presidential election, in which Lukashenka won a third term, did not meet democratic standards, according to the OSCE. The government took harsh repressive measures against the opposition, detaining and beating many activists, including Alyaksandr Kazulin, one of three opposition candidates. Though there were no reliable exit polls, the opposition asserted that Lukashenka could not have won the 83 percent of the vote that he claimed. Lukashenka subsequently asserted that his vote total had been much higher, but that the numbers were manipulated downward to make it look more realistic.

The election provoked the largest public protest of Lukashenka's tenure, bringing 10,000 to 15,000 activists onto Minsk's October Square on election day. Between 500 and 1,000 individuals were arrested on March 25, including Kazulin, who was sentenced to five and a half years in prison for protesting the flawed election and the subsequent crackdown. Opposition activity dwindled after the protests, as the government typically jailed opposition leaders and intimidated their rank-and-file supporters with fees and warnings.

In an effort to bolster his international standing, Lukashenka released all the political prisoners identified by the European Union (EU) and United States by August 19, 2008. However, hopes for further progress dimmed when no opposition candidates won seats in the September 2008 parliamentary elections.

The EU nevertheless indicated a strong interest in improved ties in 2009, releasing Lukashenka from a 13-year travel ban and allowing him to visit Italy and Lithuania. Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi returned the visit in November, making him the first Western leader to call in over a decade. Belarus also joined the EU's Eastern Partnership program. While taking advantage of these overtures, Lukashenka simultaneously launched a new political crackdown, describing opposition activists as "enemies of the Belarusian nation." In February the regime arrested more political prisoners, according to local human rights workers. These included Mikalai Autukhovich, Yury Lyavonau, and Uladzimir Asipenka. Autukhovich and Lyavonau had previously been held as political prisoners. The authorities charged Autukhovich with preparing a terrorist act in June and pressed similar charges against Asipenka in November, but released Lyavonau on August 8. Among other cases, the courts sentenced "Young Front" activist Artsyom Dubski to one year in prison on July 7, and in October, United Civil Party member Andrey Bandarenka, a former parliamentary candidate, received a seven-year sentence. As in previous years, the police regularly used violence to break up demonstrations and blocked the media from documenting such events. Toward the end of the year, the security services kidnapped at least three opposition activists and, after threatening them, dumped them in the forest far from home.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties

Belarus is not an electoral democracy. Serious and widespread irregularities have marred all recent elections. The 110 members of the Chamber of Representatives, the lower house of the bicameral National Assembly, are popularly elected for four years on the basis of single-mandate constituencies. The upper house, the Council of the Republic, consists of 64 members serving four-year terms; 56 are elected by regional councils and 8 are appointed by the president. The constitution vests most power in the president, giving him control over the government, courts, and even the legislative process by stating that presidential decrees have a higher legal force than ordinary legislation. The National Assembly serves largely as a rubber-stamp body. The president is elected for five-year terms, and there are no term limits.

With power concentrated in the presidency, parties play a negligible role in the political process. Opposition parties have no representation in the National Assembly, while pro-presidential parties serve only superficial functions. Young members of opposition parties claim that they are drafted into the military because of their political views. A 2009 law makes it illegal for soldiers to belong to political parties, forcing these opposition members to give up their affiliations. Amendments to the electoral law adopted in 2009

give the parties more opportunities to campaign but still do not provide for a transparent vote count.

Corruption is fed by the state's dominance of the economy and the overall lack of transparency and accountability in government. Belarus was ranked 139 out of 180 countries surveyed in Transparency International's 2009 Corruption Perceptions Index.

President Alyaksandr Lukashenka systematically curtails press freedom. Libel is both a civil and a criminal offense, and an August 2008 media law gives the state a monopoly over information about political, social, and economic affairs. The authorities routinely harass and censor independent media outlets, including through physical force and revocation of journalists' credentials. Belarusian national television is completely under the control of the state and does not provide coverage of alternative and opposition views. The state-run press distribution monopoly limits the availability of private newspapers. Under the 2008 media law, the federal government revoked the registration of several independent newspapers toward the end of 2009. The new media law also allowed local authorities to close down independent publications for minor violations. According to the law, the cabinet will exercise control over internet media, which are now legally subject to the same restrictions as traditional media. While the government had not yet applied the internet restrictions in 2009, its ownership of the country's sole internet service provider gives it the power to do so.

Despite constitutional guarantees that "all religions and faiths shall be equal before the law," government decrees and registration requirements have increasingly restricted religious activity. Amendments to the Law on Religions in 2002 provided for government censorship of religious publications and prevented foreign citizens from leading religious groups. The amendments also placed strict limitations on religious groups that have been active in Belarus for fewer than 20 years. The government in 2003 signed a concordat with the Belarusian Orthodox Church, which enjoys a privileged position. The authorities have discriminated against Protestant clergy and ignored anti-Semitic attacks, according to the U.S. State Department.

Academic freedom is subject to intense state ideological pressures, and institutions that use a liberal curriculum, promote national consciousness, or are suspected of disloyalty face harassment and liquidation. Official regulations stipulate immediate dismissal and revocation of degrees for students and professors who join opposition protests. Wiretapping by state security agencies limits the right to privacy.

The Lukashenka government restricts freedom of assembly for critical independent groups. Protests and rallies require authorization from local authorities, who can arbitrarily withhold or revoke permission. When public demonstrations do occur, police frequently break them up and arrest participants, a pattern that was repeated in 2009.

Freedom of association is severely restricted. More than a hundred of the most active nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) were forced to close down between 2003 and 2005. In December 2005, Lukashenka signed amendments to the penal code that criminalized participation in an unregistered or liquidated political party or organization, allowing further punitive measures against groups that refused to shut down. As a result, most human rights activists operating in the country face potential jail terms ranging from six months to two years. Regulations introduced in 2005 ban foreign assistance to NGOs, parties, and individuals deemed to have promoted "meddling in the internal affairs" of Belarus from abroad. The government signaled a slight thaw in December 2008, however, when it registered the Movement for Freedom, an NGO led by former presidential candidate Alyaksandr Milinkevich. Independent trade unions face harassment, and their leaders are frequently dismissed from employment and prosecuted for peaceful protests. Over 90 percent of workers have fixed-term contracts, meaning the government can dismiss them for any reason when the contract expires.

Although the country's constitution calls for judicial independence, courts are subject to significant executive influence. The right to a fair trial is often not respected in cases with political overtones. Human rights groups continue to document instances of beatings, torture, and inadequate protection during detention in cases involving leaders of the democratic opposition, and their trials are frequently held in secret.

An internal passport system, in which a passport is required for domestic travel and to secure permanent housing, limits freedom of movement and choice of residence. As of January 2008, citizens no longer need a travel permit before going abroad, but the government has created a database that will include nearly 100,000 people who cannot leave the country. The country's command economy severely limits economic freedom.

Ethnic Poles and Roma often face discrimination. Women are not specifically targeted for discrimination, but there are significant discrepancies in income between men and women, and women are poorly represented in leading government positions. As a result of extreme poverty, many women have become victims of the international sex trade.

**Countries are ranked on a scale of 1-7, with 1 representing the highest level of freedom and 7 representing the lowest level of freedom.*

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