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Freedom Status: Not Free

Aggregate Score: 17

Freedom Rating: 6.5

Political Rights: 7

Civil Liberties: 6

Quick Facts

Capital: Minsk

Population: 9,524,247

GDP/capita: \$8,040

Press Freedom Status: Not Free

Net Freedom Status: Not Free

OVERVIEW

President Alyaksandr Lukashenka secured a fifth term in the October 2015 presidential election, which failed to meet international standards, according to observers from the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE).

The war in neighboring Ukraine, growing regional tensions, and a failing economy motivated Belarus to seek better relations with Europe and the United States during the year. In February, Lukashenka hosted leaders of France, Germany, Russia, and Ukraine for talks that resulted in a new cease-fire agreement. Belarusian authorities then released six political prisoners in August, and refrained from violently suppressing protests during and after the October election, marking a contrast with the crackdown that followed the 2010 presidential vote.

In late October, the government was rewarded for the steps it had taken to improve its still-repressive human rights situation when the European Union and the United States granted the country temporary relief from sanctions.

POLITICAL RIGHTS AND CIVIL LIBERTIES

Political Rights: 4 / 40

A. Electoral Process: 0 / 12

The president is elected for five-year terms without limits. The 110 members of the Chamber of Representatives, the lower house of the rubber-stamp National Assembly, are popularly elected for four years from single-mandate constituencies. The upper chamber, 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.

Since Lukashenka was democratically elected to his first term in 1994, elections and referendums in Belarus have been marred by serious and systemic irregularities. During the 2012 parliamentary elections, the authorities blocked key opposition figures from running, harassed regime critics, denied the opposition access to the media, failed to administer the elections fairly, and prevented observers from independently verifying the vote count. The regime also pressured workers at state-owned enterprises to participate in the process. No opposition candidates won seats.

In October 2015, Lukashenka secured his fifth term in a noncompetitive presidential race, taking 83 percent of the vote. None of his three opponents received more than 5 percent, while the "against all" option received over 6 percent. OSCE observers concluded that the vote fell considerably short of meeting the group's standards for democratic elections, citing significant violations in the counting of the results. The observers did take note of several positive developments, including the participation of the first-ever female presidential candidate and the peaceful pre- and postelection environment; the latter was welcomed as an improvement given the brutal crackdown on protests surrounding the 2010 election. However, key opposition figures refused to recognize the results of the 2015 election, citing in part a series of irregularities related to early voting; official figures showed that some 36 percent of the electorate had cast ballots during early voting.

The legal framework for elections fails to meet democratic standards. Among other problems, electoral commission members at the national and local levels are politically aligned with and dependent on the incumbent government, and independent observers have little access to the counting process. Inadequate opposition access to state-run media, which heavily favor Lukashenka, is also a major concern.

B. Political Pluralism and Participation: 3 / 16

There is no official progovernment political party, and very few lawmakers are affiliated with any party. Opposition parties have no representation in the National Assembly, and Lukashenka's regime employs various tools to weaken and divide the opposition. These include harassment, imprisonment on trumped-up charges, and pressure on leaders and activists to leave Belarus or abandon politics.

Political parties encounter difficulties when seeking official registration. In 2015, the Ministry of Justice denied a registration application from the Belarusian Christian Democracy party for the fifth time. The Supreme Court later upheld the decision.

Six political prisoners, including 2010 presidential candidate Mikalay Statkevich, were released in August 2015 before their prison terms expired. Prior to their release, media reports had described the harsh treatment they received in prison. Another political prisoner, Mikalay Dzyadok, had his prison term extended for another year in February, days before it was set to expire.

In December, Belarusian human rights defenders concluded that Mikhail Zhamchuzhny, founder of the human rights organization Platforma, should be designated as a political prisoner. He was sentenced to six and a half years in prison in July after being convicted on charges that human rights organizations consider to be unsubstantiated and politically motivated. The group's leader, Andrey Bandarenka, was sentenced to four years in prison in 2014 after being convicted of

charges that were also disputed, including several counts of hooliganism and violence against women.

Other instances of political persecution include a case launched in August against five activists who were violently detained for marking a billboard with politically charged graffiti. Three of them faced criminal charges, while the other two were released. Another presidential candidate in the 2010 election, Ales Mikhalevich, returned to Belarus after years in exile, though a criminal case against him was still pending.

C. Functioning of Government: 1 / 12

The constitution vests most power in the president, giving him control over the government, the judiciary, and the legislative process by stating that presidential decrees have a higher legal force than ordinary legislation.

The state controls 70 percent of the Belarusian economy, feeding widespread corruption. In addition, graft is encouraged by an overall lack of transparency and accountability in government. Information on the work of about 60 government ministries and state-controlled companies, including the Ministry of Information and the state broadcaster, is classified. Belarus ranks 107 out of 168 countries and territories surveyed in Transparency International's 2015 Corruption Perceptions Index.

There are no independent bodies to investigate corruption cases. Graft trials are held in a closed format isolated from the public, raising questions about the fairness of the process.

Civil Liberties: 13 / 60 (+3)

D. Freedom of Expression and Belief: 3 / 16

The government systematically curtails press freedom. Libel is both a civil and criminal offense. A 2008 media law gives the state a monopoly over information about political, social, and economic affairs. The criminal code also contains provisions protecting the "honor and dignity" of high-ranking officials, including greater penalties in cases of defamation or insult.

Belarusian national television is completely under the control of the state and typically does not present alternative or opposition views. There are no privately owned nationwide broadcasting outlets. The state-run press distribution monopoly limits the availability of private newspapers. The authorities harass and censor the remaining independent media outlets. Freelancing or working for a foreign, unaccredited news outlet can be punished as criminal offenses.

The government seeks greater control over the internet through legal and technical means, even as Belarusians are increasingly turning to the internet as a more trustworthy source of news and information than traditional state-run media. Internet penetration reached about 62 percent in 2015.

Amendments to the 2008 media law went into effect at the start of 2015, giving the government greater powers to censor online content. The amendments further expanded the definition of mass media to include all websites and blogs that publish information, placing them under the supervision of the Ministry of Information. The government owns Belarus's only internet service provider, and authorities have repeatedly blocked access to opposition sites and independent media outlets.

Despite constitutional guarantees of religious equality, government decrees and registration requirements have increasingly restricted religious activity. Legal amendments in 2002 provided

for government censorship of religious publications and barred foreigners from leading religious groups. The amendments also placed strict limitations on religious groups active in Belarus for less than 20 years. In 2003, the government signed a concordat with the Belarusian Orthodox Church, which is controlled by the Russian Orthodox Church, giving it a privileged position. The authorities have discriminated against or harassed the Roman Catholic Church and especially Protestant groups.

Academic freedom is subject to intense state ideological pressures, and institutions that use a liberal curriculum or are suspected of disloyalty face harassment and liquidation. Regulations stipulate immediate dismissal and revocation of degrees for students and professors who join opposition protests. Mandatory assignment of university graduates to state-sanctioned, low-paid jobs for two years after graduation pushes many young people to pursue higher education in European universities.

The use of wiretapping and other surveillance by state security agencies limits the right to free private discussion. Internet communications are reportedly monitored by the authorities.

E. Associational and Organizational Rights: 1 / 12

The government restricts freedom of assembly for critical independent groups. Protests require authorization from local authorities, who can arbitrarily deny permission. Police routinely break up public demonstrations and arrest participants. The government's desire to improve its relations with Europe and the United States led to an easing of such practices in 2015; although fines and short detentions continued to be imposed, police refrained from beatings and mass arrests. Legislation curbing free assembly remained intact.

Freedom of association is severely restricted. More than 100 of the most active nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) were forced to close between 2003 and 2005, and participation in an unregistered or liquidated political party or organization was criminalized in 2005. Registration of groups remains selective. 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 entities and individuals deemed to promote foreign "meddling in the internal affairs" of Belarus. In 2013, officials introduced legislation simplifying registration requirements for NGOs, but arbitrary denials of registration have not abated.

Independent trade unions face harassment, and their leaders are frequently fired and prosecuted for engaging in peaceful protests. No independent trade unions have been registered since 1999, when Lukashenka issued a decree setting extremely restrictive registration requirements.

F. Rule of Law: 2 / 16 (+1)

Although the 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 have documented instances of beatings, torture, and psychological pressure during detention. The power to extend pretrial detention lies with a prosecutor rather than a judge, in violation of international norms.

Authorities deliberately create advantageous conditions for the Russian language to increase its dominance, while the UN Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) recognizes Belarusian as a "vulnerable" language. Ethnic Poles and Roma often face pressure from the authorities and discrimination.

LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) individuals are subject to discrimination and regular police harassment. Mikhail Pishcheuski died in October after being severely beaten in

2014 for being gay; his attacker, a former schoolteacher, was convicted in what was reportedly the first-ever trial in Belarus to address violence targeting a gay person, but the perpetrator was released from prison in August 2015 after serving just 11 months of a 32-month sentence. In 2013, the Justice Ministry refused to register a gay rights NGO. The same year, the parliament proposed a law banning "homosexual propaganda," but has not yet introduced it as legislation. An official website of the Belarusian government advises foreign gay couples traveling to the country "to avoid public displays of affection, and to book twin rooms rather than doubles."

Since 2014, Belarus has accepted about 160,000 refugees from Ukraine as people fled the conflict there, providing them with schooling and medical treatment. Belarus coordinates its efforts with the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the International Organization for Migration (IOM).

G. Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights: 7 / 16 (+2)

While an internal passport system limits freedom of movement and choice of residence, restrictions have eased in practice in recent years, leaving few significant obstacles to domestic and international travel. Nevertheless, some opposition activists are detained at the border for lengthy searches, and bribery to accelerate some of the administrative processes for traveling is common.

Although the economy remains dominated by the state, Belarus's limits on economic freedom have also been gradually eased in recent years, allowing for greater property ownership, commercial activity, and small business operations. State interference in the economy now primarily affects larger businesses.

There are significant discrepancies in income between men and women, and women are poorly represented in leading government positions. Domestic and sexual violence against women are considered to be persistent and underreported. Sexual violence is addressed in the criminal code, and a 2008 law addresses the prosecution of domestic violence, but no legislative measures are aimed at preventing these problems. The constitution explicitly bans same-sex marriage.

Mandatory unpaid national work days, postgraduate employment allocation, compulsory labor for addicts confined to state rehabilitation facilities, and restrictions on leaving employment in specific industries have led labor activists to conclude that all Belarusian citizens experience forced labor at some stage of their life. Lack of economic opportunities have led many women to become victims of the international sex trade.

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