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Freedom in the World 2015 - Belarus

Overview:

In 2014, President Alyaksandr Lukashenka continued to preside over an authoritarian system that crushes political dissent while offering citizens a basic, if increasingly unstable, standard of living. Despite continued economic declines, Lukashenka's approval ratings rose in the first half of 2014, partly due to the public's negative reaction to the Euromaidan protests and the ensuing instability in Ukraine. On May 29, Belarus signed an agreement to join the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union, scheduled to take effect on January 1, 2015. There are concerns that the union may damage the Belarusian economy, as the volatility caused in Russia by Western sanctions and dropping oil prices may reverberate in Belarus.

The authorities continued to crack down on political demonstrations throughout the year, and five prisoners remained in jail at the end of 2014. Dozens of civil society activists from Belarus and neighboring countries were preventively arrested or detained in the run-up to the 2014 Ice Hockey World Championships held in Minsk in May. Additionally, while there were a few minor improvements to freedom of expression online, the government continued to block the websites of independent media and human rights organizations, and experts anticipate repression ahead of the presidential election in 2015.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties:

Political Rights: 4 / 40 [Key]

A. Electoral Process: 0 / 12

The president is elected for five-year terms, and there are no term 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 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.

Serious and widespread irregularities have marred all recent elections. In 2010, Lukashenka won a fourth term in a deeply flawed presidential vote, though some opposition candidates were allowed to run. When approximately 15,000 protesters turned out to question the legitimacy of the balloting, the authorities arrested more than 700 people, including seven of the nine opposition presidential candidates. Three of the former candidates were later sentenced to prison terms of five or six years.

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. Further, the regime pressured workers at state-owned enterprises to participate in the process. No opposition candidates won seats.

Local elections were held in March 2014, and candidates ran unopposed in nearly 80 percent of the races. Opposition candidates were denied registration significantly more often than progovernment representatives, and less than 2 percent of registered candidates were from opposition parties. A number of opposition candidates reported harassment, including fines and administrative detention, during the campaign period.

The legal framework for elections does not meet democratic standards. Most members of election commissions support Lukashenka; in the March local elections, progovernment individuals heavily dominated the constituency election commissions.

B. Political Pluralism and Participation: 3 / 16

There is no official progovernment political party, and most lawmakers are unaffiliated with any party. Opposition parties have no representation in the National Assembly, and have generally been weak and divided, with little engagement in the political process. In October 2014, in a symbolic gesture, political prisoner Mikalay Statkevich offered to run as the single opposition candidate in 2015 despite his inability to register as a candidate.

The authorities harass dissidents on a daily basis, forcing some to undergo psychiatric treatment. Andrey Kasheuski, an opposition activist and newspaper distributor, was forced to spend a month in a psychiatric hospital after being stopped by the police in February for wearing a ribbon from the Euromaidan protests. Under such pressure and threats, the opposition remains deeply divided on the best tactics for opposing the regime and currently has little support among the public.

Political prisoners Mikalay Autukhovich, Uladzimir Yaromenak, and Eduard Lobau were released this year after completing their prison terms. Unexpectedly, human rights leader Ales Byalyatski was released from prison in June, having served nearly three years of a four-and-a-half-year sentence on charges of tax evasion.

C. Functioning of Government: 1 / 12

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 state controls 70 percent of the Belarusian economy, feeding widespread corruption. Graft is also encouraged by an overall lack of transparency and accountability in government. Under presidential decrees, information on the work of about 60 government ministries and state-controlled companies, including the Ministry of Information, the Minsk city executive committee, and the state broadcaster, is classified. Belarus was ranked 119 out of 175 countries and territories surveyed in Transparency International's 2014 Corruption Perceptions Index.

Civil Liberties: 10 / 60

D. Freedom of Expression and Belief: 3 / 16

The government systematically curtails press freedom. Libel is both a civil and a criminal offense, and 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 the president and other high-ranking officials, including greater penalties in cases of defamation or insult. In June 2014, a criminal case was opened against human rights activist Katsyaryna Sadouskaya for insulting Lukashenka; Sadouskaya had called the president "mentally ill" in April when commenting about preventive detentions before the World Ice Hockey Championship.

Belarusian national television is completely under the control of the state and does not present alternative or opposition views. The state-run press distribution monopoly limits the availability of private newspapers. The authorities routinely harass and censor the remaining independent media outlets, including by using physical force, confiscating equipment, and revoking journalists' credentials. Freelancing or working for a foreign, unaccredited news outlet can be punished as criminal offenses. The authorities do allow the publication of two independent newspapers, *Nasha Niva* and *Narodnaya Volya*. However, in the past journalists from these publications have been subject to arrests and harassment, and the website of *Nasha Niva* was temporarily blocked on March 25, Freedom Day—an unofficial holiday celebrated by opponents of the regime.

As the government continues to maintain control over most broadcast and print media outlets, Belarusians are increasingly turning to the internet as a more trustworthy source of news and information. More than half of the population has access to the internet, and every day, more than 400,000 Belarusians—equivalent to the audience size for state television—visit news websites. At the same time, the government continues to seek greater control over the internet through both legal and technical means. The 2008 media law subjects internet outlets to the same restrictions as traditional media, and the government owns the country's sole internet service provider. A 2010 presidential decree, codified in 2012, requires internet café owners to identify users and track their activities. The authorities have repeatedly blocked access to opposition sites and independent media

outlets, while the state security service harasses online opposition activists. In late December 2014, access to a number of independent news sites was blocked following their reporting on the devaluation of the Belarusian ruble. In the same week, the parliament rushed through a law that gives the government greater powers to censor online content. The law, which will go into effect in January 2015, further widens the definition of traditional media to include all websites and blogs that publish information, placing them under the supervision of the Ministry of Information. Nevertheless, self-censorship online has slightly decreased, and a growing diversity of viewpoints and information is presented on online forums and social media websites.

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 that have been active in Belarus for fewer than 20 years. In 2003 the government 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.

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 leads many young people to pursue higher education in European universities.

Wiretapping by state security agencies limits the right to free private discussion.

E. Associational and Organizational Rights: 1 / 12

The government restricts freedom of assembly for critical independent groups. Protests and rallies require authorization from local authorities, who can arbitrarily deny permission. When public demonstrations do occur, police frequently break them up and arrest participants. Although the government officially allowed a Freedom Day demonstration to take place in 2014, authorities arrested at least 10 participants, some of whom were carrying Ukrainian flags. In November, the authorities issued a deportation order to prominent human rights defender Yelena Tonkacheva, a Russian national and longtime Belarusian resident, officially due to traffic violations.

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. Since 2005, at least 18 individuals have been convicted, with five sentenced to prison terms. 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. 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: 1 / 16

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 continue to document instances of beatings, torture, and psychological pressure during detention in cases involving leaders of the democratic opposition. The power to extend pretrial detention lies with a prosecutor rather than a judge, in violation of international norms. There were five political prisoners in Belarus at the end of 2014, including Statkevich and youth activists Mikalay Dzyadok and Ihar Alinevich.

Ethnic Poles and Roma often face discrimination. There are grassroots efforts to preserve Belarusian identity and promote the use of the Belarusian language in the country, where Russian has become increasingly dominant. In August 2013, police destroyed seven Romany homes, apparently built without permits, in the city of Zhlobin before a visit by Lukashenka. No compensation was provided.

LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) individuals face discrimination and regular police harassment. In February 2013, the Justice Ministry refused to register a gay rights NGO, meaning it cannot operate legally in the country. The parliament proposed a law banning "homosexual propaganda" in July 2013 but has yet to formally introduce it as legislation.

G. Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights: 5 / 16

An internal passport system limits freedom of movement and choice of residence. Some opposition activists have been turned back at the border or detained for lengthy searches. Belarus's command economy severely limits economic freedom, and the regulatory environment favors state-owned companies.

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. As a result of widespread poverty, many women have become victims of the international sex trade. 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.

Scoring Key: X / Y (Z)

X = Score Received

Y = Best Possible Score

Z = Change from Previous Year

[Full Methodology](#)

2015 Scores

Status

Not Free

Freedom Rating

(1 = best, 7 = worst)

6.5

Civil Liberties

(1 = best, 7 = worst)

6

Political Rights

(1 = best, 7 = worst)

