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Belarus: An Overview

Belarus, located in eastern Europe, is a close ally of Russia. Belarus's authoritarian leader, Alexander Lukashenko, has served as president for more than 30 years. Lukashenko has increased Belarus's dependency on Russia since 2020, when Belarusian authorities launched a crackdown on political opposition and civil society that UN and other international human rights monitors called "unprecedented" and "catastrophic." Lukashenko's government has provided support to Russia's war against Ukraine, including by allowing Belarus to be used as a launchpad for the invasion in 2022.

The first Trump Administration and the Biden Administration, together with the European Union (EU) and other U.S. allies, condemned the Lukashenko government's crackdown on dissent in Belarus and imposed sanctions in response. The Biden Administration also condemned Belarus's support for Russia's war against Ukraine and joined the EU in imposing additional sanctions on Belarus. Members of the 119th Congress may evaluate aspects of U.S. policy toward Belarus, including implications for U.S. and European security of Belarus's tightening alliance with Russia, the role of Belarus sanctions in promoting U.S. policy goals, an existing legislative requirement for the President to appoint a Special Envoy for Belarus, and U.S. engagement with Belarus's democratic movement abroad.

Political Background

Belarus, previously part of the Soviet Union, became independent after the Soviet Union's dissolution in 1991. Lukashenko was first elected president in 1994, and he subsequently established an authoritarian system of governance. Lukashenko was reelected to a seventh presidential term on January 26, 2025, in an environment observers generally considered to be nondemocratic. According to official results, Lukashenko received 87% of the vote with 86% turnout; four nominal competitors each received 2%-3% of the vote. The EU and other U.S. allies issued a statement condemning Belarus's "sham presidential elections." (The Trump Administration has not issued a statement on the elections.)

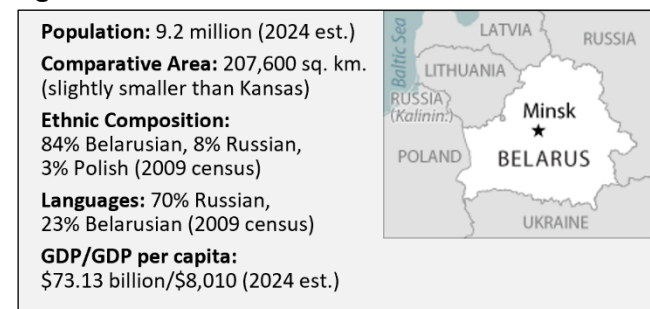
The 2020 government crackdown in Belarus was a response to the rise of the country's largest mass opposition movement since independence. The movement arose out of protests against seemingly widespread electoral fraud in that year's presidential election, in which opposition candidate Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya mounted an unexpectedly strong campaign against Lukashenko. The official pronouncement that Lukashenko won the 2020 election with 80% of the vote led to protests. The crackdown that followed led to larger protests that, at their height, attracted hundreds of thousands.

The crackdown has led to more than 50,000 arrests or detentions; at least 6,500 convictions; and at least 3,700 political prisoners (including at least 1,245 still in prison as

of January 2025), according to Belarusian human rights monitors. In July 2024, Belarusian authorities launched an unprecedented series of pardons of such prisoners, issuing more than 200 by the end of the year. The UN Human Rights Office estimates that up to 300,000 people have fled Belarus since 2020, including Tsikhanouskaya (whose husband is in prison, as are other opposition figures).

From neighboring Lithuania, Tsikhanouskaya formed a Coordination Council, "a collective representative body of the democratic part of Belarusian society," and a United Transitional Cabinet, a self-declared interim government in exile. In 2023, a Belarusian court sentenced Tsikhanouskaya in absentia to 15 years in prison for allegedly "conspiring to overthrow the government" and other charges. In May 2024, Belarus's democratic movement abroad organized direct elections to the Coordination Council; about 6,700 online votes were cast.

Figure 1. Belarus at a Glance



Sources: IMF; National Statistical Committee of Belarus.

Since 2020, Belarusian authorities have further tightened restrictions against the exercise of human rights and freedoms. In 2021, the government passed laws on mass gatherings, mass media, and countering extremism that criminalized a broad range of dissent and political activism. A 2023 law enables authorities to revoke citizenship for "extremism" and "causing grave harm to the interests of the state." The Belarusian government is responsible for at least 30 "incidents of direct, physical transnational repression" between 2014 and 2022, according to Freedom House, a nongovernmental organization. In 2021, authorities forced the landing of a commercial airliner flying from Greece to Lithuania to capture a Belarusian journalist who had facilitated 2020 postelection protests. In 2023, the government barred citizens abroad from obtaining or renewing passports from overseas.

Belarus's most recent parliamentary elections, to the lower chamber of the National Assembly, were held in February 2024 with the participation of pro-government parties and candidates (elections to the upper chamber are indirect). These elections took place after Belarusian authorities did not renew the registration of opposition parties they deemed in noncompliance with new registration requirements.

In 2022, amendments to Belarus's constitution, among other changes, altered the status of a 1,200-member All-Belarusian People's Assembly (composed of central and local government officials and other appointed delegates), elevating it to the "highest representative body of people's power." The amendments granted the assembly authority to appoint members of Belarus's Constitutional Court, Supreme Court, and Central Election Commission, as well as to remove the president under certain conditions. Lukashenko was appointed the assembly's chairperson.

Relations with Russia

Belarus and Russia are members of a supranational *union state* that the two governments established in 2000 to promote their countries' integration. Belarus also is a member of a Russia-led security alliance, the Collective Security Treaty Organization; the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union; and, since 2024, the Russia- and China-led Shanghai Cooperation Organization.

Some observers suggest Russian authorities used Belarus's 2020 protests and crackdown to increase Russian influence over Belarus. The Russian government reportedly offered Belarus more than 1 billion dollars in new loans, and the two governments committed to deepening their integration within the union state framework. A 2021 Union State Military Doctrine established a framework for closer military coordination between Belarus and Russia. In 2023, Lukashenko and Russian President Vladimir Putin stated that Russia had deployed tactical nuclear weapons in Belarus. The two countries share an air defense system and frequently hold joint military exercises, including nuclear exercises in 2024.

Belarus has provided support for Russia's war against Ukraine. Four days before the start of the war, Belarusian authorities announced that an estimated 30,000 Russian troops who had concluded joint military exercises in Belarus would remain in the country indefinitely; these troops constituted part of Russia's initial invading force. The Belarusian government permitted Russia to launch missile strikes and deploy bombers from Belarus. It has provided military equipment to Russia; hosted Russian forces; received children that Russian authorities removed from occupied Ukraine; and, according to the U.S. Department of the Treasury, helped Russia evade sanctions.

Belarus's economic dependency on Russia has increased since 2022. Belarus relies heavily on subsidized natural gas and oil from Russia and on Russian loans. In 2023, according to the International Monetary Fund (IMF), about two-thirds of Belarus's trade was with Russia, up from about 50% before 2022. European sanctions against top Belarusian exports—oil products and potash (fertilizer)—have led Belarusian firms to redirect exports to Russia and, via Russia, to non-sanctioning countries.

Belarus's gross domestic product (GDP) grew by almost 4% in 2023 and an estimated 3% in 2024, after declining by almost 5% in 2022. About 11% of Belarus's trade was with the EU in 2023; 8% of its trade was with China. Less than 1% of Belarus's total trade is with the United States.

U.S. Policy and Congressional Interests

Since 2008, the United States has had a limited diplomatic presence and no ambassador in Belarus, originally due to

restrictions imposed by the Belarusian government. In 2020, the Senate confirmed the appointment of the first U.S. ambassador to Belarus in more than a decade, but the government of Belarus retracted an agreement to receive her. The ambassador instead served as the U.S. Special Envoy for Belarus until 2022. The Department of State established a Belarus Affairs Unit at the U.S. Embassy in Lithuania in 2021 and suspended operations of the U.S. Embassy in Belarus in 2022. Section 6406 of the Department of State Authorization Act of 2023 (P.L. 118-31, Division F), as amended, directs the President to appoint a new Special Envoy for Belarus.

The Belarus Democracy, Human Rights, and Sovereignty Act of 2020 (P.L. 116-260, Division FF, Title III) states it is the policy of the United States to reject the "invalid results" of Belarus's 2020 presidential elections. This act amended the Belarus Democracy Act of 2004 (P.L. 108-347, as amended; 22 U.S.C. §5811 note), which grants the U.S. President authority to impose sanctions on persons in Belarus for human rights abuses and for undermining democracy. In the 117th Congress, H.Res. 124 and S.Res. 345 expressed support for the people of Belarus and their democratic aspirations.

U.S. assistance for Belarus has focused on independent media and civil society, human rights protection, and private sector development. In December 2024, the U.S. Department of State stated that the United States had provided more than \$140 million "in support of the Belarusian people and civil society" since 2020. The State Department's FY2025 budget request included \$23 million for Belarus assistance. The State Department convened annual strategic dialogues with Belarus's democratic movement in 2023 and 2024.

The United States has joined the EU in imposing sanctions in response to Belarusian authorities' human rights abuses and support for Russia's war against Ukraine. The U.S. Department of the Treasury has imposed sanctions on more than 300 individuals and entities, including Lukashenko, other officials and businesspeople, and major state-owned companies. The United States has suspended normal trade relations with Belarus (P.L. 117-110), restricted transactions in new sovereign debt, imposed export controls on military and dual-use goods and technology, and restricted air travel. The Department of State has imposed visa restrictions on a few hundred Belarusian officials.

Belarus sanctions mainly have been imposed pursuant to Executive Order (E.O.) 14038 of August 9, 2021, which President Biden issued to take action against those who engage in human rights abuses, electoral fraud, corruption, and other harmful activities in Belarus. E.O. 14038 expanded the scope of a national emergency that President Bush declared in E.O. 13405 of June 16, 2006, in response to similar activities. Some Belarus sanctions have been imposed under E.O. 13405, as well as under E.O. 14024 of April 15, 2021, in which President Biden declared a national emergency in response to harmful foreign activities of the Russian government.

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