



## Belarus: An Overview

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

The U.S. government and the European Union (EU) have condemned Belarus's support for Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the Lukashenko government's crackdown on dissent in Belarus, and they have imposed sanctions in response. They have called for the Belarusian government to hold free and fair presidential elections. Congress has passed legislation supporting democracy in Belarus.

### Political Background

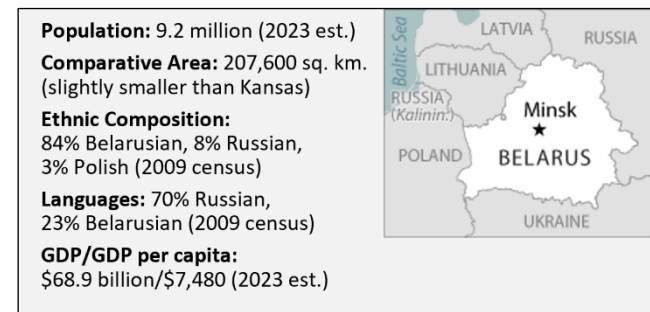
The Lukashenko government's 2020 crackdown followed the rise of Belarus's largest mass opposition movement since the country became independent in 1991 (Belarus previously was part of the Soviet Union). The movement arose out of protests against seemingly widespread electoral fraud in a presidential election in which opposition candidate Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya mounted an unexpectedly strong campaign against Lukashenko.

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 led to protests. The brutal crackdown that followed led to larger protests that some observers characterized as "leaderless" and that sometimes attracted hundreds of thousands of people. More than 37,000 Belarusians were arrested or detained by May 2021, according to the U.N. Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), and more than 1,450 currently are political prisoners, according to Belarusian human rights monitors. A few hundred thousand people are estimated to have fled the country.

Tsikhanouskaya left Belarus after being detained and threatened with imprisonment (her husband, who sought the presidency before her, was sentenced to 18 years in prison). From neighboring Lithuania, she formed a Coordination Council to help lead the opposition. Five of the Coordination Council's seven senior members still in Belarus were detained; two were sentenced to more than 10 years in prison. In 2022, Tsikhanouskaya announced the creation of the United Transitional Cabinet, a self-declared interim government in exile. In March 2023, a Belarusian court sentenced Tsikhanouskaya in absentia to 15 years in

prison for allegedly "conspiring to overthrow the government" and other charges.

Figure 1. Belarus at a Glance



Sources: IMF; National Statistical Committee of Belarus.

Various civic activist initiatives arose in the aftermath of the 2020 crackdown. Such initiatives included collecting information on human rights violations, organizing small-scale protests, supporting those persecuted by the government, and conducting cyberattacks against government institutions. Since Russia's renewed invasion of Ukraine in 2022, some activists reportedly have sought to sabotage rail services in Belarus to hinder Russian military efforts in Ukraine. Some opposition members have become volunteer fighters in Ukraine.

Belarusian authorities have 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. By July 2022, Belarusian authorities had opened "more than 11,000 criminal cases relating to extremism," according to OHCHR. A 2023 law enables authorities to revoke citizenship for extremism and "causing grave harm to the interests of the state." In 2022, the government also held a referendum, in a nondemocratic environment, to pass constitutional changes that appear aimed at securing Lukashenko's influence and personal security even if he departs from office.

The Belarusian government has targeted citizens abroad. It is responsible for at least 30 "incidents of direct, physical transnational repression" since 2014, 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 post-election protests. The journalist and his companion, a Russian national, were sentenced to several years in prison but were pardoned in 2023. In 2022, authorities amended the criminal code to allow for trial in absentia against citizens abroad accused of certain crimes. In 2023, the government barred citizens abroad from obtaining or renewing passports from overseas.

## Relations with Russia

Belarus is a member of the Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). Russia and Belarus share an air defense system and frequently hold joint military exercises. Belarus also is a member of the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union and relies heavily on Russian subsidized natural gas and oil and on loans from Russia (and China). Belarus and Russia also are members of a supranational bilateral *union state* that the two governments established in 2000 to promote their countries' integration. In practice, however, Lukashenko has sought to limit Belarus's integration with Russia.

Some observers suggest Russian authorities used Belarus's 2020 crisis to increase Russian influence over Belarus. The Russian government provided or promised Belarus more than 1 billion dollars in loans. Military cooperation between Belarus and Russia increased, and the two governments committed to deepening their integration within the union state framework.

Belarus provided support for Russia's renewed invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Four days before the invasion, Belarusian authorities announced that an estimated 30,000 Russian troops who had participated in joint military exercises would remain in the country indefinitely. These troops constituted part of Russia's initial invading force. The Belarusian government has permitted Russia to launch missile strikes and deploy bombers from Belarus. It has provided ammunition for Russian forces, hosted Russian forces and equipment, provided training to mobilized personnel, and received children that Russian authorities removed from occupied Ukraine. In June 2023, Lukashenko and Russian President Vladimir Putin stated that Russia had begun to deploy tactical nuclear weapons in Belarus. Also in June, Lukashenko participated in resolving a short-lived mutiny by Russia's paramilitary Wagner Group by agreeing to host Wagner personnel.

Belarus's economic dependency on Russia has increased since 2022. Western sanctions against trade in top Belarusian exports—oil products and potash (fertilizer)—have led Belarusian exporters to reroute their products to Russia and, via Russia, to non-sanctioning countries. Russia has agreed to maintain subsidized oil and gas supplies for Belarus, defer debt payments, and assist Belarus in import substitution efforts. Belarusian authorities also agreed to coordinate key taxation regimes with Russia. In 2022, Belarus's gross domestic product (GDP) declined by almost 5%; Belarusian officials said they anticipated GDP to grow by almost 4% in 2023.

In 2021, about half of Belarus's merchandise trade was with Russia, according to the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Despite the imposition of Western sanctions on Belarus, the EU as a whole remained Belarus's second-largest trading partner, with about 20% of its merchandise trade. In 2022, according to IMF estimates, about 62% of Belarus's trade was with Russia; less than 13% was with the EU. Belarus's total trade grew by almost 10% in 2022. Less than 1% of Belarus's total trade is with the United States.

## Relations with the U.S. and Europe

The U.S. government, the EU, and others have condemned Belarus's support for Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the Lukashenko government's crackdown since 2020. U.S. officials have conveyed support for the Belarusian people's "right to free and fair elections." The European Council, composed of the leaders of EU member states, stated the EU does "not recognize the results" of the 2020 election.

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 its agreement to receive her. The ambassador instead served as the U.S. Special Envoy for Belarus until June 2022; the Biden Administration has not appointed a new Special Envoy. In 2021, the Department of State established a Belarus Affairs Unit at the U.S. Embassy in Lithuania. After Russia renewed its invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the Department of State suspended operations of the U.S. embassy in Belarus.

The Belarus Democracy, Human Rights, and Sovereignty Act of 2020 (P.L. 116-260, Division FF, Title III) amended 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 U.S. President authority to impose sanctions on persons in Belarus for human rights abuses and for undermining democracy. In the 117<sup>th</sup> Congress, H.Res. 124 and S.Res. 345 expressed support for the people of Belarus and their democratic aspirations.

U.S. assistance to Belarus focuses on independent media and civil society, human rights protection, and private sector development. The State Department allocated \$10.2 million in FY2021; \$35 million in FY2022; and \$30 million in FY2023 for Belarus assistance. The FY2024 budget request includes \$20 million for Belarus assistance. In December 2023, the State Department convened a strategic dialogue with Belarus's democratic opposition.

The United States has imposed sanctions in response to Belarusian authorities' human rights abuses and support for Russia's invasion of Ukraine (as has the EU). The U.S. Department of the Treasury has imposed sanctions on 118 individuals, 87 entities, and 5 aircraft pursuant to Executive Order (E.O.) 14038 of August 9, 2021, which provides for sanctions on those who engage in human rights abuses, electoral fraud, corruption, and other harmful activities in Belarus, or the earlier E.O. 13405 of June 16, 2006, which provides for sanctions in response to similar activities. The Department of State separately has imposed visa restrictions on a few hundred Belarusian officials. Those subject to U.S. sanctions include Lukashenko, other officials and businesspeople, and major state-owned companies. The United States has imposed export controls on military and dual-use goods and technology to Belarus and has restricted air travel to and from Belarus.

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