Belarus: An Overview

Recent Developments
Beginning in August 2020, popular unrest has posed a serious political challenge to Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko (or Lukashenko). In advance of an early August presidential election, opposition candidate Svetlana Tikhanovskaya (Tsikhanouskaya) mounted an unexpectedly strong campaign to replace Lukashenko, who has ruled Belarus for 26 years. Given Lukashenko’s authoritarian rule, observers did not expect Tikhanovskaya to win the election. However, the official pronouncement that Lukashenko won with a seemingly exaggerated 80% of the vote (to 10% for Tikhanovskaya) led to protests. A brutal and seemingly indiscriminate crackdown has led to larger protests and strikes of government workers on a scale unseen since Belarus became independent in 1991 after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Authorities have released most of the several thousand individuals they detained, but dozens reportedly remain in prison or are missing. Tikhanovskaya and her children have left Belarus for their protection. Tikhanovskaya is part of a new Coordination Council, which is calling for new elections and has been targeted by authorities for prosecution.

The United States, other countries, and international organizations have condemned violence against protestors and detainees and criticized the elections as neither free nor fair. The European Council, composed of the leaders of European Union (EU) member states, further stated that the EU does “not recognize the results” of the election and would impose sanctions against those responsible for “violence, repression and the falsification of election results.”

Belarus’s closest security and economic partner is Russia. Tensions between Belarus and Russia have increased in recent years, with the two countries at odds over energy, debt, trade, and transit. Since Russia’s 2014 invasion of Ukraine, Lukashenko has been wary of Russian intentions. Many observers believe Moscow’s preference is for a weakened Lukashenko to stay in power dependent on Russia. Some have noted Russia’s acceptance of political change in Armenia, another Russian ally, as evidence that Moscow could be satisfied by a political change in Belarus that would not reduce Russian influence.

Politics and the Coronavirus Pandemic
In recent years, observers have debated whether Lukashenko could be encouraged to preside over a “softer” and more development-oriented authoritarian regime. The government released several political prisoners in 2015. In 2016, for the first time in years, opposition candidates were allowed to win 2 of the 110 seats in the lower house of Belarus’s legislature. In 2018, Lukashenko appointed a relatively capable technocrat as prime minister.

Figure 1. Belarus at a Glance

| Population | 9.5 million (2019 est.) |
| Comparative Area | slightly smaller than Kansas |
| Ethnic Composition | 84% Belarusian, 8% Russian, 3% Polish (2009 census) |
| Languages | 70% (Russian), 23% Belarusian (2009 census) |
| GDP/GDP per capita | $631 billion/$5,663 (2019 est.) |
| Top Exports | oil and mineral fuels, fertilizers, motor vehicles and parts, dairy products (2019) |
| Leadership | President Alexander Lukashenko, Prime Minister Roman Golovchenko, Foreign Minister Vladimir Makei |

Sources: World Bank; U.N. Comtrade Database.

Prior to the August 9, 2020, election, however, Lukashenko appeared to be interested in tightening Belarus’s authoritarian system. In November 2019 parliamentary elections, pro-government candidates won all 110 seats. In June 2020, Lukashenko removed the prime minister and other technocratic officials, instead appointing as prime minister an official from the security and defense sector.

Since May 2020, Belarusian authorities have tried—but failed—to suppress an unexpectedly energetic electoral opposition. Leading opposition candidate and political novice Tikhanovskaya (aged 37) entered the race after her spouse, a popular antigovernment video blogger, was denied his own candidate registration while he and dozens of other government critics were in temporary detention. Soon after Tikhanovsky’s release, he again was arrested while collecting signatures in support of his wife’s candidacy; he remains in prison.

Tikhanovskaya became a united opposition candidate after two other prominent individuals were denied registration. Victor Babariko, the longtime head of Belgazprombank, a bank owned by Russian energy company Gazprom, was arrested in June 2020 for alleged financial crimes. The next month, Valery Tsepkalo, a former ambassador to the United States and longtime head of Belarus’s Hi-Tech Park, an information and communications technology (ICT) hub, left the country under threat. Babariko’s campaign manager and Tsepkalo’s wife joined Tikhanovskaya on the campaign trail; the three women attracted tens of thousands to demonstrations. Tikhanovskaya pledged to be a transitional figure who would reintroduce democracy to Belarus.

Many observers attributed the strength of Tikhanovskaya’s campaign to popular disillusionment with Lukashenko’s response to the coronavirus pandemic. Lukashenko, who
says he contracted Coronavirus Disease 2019, repeatedly
derided the kind of public health measures other countries
have taken in response to the pandemic. The government
did not institute stay-at-home orders or other closures.
Many Belarusians, local governments, and other institutions
took preventative measures on their own. As of August 24,
2020, Belarus officially had reported more than 70,000
coronavirus cases and 646 deaths. Many observers believe
the number of deaths is understated; in April 2020,
Lukashenko said that “no one will die of coronavirus in our
country” and that seemingly related deaths were due to
preexisting conditions.

Economy
After independence, the state retained a dominant role in
Belarus’s economy. Some argue that because Belarus
avoided difficult market reforms, it experienced a relatively
milder post-Soviet decline in the 1990s than its neighbors.
Others contend that Belarus merely postponed necessary
reforms. In 2018, the International Monetary Fund stated
that the government’s preference for a “gradual,
incremental approach” to reform may lead to “protracted
vulnerabilities.”

The export of refined oil products, based on subsidized
crude imported from Russia, is a major part of Belarus’s
economy. In 2015-2016, Belarus experienced a recession
amid declining global oil prices and Russia’s own economic
downturn. Economic growth averaged 2.8% a year in 2017-
2018 and slowed to 1.2% in 2019, due to the rising cost of
Russian crude (see below). Belarus’s gross domestic
product (GDP) is expected to decline by at least 4% in 2020
due to the coronavirus pandemic.

In 2019, half of Belarus’s merchandise trade was with
Russia. The EU as a whole was Belarus’s second-largest
trading partner, making up more than 20% of its
merchandise trade. Belarus’s next-largest trading partners
were Ukraine (8%) and China (6%). Less than 1% of
Belarus’s total trade is with the United States. In 2019,
Belarus’s main exports were mineral fuels (mainly refined
oil products, 22%), potassium fertilizers (potash, 11%),
motor vehicles and parts (8%), and dairy products (8%).
Belarus has a developing ICT industry that exports digital
products and services globally, including to U.S.-based
companies.

Relations with Russia
Belarus is a member of the Russia-led Collective Security
Treaty Organization and shares an air defense system with
Russia. Belarus also is a member of the Russia-led Eurasian
Economic Union (EEU) and relies heavily on Russian
subsidized natural gas and oil and Russian (and Chinese)
loans. Belarus and Russia also are members of a bilateral
“union state” that came into effect in 2000. This union is
largely aspirational; a common labor market is the main
characteristic distinguishing it from the economic
integration Belarus and Russia have via EEU membership.

In 2019, Russia began reducing subsidies for Belarus’s
crude oil imports, leading to a decline in Belarus’s revenues
from its own refined oil exports. For months, the Russian
government said compensation for Belarus’s losses would
be possible only as part of an agreement to deepen the
integration of the two countries, something Lukashenko has
sought to avoid.

In late 2019, negotiations on oil prices and increased
integration failed, leading to a temporary halt and then
reduction in Russian oil exports to Belarus. Shipments
returned to their usual volumes in April 2020, reportedly at
lower cost (in part due to a decline in global oil prices). The
dispute led Belarus to seek alternative suppliers to
supplement oil imports from Russia.

Belarus’s relations with Russia were strained in advance of
the August 2020 election when Belarusian authorities
arrested more than 30 individuals alleged to be members
of the Wagner Group, a Russian private military company.
The mercenaries were ostensibly en route to another
country; they were released after the election.

Relations with the United States and EU
U.S. and EU relations with Belarus have been challenging
for years, although all parties periodically have sought to
improve relations. Efforts to achieve a new rapprochement
began in 2015, after the Belarusian government released
several political prisoners. The U.S. government waived
human rights-related sanctions it had imposed on a major
state-owned petrochemical company and eight subsidiaries.
The EU suspended and then lifted most of its human rights-
related sanctions on Belarus.

As of May 2020, the United States retains sanctions on 16
Belarusians, including Lukashenko. Sanctions on Belarus
were introduced in the Belarus Democracy Act of 2004
(P.L. 108-347, 22 U.S.C. §5811) and expanded in 2006 and
2011.

The United States and Belarus have taken steps to
normalize relations. Since 2008, the United States had a
limited diplomatic presence and no ambassador in Belarus,
originally due to restrictions imposed by Belarus. Since
2015, senior U.S. officials have made periodic public visits
to Belarus. In May 2020, President Trump nominated Julie
D. Fisher to be the first U.S. ambassador to Belarus in more
than a decade; her confirmation process is ongoing.

During a September 2019 visit to Minsk, Under Secretary
of State for Political Affairs David Hale said the United
States “welcomes Belarus’ increased cooperation on issues
of non-proliferation, border security, economic cooperation,
and information sharing on matters of shared security.” In
May 2020, Secretary of State Michael Pompeo announced a
shipment of U.S. crude oil to Belarus as part of an effort to
help Belarus improve its energy security.

The United States provided a total of about $51 million in
assistance to Belarus from FY2014 to FY2019. U.S.
assistance to Belarus has been designed to support civil
society, small business development, and vulnerable
populations. EU assistance to Belarus from 2014 to 2020
amounted to more than €170 million (about $200 million).
The European Bank for Reconstruction and Development
and the European Investment Bank also have financed a
variety of development projects in Belarus.
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