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Belarus: An Overview

Since August 2020, authorities in Belarus have engaged in a political, media, and civil society crackdown that human rights monitors have called “unprecedented” and “catastrophic.” More than 37,000 Belarusians reportedly have been detained or imprisoned; more than 900 are considered political prisoners. Several have been killed or have died under suspicious circumstances. In addition to persecuting opposition members and protest participants, authorities have intensified repression against independent media and civil society organizations, journalists, and human rights defenders. The United States, the European Union (EU), and others have called for an end to the crackdown and for the government to hold free and fair presidential elections. The U.S. Congress has passed legislation supporting democracy in Belarus.

The crackdown in Belarus emerged in response to the rise of a mass opposition movement, on a scale unseen since Belarus became independent in 1991 (Belarus previously was part of the Soviet Union). The movement arose out of protests against seemingly widespread electoral fraud in the wake of an August 2020 presidential election, during which opposition candidate Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya mounted an unexpectedly strong campaign against Aleksandr Lukashenko, who has ruled Belarus for more than 27 years.

Political Background

In past years, observers debated whether Lukashenko could be encouraged to preside over a “softer” regime, but political openings in Belarus were modest and short-lived. From May 2020, Belarusian authorities tried but failed to suppress an unexpectedly energetic electoral opposition. Tsikhanouskaya was a political novice who entered the race after her spouse, a popular anti-government video blogger, was denied candidate registration and imprisoned.

Tsikhanouskaya became the united opposition candidate after two prominent potential candidates also were denied registration. One of them, banker Viktor Babaryka, was arrested on charges of bribery and money laundering that observers considered politically motivated. In July 2021, Babaryka was sentenced to 14 years in prison.

On the campaign trail, Tsikhanouskaya pledged to be a transitional figure who would reintroduce democracy to Belarus. Babaryka’s campaign manager, Mariya Kalesnikava, and the spouse of another denied candidate joined her on the campaign. The three women attracted tens of thousands to demonstrations.

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 quickly led to protests. A brutal crackdown that followed led to larger

protests that many observers characterized as “leaderless” and that sometimes attracted hundreds of thousands.

Tsikhanouskaya left Belarus after she was detained and threatened with imprisonment. From neighboring Lithuania, she formed a Coordination Council to help lead the opposition. Kalesnikava was abducted and dispatched to the Belarus-Ukraine border. She was imprisoned after she refused to leave the country. In September 2021, Kalesnikava and another council member, Maksim Znakh, were sentenced to 11 and 10 years in prison, respectively.

The opposition has organized various actions to increase pressure on the government of Belarus and to secure international attention. A network of former law enforcement officials who seek to expose alleged government crimes has supported the opposition. Members of Belarus’s once-burgeoning information and communications technology industry, many of whom have left the country, also have supported the opposition.

Figure 1. Belarus at a Glance



Sources: World Bank; Trade Data Monitor

Forced Air Diversion and Migrant Crisis

In addition to engaging in human rights abuses, Belarusian authorities have taken controversial actions internationally. In May 2021, authorities alleged a bomb threat against Ryanair Flight 4978 (en route from Athens to Vilnius) and required the plane to land in Minsk with a military escort. An EU official referred to the seemingly fake threat as an “act of state piracy.” The evident purpose of the diversion was to capture passenger Raman Pratasevich, cofounder of a popular Belarusian online news channel that had facilitated 2020 postelection protests. Belarusian authorities arrested Pratasevich and his companion, Russian national Sofia Sapega, after the plane landed in Minsk. The United Nations’ International Civil Aviation Organization is investigating the incident. In June 2021, authorities transferred Pratasevich and Sapega to house arrest.

Subsequently, European and U.S. officials accused Belarusian authorities of facilitating migration flows—mainly from Iraq but also from Syria, Afghanistan, and elsewhere—to Belarus and on to Belarus’s borders with neighboring EU member states Lithuania and Poland (and, to a lesser extent, Latvia). Many observers contend Belarusian authorities have taken these actions in response to Western sanctions. Responding to European accusations of “hybrid warfare,” Lukashenko said the EU had “put us in such conditions that we have to react. And we are reacting ... in the best way we can.” Several thousand migrants remain in Belarus, and many reportedly continue to seek to cross the border. For more, see CRS In Focus IF11983, *Migrant Crisis on the Belarus-Poland Border*.

Relations with Russia

Belarus’s closest partner is Russia. Belarus is a member of the Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organization, and the two countries share an air defense system. Belarus also is a member of the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union and relies heavily on Russian subsidized natural gas and oil and on Russian (and Chinese) loans. In addition, Belarus and Russia are members of a largely aspirational bilateral “union state” that formally came into effect in 2000.

Observers suggest that Russian authorities have used the political crisis in Belarus to deepen the two countries’ integration, something Lukashenko previously sought to avoid. The Russian government has provided or promised Belarus with new loans worth more than a billion dollars. Military cooperation between Belarus and Russia has increased, including the establishment of joint military training centers and air border patrols. Russia and Belarus have committed to deepening their economic integration within the “union state” framework.

About half of Belarus’s merchandise trade is with Russia. In 2019, Russia began to reduce subsidies for Belarus’s crude oil imports from Russia, leading to a decline in Belarus’s revenues from its own refined oil exports.

The EU as a whole is Belarus’s second-largest trade partner, with 20% of its merchandise trade in 2020. Less than 1% of Belarus’s total trade is with the United States. Belarus’s main exports are mineral fuels (mainly refined oil products, 14%), potassium fertilizers (potash, 11%), dairy products (9%), and motor vehicles and parts (8%).

Relations with the United States and Europe

The United States, the EU, and others have condemned the crackdown in Belarus, the Ryanair flight diversion, and the manufactured migrant crisis. U.S. officials have conveyed support for the Belarusian people’s “right to free and fair elections” and have called on authorities to “engage in meaningful dialogue with the Coordination Council and Belarusian civil society.” The European Council, composed of the leaders of EU member states, stated the EU does “not recognize the results” of the 2020 election.

The Belarus Democracy, Human Rights, and Sovereignty Act of 2020 (P.L. 116-260, Division FF, Title III) amends 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 President authority to impose sanctions on persons in Belarus for human rights abuses and for undermining democracy. In the 117th Congress, the House of Representatives agreed to H.Res. 124, supporting the people of Belarus and their democratic aspirations.

Since 2008, the United States has had no ambassador and a limited diplomatic presence in Belarus, originally due to restrictions imposed by Minsk. In 2020, the Senate confirmed the appointment of Julie D. Fisher as the first U.S. ambassador to Belarus in more than a decade. Belarusian authorities reportedly did not grant Ambassador Fisher a visa to enter Belarus and, in August 2021, revoked their consent to her appointment. In July 2021, President Biden, Secretary of State Antony Blinken, and Members of Congress met with opposition leader Tsikhanouskaya.

In recent years, U.S. assistance to Belarus has focused on independent media and civil society, private sector development, and vulnerable populations. For FY2021, the State Department allocated \$10.2 million in aid to Belarus. The President’s FY2022 State and Foreign Operations budget request includes \$15 million “to support the democratic aspirations of the Belarusian people.”

U.S. and EU Sanctions

The United States and the EU have imposed sanctions in response to Belarusian authorities’ human rights abuses and international violations. As of December 9, 2021, the U.S. Department of the Treasury had imposed sanctions on 84 individuals, 51 entities, and 3 aircraft pursuant to Executive Order (E.O.) 14038 of August 9, 2021, which established sanctions on those who engage in human rights abuses, electoral fraud, corruption, and other harmful activities in Belarus, or E.O. 13405 of June 16, 2006, which established sanctions in response to similar activities. The EU has imposed sanctions on 183 individuals and 26 entities.

Individuals and entities subject to U.S. sanctions include Lukashenko, who already was subject to sanctions prior to 2020; other officials and businesspeople; and state-owned companies, including major petrochemical, potash (fertilizer), and tobacco product companies. The State Department has imposed visa restrictions on several dozen other individuals, as well. The EU has imposed sectoral sanctions that, among other restrictions, prohibit certain kinds of trade in petroleum products and potash. The United States, the EU and other European states have imposed restrictions on air travel to and from Belarus.

Among other responses, Belarusian authorities have reduced the number of permitted staff at the U.S. Embassy in Belarus, revoked permission for the U.S. Agency for International Development to work in Belarus, suspended participation in the EU’s Eastern Partnership program, and imposed sanctions on some EU and U.S. food imports.

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