



Freedom in the World - Belarus (2011)

Capital: Minsk

Population:
9,662,000

Political Rights Score: 7 *

Civil Liberties Score: 6 *

Status: Not Free

Overview

Alyaksandr Lukashenka won a fourth term as president in a December 2010 election that was neither free nor fair. Although the nine opposition candidates enjoyed some media access during the campaign, the government stacked local electoral commissions to manipulate the ballot count. In a post-election crackdown, Lukashenka arrested seven of the former candidates and launched a series of repressions that lasted through the end of the year. In September, the controversial death of internet news portal founder Aleh Byabenin added to existing intimidation of independent journalists, though his site, Charter97.org, continued to post reports that were critical of the regime.

Belarus declared independence in 1991, ending centuries of rule by Poland, Russia, and the Soviet Union. In 1994, voters made Alyaksandr Lukashenka, a member of parliament with close links to the security services, Belarus's first post-Soviet president. He pursued reunification with Russia and subordinated the government, legislature, and courts to his political whims while denying citizens basic rights and liberties. A widely criticized 1996 referendum approved constitutional amendments that extended Lukashenka's term through 2001, broadened presidential powers, and created a new bicameral parliament (the National Assembly). In October 2000, Belarus held deeply flawed lower house elections in which only three opposition candidates won seats.

Lukashenka won a second term through disputed elections in September 2001, amid accusations by former security officials that the president was directing a death squad aimed at silencing his opponents. Four politicians and journalists who had been critical of the regime disappeared during 1999 and 2000.

Not a single opposition candidate won a seat in 2004 parliamentary elections, and voters ostensibly endorsed a parallel referendum proposal to allow Lukashenka to run again in 2006. As with previous votes, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) declared that the parliamentary elections fell "significantly short" of Belarus's commitments.

The March 2006 presidential election, in which Lukashenka won a third term, did not meet democratic standards, according to the OSCE. The poll brought 10,000 to 15,000 activists to Minsk's October Square on election day. However, the government detained and beat many activists, and opposition activity dwindled after the protests, as the government typically jailed opposition leaders and intimidated their rank-and-file supporters with fees and warnings. Alyaksandr Kazulin, one of three opposition candidates, was sentenced to five and a half years in prison for protesting the flawed election and the subsequent crackdown.

To bolster his international standing, Lukashenka released all political prisoners identified by the European Union (EU) and the United States by August 2008, including Kazulin. However, no opposition candidates won seats in the September 2008 parliamentary elections, and the authorities reportedly arrested a new batch of political prisoners in a February 2009 crackdown.

On September 3, 2010, Aleh Byabenin, founder of the opposition news website Charter97.org, was found hanged in his country house. Investigators initially claimed the death was a suicide, but subsequently admitted that Byabenin could have been murdered. Although an OSCE report supported the suicide hypothesis, opposition figures continued to suspect foul play.

Later in September, the parliament moved up Belarus's presidential election, which had been expected in early 2011, to December 19, just before Russia's anticipated hike in energy prices at year's end. The opposition failed to unite behind a single candidate after leading opposition figure Alyaksandr Milinkevich decided not to renew his 2006 candidacy, arguing that the polling would not be fair. Ultimately nine opposition figures ran; while they were given some media access during the campaign, 90 percent of television news coverage was devoted to Lukashenka.

On the eve of the election, police dispersed a crowd of more than 10,000 people who had gathered in downtown Minsk to protest the vote. More than 600 demonstrators were arrested, including seven opposition candidates who faced serious charges for organizing mass disorder: Ales Mikhalevich, Uladzimer Nyaklyaeu, Andrey Sannikau, Mikalay Statkevich, Vital Rymasheuski, Ryhor Kastusyou, and Dzmitry Vus. Mikhalevich, Nyaklyaeu, Sannikau, and Statkevich remained in custody at year's end, as did at least 20 journalists. Nyaklyaeu, sponsor of the Tell the Truth campaign, which encouraged Belarusian citizens to speak out about social problems and document false statements by government officials, and Sannikau, a co-founder of Charter97.org, were beaten before their arrests. According to Amnesty International, Sannikau was tortured while in detention.

The Central Election Commission, which was led by a Lukashenka ally, declared Lukashenka the winner with more than 79 percent of the vote. Local electoral commissions were also heavily skewed in favor of the incumbent, with only 0.7 percent of the members—a total of 14 individuals—representing opposition candidates. Official turnout was over 90 percent. The opposition charged that the vote totals were falsified, and the OSCE declared that the elections did not meet Belarus' international commitments. Shortly thereafter, Belarus refused to extend the OSCE mandate in the country, closing the office that had opened in 1998.

Relations with Russia suffered in 2010 over ongoing energy-price disputes, Lukashenka's failure to recognize the independence of two Russian-backed territories in Georgia, and his decision to provide asylum to ousted Kyrgyzstan president Kurmanbek Bakiyev in April. By year's end, Russia had resumed some economic support to Belarus and backed Lukashenka's crackdown on the opposition.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties

Belarus is not an electoral democracy. Serious and widespread irregularities have marred all recent elections, including the December 2010 presidential poll. 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. 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 president is elected for five-year terms, and there are no term limits.

Opposition parties have no representation in the National Assembly, while pro-presidential parties serve only superficial functions. Young members of opposition parties report being deliberately drafted into the military; soldiers are banned from party membership. Amendments to the electoral law adopted in 2009 give the parties more opportunities to campaign but do not provide for a transparent vote count. Local elections in April 2010 produced unusually large returns for proregime candidates. Approximately 360 opposition candidates competed for the 21,000 seats, but many withdrew, claiming that the authorities obstructed their campaigns.

Corruption is fed by the state's dominance of the economy and the overall lack of transparency and accountability in government. Belarus was ranked 127 out of 178 countries surveyed in Transparency International's 2010 Corruption Perceptions Index. Svyatlana Baykova, a senior prosecutor, was arrested in March 2010 while investigating corruption among high-level KGB officials.

President Alyaksandr Lukashenka 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. Belarusian national television is completely under the control of the state and does not present alternative and 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 through physical force and revocation of journalists' credentials. The government is exerting greater control over the internet. According to the 2008 media law, internet outlets are now subject to the same restrictions as traditional media. The government owns the country's sole internet-service provider. A presidential decree that took effect in June 2010 requires internet cafe owners to identify users and track their activities. Despite the disputed death of founder Aleh Byabenin in September, the Charter97.org news site continued to publish independent analyses. As Lukashenka's relations with Russia deteriorated during the year, the government banned critical Russian-produced documentaries such as NTV's *Belarusian Godfather*, and even took Russian television networks off the air—ostensibly for technical reasons—in October.

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. The government in 2003 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, according to the U.S. State Department. The Minsk-based New Life Evangelical Christian Church has faced official efforts to seize its land since 2005.

Academic freedom is subject to intense state ideological pressures, and institutions that use a liberal curriculum, promote national consciousness, 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. Wiretapping by state security agencies limits the right to privacy.

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.

Freedom of association is severely restricted. More than a hundred of the most activenongovernmental organizations (NGOs) were forced to close down between 2003 and 2005, and participation in an unregistered or liquidated political party or organization was criminalized in December 2005. As a result, most human rights activists operating in the country face potential jail terms ranging from six months to two years. 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 December 2008 the government registered the Movement for Freedom, an NGO led by former presidential candidate Alyaksandr Milinkevich, but registration remains selective, with other groups including the Young Front and the Christian Democratic Party remaining unregistered. Independent trade unions face harassment, and their leaders are frequently fired and prosecuted for peaceful protests. Over 90 percent of workers have fixed-term contracts, meaning they can be arbitrarily dismissed when the contract expires.

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 inadequate protection during detention in cases involving leaders of the democratic opposition, and their trials are frequently held in secret.

An internal passport system limits freedom of movement and choice of residence. Citizens no longer need a travel permit before going abroad, but the government has created a database that will include nearly 100,000 people who cannot leave the country. The country's command economy severely limits economic freedom.

A family in Hrodna faced police questioning after protesting the local school system's refusal to provide kindergarten instruction in Belarusian instead of Russian in September 2010. Both are

official state languages, but Russian is dominant. Ethnic Poles and Roma often face discrimination. In February, the police seized the property of the unofficial Union of Poles in Belarus and arrested activists.

Women are not specifically targeted for discrimination, but there are significant discrepancies in income between men and women, and women are poorly represented in leading government positions. As a result of extreme poverty, many women have become victims of the international sex trade.

**Countries are ranked on a scale of 1-7, with 1 representing the highest level of freedom and 7 representing the lowest level of freedom. Click [here](#) for a full explanation of Freedom in the World methodology.*