

Belarus

Political Rights: 7 ↓
Civil Liberties: 6
Status: Not Free

Ratings Change: Belarus's political rights rating declined from 6 to 7 due to massive falsifications in the country's October parliamentary election and referendum on the presidency and an unrelenting campaign against independent media, political parties, and civic groups.

Overview:

Belarus saw the further consolidation of authoritarian rule under the personal dictatorship of President Alyaksandr Lukashenka in 2004. The October legislative elections and a parallel national referendum that lifted the constitution's two-term restriction on the presidency saw voter irregularities, tight state control of the mass media in favor of the government candidates and the government's referendum position, and intense pressure on opposition and civic activists. The year also witnessed a widespread, systematic campaign of state-directed legal pressures on newspapers, punishments meted out to opposition civic leaders and demonstrators, the disbanding of human rights and civic organizations, and efforts at total state control over independent schools.

Belarus declared independence in 1991, ending centuries of foreign control by Lithuania, Poland, Russia, and, ultimately, the Soviet Union. Stanislau Shushkevich, a reform-minded leader, served as head of state from 1991 to 1994. That year, voters made Lukashenka, a member of parliament with close links to the country's security services, the first post-Soviet president. Lukashenka has pursued efforts at reunification with Russia and subordinated the government, legislature, and courts to his political whims while denying citizens basic rights and liberties.

In a 1996 referendum, Belarusian citizens backed constitutional amendments that extended Lukashenka's term through 2001, broadened presidential powers, and created a new bicameral parliament. When the president ignored a court ruling that the referendum was nonbinding, Prime Minister Mikhail Chyhir resigned in protest.

In October 2000, Belarus held deeply flawed elections to the Chamber of Representatives, parliament's lower house. State media coverage of the campaign was limited and biased, and approximately half of all opposition candidates were denied registration. Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) reported irregularities such as ballot-box stuffing and tampering with voter registration lists. Seven opposition parties boycotted the elections when the government failed to ensure a fair campaign and to give parliament more substantial duties. Some opposition candidates participated in the election, but only three were elected.

Lukashenka won a controversial reelection in September 2001 amid accusations from former security service officials that the president was directing a government-sponsored death squad aimed at silencing his opponents. Formally, citizens had three presidential candidates from whom to choose. However, the outcome was predetermined and Western observers judged the election to be neither free nor fair. During the campaign, the government and its supporters harassed would-be candidates and independent media outlets, and state television was used as an instrument for propaganda on behalf of Lukashenka. On election day, Lukashenka declared himself the victor with 78 percent of the vote over opposition candidate Vladimir Goncharik (12

percent). However, independent nongovernmental exit polls showed that Lukashenka had received 47 percent of the vote and Goncharik 41 percent—an outcome that by law should have forced a second round. While opposition parties and civil society were active in the election process, by 2002, Lukashenka had launched a campaign of political retribution against those who opposed him during the presidential campaign.

In 2004, the Lukashenka regime intensified its policy of systematic legal persecution and physical intimidation of its democratic opponents. Courts banned or liquidated NGOs and imposed prohibitive fines against independent media, and the Information Ministry ordered the suspensions of independent newspapers critical of the Lukashenka government. Other government actions included harassment of independent civic activists and arrests of scores of peaceful protestors. On April 26, the former minister of foreign economic affairs and member of parliament Mikhail Marynich was arrested and later sentenced to five years' imprisonment on trumped-up charges arising from his opposition activities. On June 9, a Minsk court sentenced a pregnant opposition activist, Aksana Novikava, to two and a half years of deprivation of freedom for "defamation of the President of the Republic of Belarus" arising from her distribution of leaflets. In October, two opposition leaders, Valery Levaneuski and Alyaksandr Vasilyew, were sentenced to two years in a work colony on charges of "public slander" against Lukashenka.

Parliamentary elections and a parallel referendum on the presidency were held in October 2004. The Central Election Commission claimed 89.73 percent of voters took part in the plebiscite and some 86 percent of them voted in favor of the government's proposal that would allow President Alyaksandr Lukashenka to run for a third term in 2006. According to the announced election results, not a single candidate fielded by opposition parties entered the parliament.

An OSCE monitoring effort that deployed 270 international observers from 38 countries in Belarus declared on October 17 that the parliamentary elections fell "significantly short" of Belarus's OSCE commitments. "We were concerned by police raids in campaign offices, the detention of a candidate, campaign workers and domestic observers, as well as numerous reports of coercion on certain groups, particularly students, to vote," OSCE Parliamentary Assembly vice president Tone Tinsgaard observed. An NGO called Partnership, which fielded 3,500 monitors for the parliamentary elections and presidential referendum, declared the election marred by massive falsification and widespread violations of the electoral law. Despite efforts by NGOs, the vote count at virtually all polling stations in the country was conducted in the absence of independent monitors. An exit poll conducted by the Gallup Organization/Baltic Surveys that collected data during the weeklong voting process found that just 48.4 percent of all eligible voters in the country said yes to the referendum as compared with the government results that showed more than 77 percent of eligible voters supporting the referendum question. Thus, according to independent poll data, the referendum actually failed to amend the Belarusian constitution or give Lukashenka the right to run for reelection, as claimed by Belarus authorities.

According to the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, the country's private sector share of gross national income is the lowest of all the post-Communist countries. World Bank data also show that more than a quarter of the population lives below the national poverty line.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties:

Despite a constitutional guarantee of universal, equal, and direct suffrage, citizens of Belarus cannot change their government democratically. The 2001 presidential vote, in which Lukashenka was declared to have been reelected by a wide majority, was neither free nor fair. Independent exit polls found the results were significantly altered, and domestic supporters of opposition candidate Vladimir Goncharik accused the government of massively falsifying the results. The OSCE report on the election indicated it was conducted in a “manner that actively sought to exclude candidates representing a diversity of interests.” The October 2004 parliamentary elections and a parallel referendum on the presidency were marred by serious and widespread irregularities.

Belarus was ranked 74 out of 146 countries surveyed in the 2004 Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index.

The Lukashenka regime systematically curtails press freedom. State media are subordinated to the president, and harassment and censorship of independent media are routine. Libel is both a civil and a criminal offense. The State Press Committee can issue warnings to publishers for unauthorized activities such as changing a publication's title or distributing copies abroad. It also can arbitrarily shut down publications without a court order. The country's Information Ministry has promulgated regulations that required the heads of all FM radio stations to provide a complete daily printout of news bulletins and daily playlists to ensure monitoring of content. Russian television is occasionally subject to suspensions, and some Russian newscasts that are rebroadcast in Belarus are censored. Belarusian national television is completely under the control and influence of the state and does not provide coverage of alternative and opposition views.

Harassment and legal attacks against independent newspapers and broadcast media were widespread in 2004. Journalists, including the chief editor of *Narodnaya Volya*, were regularly fined for their reporting. On February 5, the Information Ministry suspended the independent newspaper *Zgoda* for one month. On June 3, the ministry suspended the newspaper *Rabochaya Solidarnasts* for three months on the technicality that it failed to report its new address. In October, the journalist Veronika Cherkasova of the opposition newspaper *Solidarnasts* was murdered in Minsk in what opposition groups regard as a possible political killing.

Internet sites within the country are under the control of the government's State Center on Information Security, which is part of the Security Council of Belarus. Independent information is posted by some opposition groups and journalists in Belarus and abroad. The government at times censors and blocks independent Web sites, particularly during preelection periods. In February, an opposition Web site—www.Charter97.org—accused state authorities of a wave of hacker attacks that flooded the site with requests and prevented normal access. The impact of independent Internet sites is limited. According to the International Telecommunications Union, fewer than 10 percent of the population has some access to the Internet, while other estimates suggest that only 2 percent of the population enjoy regular Internet access.

Despite constitutional guarantees that “all religions and faiths shall be equal before the law,” government decrees and registration requirements have increasingly restricted the life and work of religious groups. Amendments in 2002 to the Law on Religions provide for government censorship of religious publications and prevent foreign citizens from leading religious groups. The amendments also place strict limitations on religious groups that have been active in Belarus for fewer than 20 years. The government pressures and intimidates members of the independent Autocephalous Orthodox Christian Church, harasses Hindus for public meditation, and represses Baptists for singing hymns in public. In 2004, the Union of Evangelical Christian Faiths reported

a growing number of actions by government authorities that prevented students from attending evangelical religious services. In February 2004, authorities shut down the International Institute for Humanities, the only higher education institution in the country that offered Jewish studies.

Academic freedoms are subject to intense state ideological pressures. In 2003, the entire staff of the Modern Studies Institute's journalism faculty, some of them active in an independent journalists' association, were dismissed after criticism leveled at them by a presidential commission and the Ministry of Education. The leader of the country's most highly regarded secondary school, the National State Humanities Lyceum, was dismissed, and a Lukashenka loyalist was appointed in his place; the move prompted a walkout by students and faculty. In 2004, state pressure to implement curriculum reform that reduced academic freedom resulted in an end to Jewish studies in state institutions. The year also saw the establishment of a new higher education course based on Lukashenka "ideas." Entitled "Foundations of Ideology," it is to be mandatory for students in all of Belarus' colleges and universities. Textbooks are being rewritten under political pressure from the authorities.

Freedom of association is severely restricted. In 2004, independent civic groups were subject to surveillance by the country's security service, the KGB. Leaders of the Strike Committee of Entrepreneurs were sentenced to long terms of imprisonment in 2004. Among the organizations whose activists and officials were harassed and impeded were the youth group Zubr, the Batskaushchyna Cultural and Educational Foundation, the Leu Sapaha Foundation, the Belarusian Popular Front, and the Viasna Human Rights Center. The Belarus Helsinki Committee, a human rights group, was ordered to pay \$176,000 in back taxes in a step regarded as an effort to shut down and cripple the monitoring organization, although a court later struck down the decision. Independent trade unions are subject to harassment and their leaders are frequently arrested and prosecuted for peaceful protests and dismissed from employment. In November, a 200-page report, drawn up by an International Labor Organization commission, accused Belarus' authorities of interference in the activities of trade unions.

The Lukashenka government limits freedom of assembly by groups independent of and critical of his regime. Protests and rallies require authorization from local authorities, who can arbitrarily withhold or revoke permission. When public demonstrations do occur, police typically break them up and arrest participants.

Although the country's constitution calls for judicial independence, courts are subject to heavy government influence. During the year, numerous independent civic leaders, opposition political activists, independent journalists, and other persons who oppose government policies experienced arbitrary persecution, arrest, and imprisonment. 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.

An internal passport system, required for domestic travel and securing permanent housing, controls freedom of movement and choice of residence. Wiretapping by state security agencies limits the right to privacy. The country's command economy severely limits economic freedom.

Women are not specifically targeted for discrimination, but there are significant discrepancies in incomes 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-trafficking trade.