

Belarus

Population: 9,800,000

GNI/capita: \$1,600

Life Expectancy: 69

Religious Groups: Eastern Orthodox (80 percent), other (20 percent)

Ethnic Groups: Byelorussian (81.2 percent), Russian (11.4 percent), Polish, Ukrainian, and other (7.4 percent)

Capital: Minsk

Political Rights: 7

Civil Liberties: 6

Status: Not Free

Ratings Timeline (Political Rights, Civil Liberties, Status)

Year Under Review	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005
Rating	6,6,NF	7,6,NF	7,6,NF							

Overview:

The dictatorial rule of Belarus' President Alyaksandr Lukashenka grew increasingly hardline in 2005. After the adoption of an October 2004 constitutional referendum, which removed term limits for the presidency, the government moved to eradicate the remaining spheres of political and social autonomy that could potentially challenge Lukashenka's aspirations for unlimited and lifelong rule. The Orange Revolution in neighboring Ukraine raised concerns within the centers of power in Minsk about the spread of democratization into Belarus in the run-up to the 2006 presidential elections. As a result, the authorities stepped up pressure against opposition parties, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), independent media outlets, and educational establishments.

Belarus declared independence in 1991, ending centuries of foreign control by 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 Alyaksandr 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. A controversial 1996 referendum, highly criticized by domestic monitors and the international community, adopted constitutional amendments that extended Lukashenka's term through 2001, broadened presidential powers, and created a new bicameral parliament (National Assembly).

In October 2000, Belarus held deeply flawed elections to the House 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 give parliament more substantial duties. Although some opposition candidates participated in the election, 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 75 percent of the vote over opposition candidate Uladzimir Hancharyk (15 percent). However, independent nongovernmental exit polls showed that Lukashenka had received 47 percent of the vote and Hancharyk 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 had opposed him during the presidential campaign.

Legislative 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 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 National Assembly. A monitoring effort by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) declared on October 17, 2004, that the parliamentary elections fell "significantly short" of Belarus's OSCE commitments. 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, which 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 to give Lukashenka the right to run for reelection, as claimed by Belarus authorities.

Ukraine's Orange Revolution, unfolding only five weeks after the constitutional referendum in Belarus, provoked a reaction against possible "acts of banditry"—Lukashenka's own definition of electoral revolutions—in Belarus in the run-up to 2006 presidential election. Lukashenka boosted the law enforcement agencies in 2005 and purged their ranks of potential dissenters. Viktor Sheiman, Lukashenka's new chief of staff appointed in 2004, stated that his goal was to "consolidate the power systems, unify the command structure, and avoid situations such as those that had occurred south of the border." The amendments to the Law on Interior Troops introduced in February 2005 allowed for the discretionary use of firearms against protesters on orders from the president. The introduction of new police tactics to disperse demonstrations were an indication that the country's security forces had been specifically trained to stop street protests from taking place.

More opposition figures were effectively barred from politics in throughout the year. Mikhail Marynich, former government minister and a potential contender for presidency, was sentenced to five years in jail in December 2004 on charges of stealing computers from his own NGO. Siarhiey Skrabets, leader of the opposition in the previous parliament, was arrested in May on corruption charges. Mikalaj Statkievich, chairman of the Belarusian Social-Democrat Party

Narodnaya Gromada (BSDP NG) and Pavel Seviarynec, leader of the Young Front movement, were both sentenced to two years of forced labor for organizing antireferendum protests in October 2004.

The legal space in which opposition parties in Belarus operate continued to shrink steadily during 2005. Housing regulations provided the regime with a pretext for closing down local branches of leading opposition parties registered at residential apartments. New regulations impose severe punishments on those working for, or acting on behalf of, unregistered political parties, NGOs, coalitions, or civic initiatives.

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 that the results were significantly altered, and domestic supporters of opposition candidate Uladzimir Hancharyk accused the government of massively falsifying the results. An OSCE report indicated that the election was conducted in a "manner that actively sought to exclude candidates representing a diversity of interests." The October 2004 legislative elections and a parallel referendum on the presidency were marred by serious and widespread irregularities.

The National Assembly of the Republic of Belarus is composed of two houses. The 110 members of the House of Representatives are popularly elected for four years on the basis of single mandate constituencies. The Council of the Republic consists of 64 members, of whom 56 are elected by regional councils and eight are appointed by the president. The constitution vests most power with 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 the laws. The National Assembly serves largely as a rubber-stamp body.

Due to the concentration of power in the hands of the president, parties play a negligible role in the political process. Opposition parties have been marginalized by the presidency, whereas pro-presidential parties generally exist for window-dressing. The most prominent parties include the Belarusian Popular Front, the liberal-leaning United Civil Party, and the Belarusian Party of Communists.

Belarus was ranked 107 out of 159 countries surveyed in Transparency International's 2005 Corruption Perceptions Index due to the increasing bureaucratization of the economy and the overall lack of transparency in the government.

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. Belarusian national television is completely under the control and influence of the state and does not provide coverage of alternative and opposition views. The State Press Committee issues warnings to publishers for unauthorized activities such as distributing copies abroad or reporting on unregistered organizations. It also can arbitrarily shut down publications without a court order. The news bulletins and daily playlists of all FM

radio stations are censored. Belarusian-language rock and folk groups that openly sympathize with the opposition have been banned from airwaves. The state-run press distribution monopoly refused in November to continue distribution of most of the country's independent newspapers.

Harassment and legal attacks against independent newspapers and broadcast media were widespread in 2005. A presidential decree banned private media from having the words "Belarusian" and "National" in their titles, which affected three prominent independent newspapers. A libel suit filed against the largest independent daily, *Narodnaja Volja*, by a pro-regime member of parliament resulted in a fine of more than \$50,000, paid mostly through individual donations. Journalists of the Polish-language press who reported on the government dismissal of the independent leadership of the Belarusian Union of Poles were routinely arrested and briefly imprisoned for covering and participating in peaceful protests.

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. The impact of independent internet sites is limited. According to the International Telecommunications Union, less than 10 percent of the population have some access to the internet, while other estimates suggest that only 2 percent of the population enjoy regular internet access. Nevertheless, the impact of the internet is gradually expanding, which prompts censorship and restriction of access to undesired sites at universities and government offices. In August, security services attacked producers of the independent site *Third Way*, which published political cartoons criticizing Lukashenka, confiscated their equipment and passports, and launched criminal proceedings for defaming the president.

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 Belarusian Autocephalous Orthodox Church, harasses Hindus for public meditation, and represses Baptists for singing hymns in public. Three Protestant parishes were liquidated in Belarus in August-September 2005; a pastor was fined for leading a prayer for a de-registered parish.

Academic freedom is subject to intense state ideological pressures, with institutions that use a Western-style curriculum, promote national consciousness, or are simply suspected of disloyalty being subject to harassment and liquidation. The most highly regarded secondary school, the National State Humanities Lyceum, was closed down in 2003. In 2004, the leading private institution of higher learning, the European Humanities University, was shut down; it relocated to Lithuania. State pressure to implement curriculum reform that reduced academic freedom resulted in an end to Jewish studies in state institutions. Official regulations stipulate the immediate dismissal and revocation of degrees to students and professors who join opposition protests. Students who study abroad without permission from the Ministry of Education face expulsion from their home universities. The Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies, which administered exit polls and postelection surveys after the 2004 parliamentary elections and the referendum, was closed down by a court ruling.

Freedom of association is severely restricted. More than a hundred of the most active NGOs critical of the authorities were liquidated or forced to close down from 2003 through 2005. In November 2005, the government initiated the adoption of amendments to the Criminal

Code that would penalize activities of de-registered NGOs by up to three years in prison. The government dismissed in 2005 the independent leadership of the Belarusian Union of Poles and pressed for the election of loyalists, prompting domestic and international protests. Housing rules, which make it impossible for opposition parties and NGOs to rent inexpensive office space, became a pretext for liquidating hundreds of local chapters of opposition parties in June. New regulations introduced in August ban foreign assistance to NGOs, parties, and individuals who promote “meddling into the internal affairs” of Belarus from abroad. Independent trade unions are subject to harassment, and their leaders are frequently arrested and prosecuted for peaceful protests and dismissed from employment. Leaders of the union Perspective, which organized strikes of small entrepreneurs (joined by nearly 100,000 individuals) to protest new taxes in February and March, were arrested and given short sentences.

The Lukashenka government limits freedom of assembly by groups independent of and critical of the president’s 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 significant government influence. During the year, numerous independent civic leaders, opposition political activists, independent journalists, and others 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, in which a passport is required for domestic travel and to secure permanent housing, limits freedom of movement and choice of residence. Citizens traveling abroad have to reapply for a permission stamp in their passport every five years. In September, the Constitutional Court bowed to government pressure and renounced an earlier decision to outlaw the stamp system. 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 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-trafficking trade.