

Belarus

by Andrei Kazakevich

Capital: Minsk
Population: 9.51 million
GNI/capita, PPP: US\$17,440

Source: World Bank *World Development Indicators*.

	Nations in Transit Ratings and Averaged Scores									
	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
National Democratic Governance	7.00	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.50
Electoral Process	7.00	6.75	6.75	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	6.75	6.75
Civil Society	6.50	6.25	6.00	6.00	6.25	6.50	6.50	6.50	6.25	6.25
Independent Media	6.75	6.75	6.50	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75
Local Democratic Governance	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75
Judicial Framework and Independence	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00
Corruption	6.25	6.00	6.00	6.00	6.25	6.25	6.25	6.25	6.25	6.25
Democracy Score	6.71	6.57	6.50	6.57	6.68	6.71	6.71	6.71	6.64	6.61

NOTE: The ratings reflect the consensus of Freedom House, its academic advisers, and the author(s) of this report. If consensus cannot be reached, Freedom House is responsible for the final ratings. The ratings are based on a scale of 1 to 7, with 1 representing the highest level of democratic progress and 7 the lowest. The Democracy Score is an average of ratings for the categories tracked in a given year. The opinions expressed in this report are those of the author(s).

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

According to the constitution, the Republic of Belarus is a democratic social state that guarantees respect for political rights and freedoms, as well as the separation of powers. However, after changes to the document in 1996 and 2004, the principle of separation of powers is no longer respected. The president not only has full executive power, but also a significant part of the legislative power.

Although the political opposition operates under adverse conditions and periodically faces administrative pressure or repression, the general political climate improved somewhat in the past two years. In 2016, the major political forces decided to take part in the September parliamentary elections, and support for an opposition boycott was limited. Most opposition groups revised their tactics of street protests, and demonstrations organized by some politicians did not attract many participants.

The results of the elections differed from previous balloting in a number of ways. For the first time since 2000, opposition candidates—Hanna Kanapatskaya of the United Civil Party and independent civil society activist Alena Anisim of the Belarusian Language Society—became members of parliament. Furthermore, while the 110-seat parliament remained mostly nonpartisan, the number of political party representatives increased to 16, the highest figure since the 1995 elections. The 2016 elections also marked the first time since 2000 that the average age of the deputies decreased, the first time that there were no constituencies contested by just one candidate, and the first time since 2000 that some competition between progovernment candidates was apparent. The changes represented a step toward political pluralism, but they were seen as the planned result of a shift in government priorities, and it was unclear whether they would have any noticeable political consequences.

There were no significant improvements to the electoral process itself in 2016. In addition to unequal conditions for candidates and state dominance of the media, there was a crucial lack of transparency that cast doubt on the official results. International and local monitoring found that the legal framework, media coverage, electoral commissions, and counting and tabulation procedures were all marred by irregularities and opacity.

Economic conditions in the country remain difficult. After a 3.9 percent contraction in gross domestic product in 2015, the decline in 2016 eased to 2.6 percent. The economy was expected to stagnate rather than return to growth in 2017. The inflation rate was relatively moderate by Belarusian standards, reaching 11.8 percent in 2016. Unemployment increased, although official statistics did not reflect this. The situation is complicated by the reduction of labor force outflow to Russia. Economic difficulties led to a significant increase in social tension and a drop in the authorities' popularity, though no escalation in antigovernment protests or political activity had materialized by year's end.

Foreign policy in the past two years has been characterized by a significant improvement in relations with the European Union (EU) and the United States. The 2015 presidential election was held with no evident violence. Belarusian authorities also released political prisoners and made some other minor changes in public life. In February 2016, hoping that its engagement policy would contribute to improving the political situation in the country and encourage efforts by Minsk to distance itself from Russian foreign policy, the EU lifted sanctions against Belarusian officials and businessmen. The level and intensity of contacts between Belarus and the EU have increased significantly. Relations with the United States have also greatly improved, and consultations on the return of a U.S. ambassador to Belarus have begun.

Despite efforts to diversify its foreign policy and economic cooperation, Belarus is still heavily dependent on Russia. Russia remains the country's top trading partner and a major market for Belarusian products; even Belarusian exports to the EU are mainly composed of processed Russian oil. Belarus is a member of Eurasian integration projects like the Eurasian Economic Union, despite criticism of them from government figures including President Alyaksandr Lukashenka and the lack of practical benefits from membership. At the same time, Belarus refused to accept a Russian military base on its territory in 2015, and while maintaining routine cooperation in the military sphere, did not participate in Russia's provocative military initiatives in the region in 2016. Relations between Russia and Belarus became

increasingly strained during the year due to oil, gas, and other trade disputes; disinformation campaigns against Belarusian authorities in Russian media; a policy in Minsk of strengthening Belarusian identity that irritated certain political circles in Russia; security issues; and contradictions in foreign policy.

There were no significant shifts in the government and other executive bodies for much of 2016, though important rearrangements in the presidential administration were announced in December. The head of the administration, Alyaksandr Kosinets, and two deputies, Kanstantsin Martynetski and Ihar Buzowski, were sacked, and a new head (Natallya Kachanova) and deputy (Maksim Ryzhankow) were appointed. The shakeup could mean a reduction in the head of the administration's influence in Belarusian politics. Meanwhile, the government's discussion of the necessity of reforms, especially in the economy, increased, though no major changes were put forward. Lukashenka emphasized several times during the year that changes should be moderate, and that the proper reforms were more about improving or upgrading rather than fundamentally revising the current system.

Score Changes:

- **National Democratic Governance rating improved from 6.75 to 6.50** due to a general improvement in the political climate, including a reduction in police violence against government opponents surrounding the parliamentary elections, and the formation of a more politically diverse legislature, with opposition representatives winning seats for the first time since 2000.

As a result, Belarus's Democracy Score improved from 6.64 to 6.61.

Outlook for 2017: The next parliamentary and presidential elections are not due until 2020, and the long interim period opens possibilities for economic and constitutional reforms. However, the government has no significant incentives to improve democracy and protection of human rights, as its relationship with the United States and the EU has already been partially normalized. These normalized relations also provide a deterrent to any new repressive policies. Nevertheless, if Belarusian authorities feel a threat to internal stability (as a result of the deteriorating economic situation, the growth of protest sentiments, etc.), then additional measures of political control and political rights restrictions will be applied. The greatest challenges in such a scenario would be a deepening of the economic crisis and closer Russian involvement in Belarusian politics, both factors that could trigger a rollback in political development. Taking into account negative economic trends and growing social tensions, such developments are quite possible. The positive tendencies of 2015 and 2016 will be maintained only if there are no significant challenges to political system and control.

MAIN REPORT

National Democratic Governance

2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
7.00	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.50

- According to the 1994 constitution, the Republic of Belarus is a democratic social state that guarantees respect for political rights and freedoms, as well as the separation of powers.¹ However, after changes to the document in 1996 and 2004, the principle of separation of powers is not respected.² The president not only has full executive power, but also a significant part of the legislative power. In particular, the president can issue decrees on his own initiative that have greater legal force than ordinary legislation.³ Moreover, the president has virtually unlimited powers in the appointment of judges and reorganizing courts.
- Executive bodies completely dominate political and social life. This applies to both national and local politics. Since the beginning of the 1990s and especially after 1996, Belarus has encouraged a no-party political system. Political parties and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) are granted no important role in policymaking.⁴
- The political opposition operates under adverse conditions, periodically facing administrative pressure and, in some cases, criminal prosecution. However, the general political climate improved somewhat in 2015 and 2016.⁵ In 2016, the major political forces decided to take part in the September parliamentary elections; support for a boycott was limited.⁶ Most of the opposition forces revised their tactics of street protests. The demonstrations organized by Mikalay Statkevich and some other politicians did not attract many participants.⁷
- Despite the fact that the electoral process itself has not changed significantly (see Electoral Process), the election results differed from those of previous years in a number of respects.⁸ For the first time since 2000, opposition candidates—Hanna Kanapatskaya of the United Civil Party and Alena Anisim of the Belarusian Language Society, an independent NGO—won seats in the parliament. Furthermore, political parties won 16 seats, or 14.6 percent of the 110-seat parliament—the highest figure since the 1995 elections. In both the 2008 and 2012 elections, only five winning candidates represented political parties.⁹ Five parties now have their representation in parliament, compared with two and three parties after 2008 and 2012 elections, respectively. In general the parliament will preserve its nonpartisan character, given that 94 lawmakers do not represent any political party, but 68, or 61.8 percent, are formally members of the government-organized NGO (GONGO) Belaya Rus,¹⁰ compared with 67 in the old parliament. Four of the five parties will not be represented by their leaders, who either lost their races or were forced to give up their candidacy. The leaders of Belaya Rus did not run for parliament.
- The political role of parties is not certain, but their presence in the parliament can promote the political activity of lawmakers, help to articulate a broader spectrum of political ideas and projects, provide broader engagement in decision making, and promote the political organization of various progovernment groups. An increase in party representation also means a strengthening of institutions that are not part of the executive “vertical.” However, it is difficult to say whether the new composition of the parliament will bring visible changes in Belarusian politics.
- The 2016 elections also marked the first time since 2000 that the average age of the deputies decreased, the first time that there were no constituencies with only one candidate, and the first time since 2000 that a degree of competition among progovernment candidates was visible. The changes can be considered as a step toward political pluralism, but they were apparently the result of a

government decision to allow such a limited opening, and any lasting political consequences remained unclear at year's end.

- The economic situation of the country remains difficult. After a contraction of 3.9 percent in 2015,¹¹ the gross domestic product fell another 2.6 percent in 2016.¹² The economy is expected to stagnate rather than return to growth in 2017.¹³ The inflation rate was relatively moderate by Belarusian standards, reaching 11.8 percent in 2016.¹⁴ There has been an increase in unemployment, though official statistics do not reflect this. The situation is complicated by a reduction of labor force outflow to Russia. Economic difficulties led to a significant increase in social tension and a drop in the authorities' popularity.¹⁵ However, this had not resulted in an increase in protests or political activity by year's end.
- Belarus's foreign policy was characterized by a significant improvement in relations with the European Union (EU) and the United States. In February 2016, the EU lifted sanctions against Belarusian officials and businessmen, hoping that its engagement policy would contribute to improvements in the country's situation and encourage Minsk to distance itself from Russian foreign policy.¹⁶
- The government's political rhetoric for domestic audiences changed to reflect foreign policy priorities in 2016. In particular, in a June 22 speech to the delegates of the fifth All-Belarusian People's Assembly, President Alyaksandr Lukashenka said that "to develop dynamically, Belarus needs normal relations with the European Union and the United States."¹⁷
- Despite these efforts to diversify its foreign policy and economic cooperation, Belarus remains heavily dependent on Russia. Russia is the country's main trading partner and a major market for Belarusian products.¹⁸ Even Belarusian exports to the EU are largely composed of processed Russian oil products. In various speeches, authorities have consistently stressed the closeness of the relationship with Russia.¹⁹ In fact, Belarus maintains a political and military alliance with Russia. At the same time, despite routine cooperation in the military sphere, Belarus did not participate in Russia's provocative military initiatives in the region in 2016.
- Relations between Russia and Belarus became increasingly strained during 2016 due to oil, gas, and other trade disputes;²⁰ disinformation campaigns against Belarusian authorities in Russian media; a policy of strengthening Belarusian identity that irritated certain political circles in Russia; security issues; and contradictions in foreign policy.²¹
- In a sign of the confrontation between Russia and Belarus in the information sphere, two pro-Russian columnists were arrested in December 2016. They were charged with inciting national hatred, as they had expressed disdain for Belarusian statehood and culture and criticized Belarusian authorities for strengthening relations with Western countries.²²
- For most of the year there were no significant changes in the government and other executive bodies, but important rearrangements in the presidential administration were announced in December. The head of administration, Alyaksandr Kosinets; the first deputy head, Kanstantsin Martynetski; and deputy Ihar Buzowski were dismissed, and new head Natallya Kachanova and deputy Maksim Ryzhankow were appointed to replace them. The reshuffle will likely mean a decrease in the head of administration's influence in Belarusian politics, but the consequences remained uncertain at year's end.²³
- The government increased its discussion of the necessity of reforms, especially in the economy, although no important reforms were put forward. Over the course of the year, Lukashenka emphasized several times that changes should be temperate, and that any reforms should be about improving or upgrading but not significantly revising or altering the current system. He said in October, "I have already stated a thousand times that we have carried out all the reforms. We are now improving on what we have today."²⁴

Electoral Process

2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
7.00	6.75	6.75	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	6.75	6.75

- The electoral process did not change significantly in Belarus in 2016. Like the 2015 presidential election, the parliamentary elections were characterized by a certain improvement in the political climate compared with the most recent national balloting, but the changes were not consistent or institutionalized. The most important improvements were related to the authorities' restraint in the use of direct violence, including violence against political protesters.
- The parliamentary elections were held on September 11, 2016. Members were elected through a majoritarian system in 110 constituencies for a four-year term. The Belarusian authorities had partially accepted previous recommendations from the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (OSCE/ODIHR) and made some changes in the national legislation in 2013. An Interagency Working Group was established in February 2016 to consider the prior OSCE/ODIHR recommendations, and submitted seven proposals to the Central Election Commission of Belarus. The Election Commission adopted six resolutions addressing some of these recommendations. Nevertheless, a significant number of the OSCE/ODIHR recommendations were not addressed.²⁵
- The OSCE/ODIHR mission concluded that elections in 2016 "were efficiently organized, but, despite some first steps by the authorities, a number of long-standing systemic shortcomings remain."²⁶ Among the most important problems, the mission noted the following: early voting, counting, and tabulation procedures were still marred by a significant number of procedural irregularities and a lack of transparency; the legal framework restricted political rights and fundamental freedoms and was interpreted in an overly restrictive manner; the campaign lacked visibility; media coverage of the campaign did not enable voters to make an informed choice; and the composition of election commissions was not pluralistic. Among positive trends, the mission noted an overall increase in the number of candidates, including from the opposition, and a timely invitation to and welcoming approach toward international observers.²⁷
- Election observation was also organized by the public campaign Human Rights Defenders for Free Elections, bringing together the most significant Belarusian human rights organizations. Leaders of the effort concluded that the 2016 elections took place in a more favorable internal political environment than previous balloting. They noted some positive trends: the absence of significant constraints in the collection of signatures for nominating candidates and conducting campaign activities, and a low percentage of refusals to register the nominations of groups and candidates. Nevertheless, the observers stated that the elections failed to meet a number of key international standards for democratic and free elections, and provisions in the country's own electoral legislation. The most important problems were the opacity of some procedures for observers, the lack of equal access to state media for all candidates, lack of impartiality of election commissions, abuse of administrative resources in favor of the progovernment candidates, and reported incidents in which voters were forced to participate in early voting.²⁸
- Representatives of the campaign Right to Choose–2016, organized by the main opposition parties, declared that the lack of positive changes in the electoral law and law enforcement policy precluded the recognition of the elections as free and fair and undermined the credibility of the official results. They also stated that the sociopolitical environment had grown worse in comparison with the 2015 presidential election, noting the resumption of politically motivated criminal prosecution and an increasing number of administrative cases against political opponents and protesters.²⁹
- Media monitoring conducted by the Belarusian Association of Journalists revealed that election commissions remained the dominant figures of the election field as presented in the state-run media; news programs adhered to predominantly depersonalized coverage of the candidates; and any broad

public debates were nonexistent. In general, the elections were characterized as largely invisible and uninteresting for voters.³⁰

Civil Society

2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
6.50	6.25	6.00	6.00	6.25	6.50	6.50	6.50	6.25	6.25

- Formally, it is possible to create an NGO in Belarus. As of July 2016, a total of 15 political parties, 33 trade unions, 2,695 public associations (including 226 international, 725 national, and 1,744 local), 36 unions of public associations, and 7 republican state-public associations were registered in the country.³¹ In practice, there are many politically motivated restrictions on the ability to form, register, and operate such groups. Belarusian organizations often register abroad or operate without registration due to the unfavorable legal environment. As of 2015, about 200 Belarusian civil society organizations were registered in Lithuania and Poland.³²
- An extensive sector of organizations associated with the state has been created in Belarus. Such so-called government-organized NGOs (GONGOs) receive funding and other support from the government,³³ as well as a significant amount of international aid. Seven organizations formally have the status of “state-public,” but many others nominally operate as independent organizations. The most significant GONGOs are the Belarusian Republican Youth Union, Belaya Rus, the Women’s Union, and the Federation of Trade Unions. In addition to performing their immediate tasks, such organizations are included in the political process through participation in election commissions and election monitoring, as well as representatives serving in parliament and on local councils.
- Another part of the civil society sector consists of organizations that are not affiliated with the government. Since the late 1990s, the authorities have treated these groups as a potential political threat and imposed restrictions to limit their activities. In 2016, the authorities continued the practice of selectively denying the registration of public associations and parties for political reasons.³⁴ There are also restrictions on statutory activity, obtaining financing, and other aspects of operating an association.
- The 2015 CSO Sustainability Index, published in 2016, shows that the greatest obstacles for the development of civil society in Belarus are the legal environment and financial viability. In other areas—public image, infrastructure, service provision, advocacy, and organizational capacity—Belarusian NGOs exhibit a much higher degree of sustainability. Among the positive trends, the report noted a reduction in government harassment, successful advocacy campaigns, use of online crowdfunding platforms, organizational capacity development, and grassroots organizing.³⁵
- In March 2016, legislation on foreign donations was amended, leaving the procedure without fundamental changes; compulsory preregistration of foreign aid is still needed, and criminal penalties for noncompliance with the procedure remain in force. However, positive changes include the removal of anonymous donations received in Belarus from the category of foreign donations.³⁶ According to NGO experts, the system does not meet international standards, including the OSCE Guidelines on Freedom of Association.³⁷
- A large part of the NGO sector depends on funding from international donors, whose support was significantly reduced in 2015 and 2016. In addition, many international organizations have switched their attention to the authorities and GONGOs. NGOs are increasingly collecting donations from businesses and individuals, but the scale of such funds is not significant. Opportunities to receive funds from these sources are also adversely affected by the deterioration of the economy. Local business involvement in NGO funding is limited because of a lack of philanthropic traditions and informal prohibitions on supporting “disloyal” activities and organizations.

- In general, Belarusian authorities tried to avoid the use of incarceration or direct violence against political opponents, civil activists, and journalists in 2016. Instead, the role of fines was significantly increased. According to human rights organizations, activists and journalists were fined 415 times for a total of \$148,000 during the year. This was double the number of cases and 3.5 times the amount in fines compared with 2015.³⁸ The number of fines imposed for organizing and participating in protests and other public events increased nearly seven times.³⁹
- The positive trends of broader cooperation between authorities and civil society organizations were maintained in 2016. Both sides participated in joint public events and expert discussions and conferences, and cooperated on cultural and other projects. Informal restrictions were partially lifted. A characteristic example was a legal October concert in Homyel given by the rock band Brutto, which had long been prohibited from performing in Belarus.
- In August 2016, as a result of pressure from the security services, the oldest Belarusian nonstate polling agency, established in 1992, was forced to suspend its activities.⁴⁰ The closure was likely connected with the parliamentary elections, as well as the agency’s regular publication of opinion surveys showing a significant drop in President Lukashenka’s approval rating.

Independent Media

2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
6.75	6.75	6.50	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75

- According to the Ministry of Information, 440 state-owned and 1,165 private print periodicals were officially registered in Belarus as of November 1, 2016. In the broadcast sector the disposition is the following: 149 state-owned and 25 private radio outlets; 40 state-owned and 59 private television outlets.⁴¹
- State-owned media dominate the print market. According to the Belarusian Association of Journalists, social and political issues are covered by fewer than 30 private periodicals. The joint circulation of private print media is much less than that of state-owned competitors.⁴²
- Television is still the most popular source of news in Belarus. The sector is dominated by Belarusian state-owned and Russian channels. There are also several foreign television and radio services directed at Belarus, including the television channel Belsat, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty’s Belarusian service, Radio Racyja, and European Radio for Belarus. Only European Radio for Belarus and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty were accredited in Belarus.
- Internet users account for 62.2 percent of the population, and 66.9 percent of them use the internet daily.⁴³ The internet remains the only medium in which nonstate news outlets have prevalence over state-owned outlets.⁴⁴
- Two Belarusian journalists, Kanstantsin Zhukowski and Larysa Shcharakova, were brought to trial for cooperation with foreign media outlets in 2016. The reporters were fined for “illegal production of media products.” The accusation was based on video materials aired on Belsat TV.⁴⁵ Zhukowski was fined seven times over the course of the year.
- In January 2016 the Belarusian State Security Committee (KGB) suspended a criminal investigation against journalist and military expert Alyaksandr Alesin. In December 2014, Alesin had been released from a KGB pretrial detention center, where he was kept for 21 days. The journalist was accused of espionage.⁴⁶
- In March 2016 the Ministry of Information issued official warnings to popular online news outlets *Yezhednevnik* (ej.by) and *Nasha Niva* (nn.by). According to the ministry, the warnings were issued for using visual materials that could discredit Belarusian armed forces and providing inaccurate demographic statistics, respectively.⁴⁷

- In October, Eduard Palchys, founder and editor of the blog *1863X*, was sentenced to one year and nine months of restricted freedom and released for time served in pretrial detention.⁴⁸ He had been arrested in Russia in January, extradited to Belarus, and charged with inciting hatred and distributing pornographic materials after publishing a series of articles that were critical of Russian nationalism and foreign policy. Human rights organizations had recognized him as a political prisoner.

Local Democratic Governance

2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75

- Local politics in Belarus are overseen by executive bodies (the “executive vertical”) and subordinated to the central authorities.⁴⁹ There is virtually no local self-government, with an extremely low level of real local autonomy. In practice, local representative bodies cannot pursue their own economic and personnel policies or independently allocate financial resources.⁵⁰ No significant reforms in the sphere of local democracy were implemented in 2016. A gradual opening of the executive bodies to contact with the public and civil society organizations can be noted, but such changes are not consistent in nature.
- The current Belarusian system of local self-government was formed in the Soviet period and has not undergone any substantial changes since the time of independence. Citizens’ level of interest in local politics is consequently very low, as is their interest in the development of local communities and initiatives.
- There is a growing divergence in economic and political development between Minsk and the rest of Belarus, as well as between large cities and other areas.⁵¹ Human, financial, and political resources are increasingly concentrated in the capital and other major urban centers, while a significant part of the rural countryside and smaller towns are experiencing demographic and economic decline. As a result, local democratic initiatives are mainly limited to large cities, while the depressed regions are becoming even more reliant on the national government.
- The actual level of freedom may differ from area to area, and depends on a settlement’s location, its economic structure, human resources, and local authorities. In 2016 the most visible public initiatives were focused on large cities and especially Minsk. They were typically related to the development of city infrastructure and transport, or the struggle to protect parklands and resist a growing density of housing construction. Characteristic example of 2016 is civic campaign to protect Asmalouka (historical district in Minsk).⁵² There is a trend of city authorities becoming more transparent and open to grassroots initiatives and local civil society organizations when implementing urban policy and infrastructure projects in Minsk and other large cities. The primary incentive is the curtailment of financial resources. However, the trend is unstable and has not significantly affected the development of local democracy to date.
- The main bodies of self-government are local councils. In practice, they exercise only a small part of the authority legally allocated to them. In most cases they simply approve solutions prepared by the executive bodies, including allocation of local budgets. The main function of local councils in the Belarusian political system is to serve as a space for communication among local elites and between local elites and the population.⁵³
- Local councils, like other representative bodies in Belarus, are mostly nonpartisan in nature. Only two representatives of opposition parties became deputies of local councils after local elections in 2014. Representation of progovernment parties is also low and politically insignificant at about 1.3 percent.⁵⁴

- The *voblasts*, or region, is the most significant level of subnational government from a political point of view. Regions are controlled by the national government but have some autonomy, including on staff policy. Hrodna, along the country’s western border, is the region with the lowest level of autonomy in practice, as it is considered to be potentially the least loyal in political terms. Top appointments in this region are frequently transfers of officials from other regions.⁵⁵ Such transfers are rare in the rest of the country.

Judicial Framework and Independence

2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00

- The independence of Belarusian courts is formally guaranteed by the constitution and the law. However, courts are dependent on the executive bodies in practice. The level of corruption is relatively low; petty bribery is not widespread. Judges enjoy some autonomy in considering the majority of cases, but if a particular case affects essential interests of the authorities, a judge can be directly influenced and the final judicial decision revised. This applies to both criminal and administrative cases, including those related to suppression of political activity in the country, and to civil cases that affect the economic interests of the ruling circles or state-owned enterprises. Influence usually takes the form of direct instructions by executive officials to heads of courts; the latter then convey the instructions to judges.⁵⁶
- Executive bodies, primarily the president and the presidential administration, have the ability to exercise decisive influence on judicial appointments. However, the determinative role in personnel policy is currently played by the Supreme Court and the chief justice. The courts have a fairly autonomous position among the law enforcement agencies due to the role of Chief Justice Valiantsin Sukala, who has held his office since January 1997. The judicial system’s management is centralized and largely follows the patterns of the executive “vertical.”
- The executive bodies have been able to alter the structure and authority of the judiciary, partly via presidential decrees. For example, some functions of Constitutional Court were changed by a presidential decree in 2008,⁵⁷ and the reform of judicial system in 2013–14 was also implemented through decrees.⁵⁸ Among other things, that reform led to the incorporation of the Supreme Economic Court into the Supreme Court, in spite of the fact that the autonomy of the former is granted by Article 34 of the constitution. The changes introduced by decrees have not been approved through legislation. Furthermore, the Constitutional Court has recognized that such reforms require constitutional amendments.⁵⁹
- Citizens have virtually no avenues for a constitutional review of laws or executive actions in Belarus. The bodies eligible to appeal to the Constitutional Court are limited to the president, the parliament, the Supreme Court, and the government,⁶⁰ and few binding decisions have been issued by the Constitutional Court since 2000.⁶¹ The main activities of the Constitutional Court include consultation on new legislation and, on rare occasions, issuing formal advisory decisions on certain legal issues; only two advisory decisions were issued in 2016.⁶²
- In 2016, the political dependence of the courts was clearly visible in administrative cases against the organizers of street protests. Human rights organizations noted the use of the courts to punish political activists, journalists, and representatives of civil society during the year.⁶³ The most obvious indicator of court politicization is the prompt revision of sentencing policy after a change in the political situation. The courts also take the side of the authorities when considering the majority of electoral disputes.

Corruption

2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
6.25	6.00	6.00	6.00	6.25	6.25	6.25	6.25	6.25	6.25

- The state system is highly nontransparent. Executive bodies are the main agents and mediators of corruption. The vast majority of information on corruption comes from official sources, and the activity of NGOs in this sphere is limited due to their lack of access to information; investigative journalism focused on corruption is rare.⁶⁴
- President Lukashenka has always used the fight against corruption to increase the government's popularity and legitimacy, and official anticorruption processes and their coverage in the media have become a standard of political life. In 2016, seeking to demonstrate consistency in the fight against corruption, the authorities announced prosecutions of both petty and high-ranking officials and even a businessman close to the president.⁶⁵
- The case against the businessman, Yuriy Chyzh, was unusual for Belarus given the connection to Lukashenka. Chyzh was detained by the KGB along with five associates in March and charged with tax evasion.⁶⁶ He was released in September and was expected to remain free if he paid what he owed to the state. Lukashenka told reporters that he was personally supervising the case.⁶⁷
- A new anticorruption law entered into force in January 2016.⁶⁸ Under the new measure, persons dismissed for discrediting reasons cannot be appointed to high civil posts, service retirement benefits are not available for corrupt officials, and an institute of public control will be established with mechanisms for citizen participation. In general, the changes in the law are not expected to significantly strengthen the fight against corruption.
- The anticorruption policies of the authorities result in a relatively low level of petty corruption; direct bribery is risky and not widespread. Many measures have been taken to make corruption unnoticeable to the public. Unlike in many post-Soviet countries, officials do not engage in displays of luxury or high income. To some extent the same is true among businessmen.
- In September 2016, the Council of Europe's Group of States against Corruption (GRECO) published a summary of its report on Belarus. It notes that Belarus has partly implemented only one out of the 20 pending recommendations on addressing corruption, with no progress registered on others. The only area where progress has been recorded concerns the introduction of administrative liability of legal persons for money-laundering offenses. An evidence-based comprehensive strategy and plan of action as well as independent mechanisms to combat corruption are still missing; no initiatives have been taken to strengthen the independence of either the Prosecutor General's Office or the judiciary.⁶⁹
- It remained a common practice in 2016 to pardon persons who committed corruption crimes but offset the financial damage through fines of twice the embezzled amount or more.⁷⁰ This creates opportunities for the abuse of pardons and raises the potential for de facto commercialization of anticorruption measures. The risk of abuse was exacerbated by the presidential administration's decision to treat the list of officials pardoned by the president as an official secret in 2016.⁷¹
- Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index 2016 ranks Belarus at 79th out of 176 countries, with 40 points on a 100-point scale. This is worse than the global average of 43 points.⁷² It should be noted that the level of corruption greatly depends on the sector. For instance, the World Justice Project's Rule of Law Index 2016 ranked Belarus 57th out of 113 countries overall.⁷³ However, the index's "Civil Justice" and "Regulatory Enforcement" factors place Belarus at 30th in the world, while in terms of the "Open Government" factor, Belarus holds only the 90th position.

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