

Belarus

Last update:	1 maart 2022
Population:	9,340,314 (World Bank 2021)
Prime minister:	Roman Golovchenko
President:	Aleksandr Lukashenko
Governemental type:	De jure republic; de facto dictatorship
Ruling coalition:	-
Last election:	2020 (presidential elections)
Next election:	2024 (parliamentary elections)
Sister parties:	Belarusian Social Democratic Party (Narodnaya Hramada), Belarus Party of Labour (BSDP)

The Republic of Belarus is an authoritarian presidential state. Its current president, Alexander Lukashenko, has been in office since July 1994. After the parliamentary elections of November 2019, the parliament is once again fully occupied by government loyalists. Official results state that all 110 parliamentary seats were won by government functionaries, diplomats and pro-government parties after an apparent 77 per cent voter turnout, meaning that the new parliament will have no members of the opposition in it. The Communist Party of Belarus holds 11 seats, the Republican Party of Labour and Justice holds 6, the Belarusian Patriotic Party 2, the Liberal Democratic Party 1, the Belarusian Agrarian Party 1 and the independents (who are strongly tight to Lukashenko) together hold another 89.

In all, the 2019 parliamentary elections were reported to be neither fair nor free. Severe human rights violations and restrictions on media are constantly reported in the country. Ballot stuffing and the rejection of opposition candidates was common practice before and during the election.

The latest presidential elections were held on August 9th 2020, and president Alexander Lukashenko claimed victory. According to election officials, Lukashenko won 80,23% of the votes, while Ms. Tikanovskaya won 9,9%. Critics are highly skeptical of these statistics, and large scale protests erupted as a reaction to the election results. These protests have been met with force by the Belarussian police, and thousands of protesters were arrested. The protests have now died down, but political instability remains.

On February 27, 2022, a constitutional referendum took place in Belarus which included various amendments on the role of the president and Belarus' stance as a neutral and non-nuclear nation. It was approved by 65,2% of voters. It raised fears of the increasing integration of Belarus into Russia. It all occurs amid the Russian invasion of Ukraine, in which Lukashenko's government plays a key role as he accepted the stationing of Russian troops in Southern Belarus.

Political Situation

As the state has turned into a strong authoritarian presidential republic, presidential elections are most important in Belarus. In part, this is related to the breakdown of opposition structures after the presidential election of 2010 and the overall internal situation in the country, which is not conducive to independent initiatives. Unfortunately, there is no indication that this situation will soon change. Changes made to the Electoral Code, which have been in force since December 2013, criminalise election boycotting. Key features of the Belarussian electoral process remained unaffected: neither the existing legislation nor its implementation provides the basis for free and fair elections. The authorities remained reluctant to conduct structural reforms considering the uncertain future of financial transfers from Moscow, particularly as Russia's own economic situation worsened. Corruption remains a serious problem in the country as well. However, existing practices and planned legislative changes confirm the government's agenda to identify and punish corrupt officials, rather than prevent and eradicate corruption as a sociopolitical phenomenon. Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index 2015 has ranked Belarus 107 out of 167 countries and is thereby considered rather corrupt.

Political rights and civil liberties

Systematic violation of human rights, in particular civil and political rights, continues in Belarus. Peaceful protesters are repeatedly arrested and sentenced to short periods of detention. The authorities continue to use arbitrary detentions, searches, interrogations and misdemeanour charges on bogus grounds to harass and intimidate government critics, especially journalists and opposition activists. The authorities extended sentences of several remaining political prisoners, as in the case of 2010 presidential candidate Mikalai Statkevitch. He was charged with violating prison rules and moved to a harsher penitentiary institution. These prisoners were subjected to undue restrictions, psychological pressure, and other forms of ill-treatment as punishments. They were, however, released in late August 2015 in an apparent attempt to soften Western criticism in the run-up to the presidential elections of 11 October 2015. Nevertheless, there are now new cases of political prisoners, including those arrested after the protests following the presidential election in 2020, as well as the striking example of Roman Protasevich, editor of an opposition channel. Protasevich was travelling in an airplane that flew over Belarussian airspace, with the destination Lithuania when the airplane was forced to land in Belarus and Protasevich was arrested. Mikalai Statkevich himself was also arrested again several times after participating in protests.

The use of the death penalty continues. Belarus is the only country in Europe that still has capital punishment. It has executed four people in 2018 and at least one in 2019. The Freedom House has evaluated political rights and civil liberties in Belarus with a 6.5 (1 being most free and 7 the least free).

Freedom of expression is severely restricted. The media remains largely under state control and is used to smear political opponents. Independent media outlets are harassed - including searches of their offices - and bloggers, online activists and journalists are subjected to administrative and criminal prosecution. State-run distribution outlets refuse to disseminate independent periodicals and internet activity remains closely monitored and controlled, especially after the parliament adopted amendments to the media law, enabling the Ministry of Information to shut down online news outlets. The authorities recently started using an article of the Administrative Code on "unlawful creation and dissemination of mass media produce" to prosecute freelance journalists writing for media outlets based outside Belarus, claiming that they require formal accreditation as foreign journalists with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Belarus is ranked 153 out of 180 countries in the 2019 World Press Freedom Index, giving the country a very bad reputation in terms of its press freedom record.

February 2022 - Constitutional amendments

Belarus approved a controversial amendment of its constitution, in a referendum that took place on February 27. It was passed with the support of 65.2% of voters, as published by the Belarussian central elections commission. It gave President Lukashenko far-reaching tools to stay in power until 2035 and especially significant is a clause that scraps Belarus' status as a neutral, non-nuclear power in the constitution - causing Belarus to be further connected with Russia and increasing fears over Belarus' integration with its main ally.

The EU, US and UK have already said not to recognize the results of the referendum, which saw a turnout of 78,6%. The political landscape is tightly controlled by Lukashenko and his party, and voting results are possibly manipulated.

Belarus' role during the Russian invasion of Ukraine

The Belarussian authorities have played a very questionable role during the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Since January 2022, tens of thousands of Russian troops were stationed in Southern Belarus near Gomel. These were allegedly present for a joint military practice mission with Belarussian troops. However, from 24 February onwards, Russian troops used southern Belarus to commence a full-fledged invasion of northern Ukraine - immediately being very near to its capital Kyiv.

President Lukashenko has repeatedly voiced his support for Putin's war in Ukraine, saying that Russia - and Belarus as well - naturally feel threatened by the West due to sanctions. There have also been reports that show Belarussian forces joining Russian operations in the Ukraine's north. Meanwhile, Belarussian resistance forces halted Russian mobilization movements in Belarus by sabotaging railways and crucial road infrastructure. In April 2022, Russia retreated most of its northern and Belarussian-stationed forces towards a all-out invasion of Ukraine's Donbas and Luhansk regions.

Since Lukashenko has univocally supported Putin's actions in Ukraine, and also gave territorial support to Russian troops, the EU, UK and US have sanctioned Belarus similarly to Russia. The already weak Belarussian economy is expected to suffer considerably from harsh economic sanctions.

Human Rights and Gender Equality

Human rights in Belarus are not only sometimes cast aside in politics. Also regarding LGBT+ rights human rights are violated in Belarus. Same-sex relations have been legal since 1994, but homophobia is rife and there are no anti-discrimination laws that protect LGBT+ people. Some state officials, including President Lukashenko, have openly expressed homophobic views.

Activists say violence has been routine in the LGBT+ community for years, but victims rarely speak out because of the high risk of social stigmatization and the accompanying re-traumatization, even by official authorities. Furthermore, the courts in Belarus officially recognize the “hatred motive” for violent crimes, but according to Human Rights Watch homophobic motives for crime has only been recognized once.

Regarding gender equality, Belarus scores relatively well, ranking 33 out of 156 on the World Economic Forum Global Gender Gap Index 2021. Belarus has equal rights for both men and women enshrined in the constitution, and both economic and political participation are relatively gender equal for the area, with women occupying 40% of the seats in parliament. Nevertheless, Belarussian culture remains conservative and gender stereotypes are pervasive. Women’s participation in senior decision-making positions remains low, and gender norms are perpetuated in families and social circumstances. Furthermore, Belarus lacks standalone legislative protections against forms of gender-based discrimination. Movements have been made in politics to create law to prevent violence in the family, but conservative groups have prevented it up until today.

Elections

Electoral system

For presidential elections to be valid, a turnout of 50 per cent of registered voters is required. For a candidate to be elected as president, he or she must receive more than half of the votes. If no candidate achieves this, a second election round has to be held within two weeks. The president is elected for a five-year term. Elections in Belarus are primarily regulated by the constitution, the Election Code and the Central Election Committee (CEC).

Parliamentary elections are held every four years through a simple majority vote, with the outcome decided by overall majorities in single-member constituencies for the 110 seats in the House of Representatives, the lower house of the National Assembly. In addition, the upper house of parliament, the Council of the Republic, comprises 64 members, with geographically-based representation. Members of the Council of the Republic are appointed by the President and elected in a secret voting procedure. Belarus also holds elections for local councils of deputies, who are also elected for a period of four years.

Parliamentary Elections

Belarus parliamentary election of 2019

On November 17th 2019, the first parliamentary elections since 2016 were held in Belarus. Official results state that all 110 parliamentary seats were won by government functionaries, diplomats and pro-government parties on a claimed 77 per cent voter turnout, which means that the new parliament will have no members of the opposition in it. During the last parliamentary elections in 2016, two opposition members won seats in parliament (Hanna Kanapatskaya, a member of the opposition United Civil Party, and Alena Anisim, an independent with links to the opposition), but neither candidate was allowed to run again in 2019.

The Communist Party of Belarus remained the largest party with 11 seats, an increase of three in comparison to the last parliamentary election in September 2016. The Republican Party of Labour and Justice remained the second largest party with 6 seats, compared to the 3 seats they won in the last election. In third place, losing 1 seat, came the Belarusian Patriotic Party with a total of 2 seats. What is notable is that three new parties entered the election, even though none of them won any seats. These parties were the Belarusian Social Democratic Assembly, Belarusian Socialist Sporting Party and the Republican Party. In total, all independent candidates received 89 seats, which is 5 seats less than in the last election.

Official election results

Party	Votes	Seats
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Communist Party of Belarus	559,537	11
Republican Party of Labour and Justice	355,971	6
Liberal Democratic Party	280,683	1
Belarusian Social Democratic Party (Assembly)	84,790	0
BDF Party	82,403	0
Belarusian Patriotic Party	75,283	2
United Civic Party	72,192	0
Belarusian Agrarian Party	46,785	1
Belarusian Left Party "A Just World"	37,861	0
Belarusian Social Democratic Assembly	23,164	0
Belarusian Green Party	10,592	0
Belarusian Socialist Sporting Party	7,905	0
Republican Party	7,529	0
Independents	3,178,037	89
Against All	447,111	-
Invalid/blank votes	49,725	-
Total	5,319,568	110

International observers and opposition

Election observers and government opponents question the integrity of the elections. The observers from the Organization for Security and Cooperation (OSCE) said that "fundamental freedoms were disregarded and the integrity of the election process was not adequately safeguarded". Moreover, the OSCE observers noted concerns regarding the exclusion of many opposition candidates, limited opportunity for public campaigning and shortcomings during vote counting.

The 110 seats were contested by a total of 558 candidates, of which 150 opposition candidates, who were rejected by election officials. This happened on the grounds that some of the opposition candidates' signatures were deemed invalid by authorities.

In particular, there was a concern for the opposition candidates in regard to early voting. During this time, ballot boxes are not guarded and several independent observers reported ballot stuffing as well as vote counting without observers being present.

Presidential Elections

The most recent presidential elections took place on 9 August 2020. Alexander Lukashenko won these according to Belarus' Central Election Committee with 80% of the votes. Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya came in on the second place obtaining 10%. Hanna Kanapatskaya obtained 1.7% of the votes and Andrey Dmitriev and Siarhei Cherenchen received just over 1% each. However, these results were widely denounced as the majority of the people did not believe these to be accurate. Tsikhanouskaya and her followers believe that she is the legitimate president. Mass-protest erupted immediately after the results were made public and are still going on.

Election results

Candidate	% of votes
Alexander Lukashenko (Incumbent)	80 %
Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya (Belarusian Democracy Movement)	10 %

Hanna Kanapatskaya (United Civic Party of Belarus)	1,7 %
Andrey Dmitriev (Tell the Truth)	1,2 %
Siarhei Cherachen (Belarussian Social Democratic Assembly)	1,1 %
Against all candidates	4,6 %

Observers

The Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) was unable to observe the presidential elections in Belarus because it did not receive an invitation from the country's authorities. In addition, it was reported that many independent observers were detained during early voting. The observers that were able to monitor parts of the elections reported numerous violations preventing them from entering the polling stations and from checking if the ballot boxes were sealed.

The international community reacted in different ways. Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan congratulated Lukashenka on his election. Poland issued a statement calling for de-escalation and said it might impose sanctions if Lukashenka would use force towards the protestors. The European Union (EU) remained silent on the matter until ten days after the elections. After an emergency summit, as a reaction to the continuous demonstrations in Belarus, the EU stated that it did not recognise the results of the elections, since they were neither free nor fair. In October, the Union made clear that Lukashenka and 40 of his high-ranking officials face sanctions over the police brutality towards the Belarussians. Their assets were frozen and a travel ban imposed.

Social Democratic Parties

Belarusian Social Democratic Party (People's Assembly) (BSDP-NH "Narodnaya Hramada")

Party Leader: Mikola Statkevich

Number of seats:

The BSDP-NH calls itself the successor of the Belarussian Socialist Hramada, which was founded in 1903. This party played a crucial role in the formation of the short-lived Belarussian People's Republic in 1918. The party was re-established in March 1991. Since then, it has been plagued by internal conflicts. Mikola Statkevich has chaired the party since 1995 and has been arrested several times for his actions against the Lukashenko government.

The BSDP-NH demands a democratic, legal, and social state, and favours Council of Europe and EU membership for Belarus. One of the party's priorities traditionally is the defence and the revival of national values. Today, the BSDP-NH programme wants to adapt 'classical values of European Social Democracy' to Belarussian standards. It wants a social market economy and privatisation of small and medium businesses, but wants to keep railways and utilities in government hands. According to the BSDP-NH, the medical care, the pension system, and education need to be reformed on a step-by-step basis.

The party used to be a member of the Consultative Council of Parties, but under the leadership of Mikola Statkevich left the council when it decided to participate in the 2000 elections, while other opposition parties organised a boycott. In 2003 the BSDP-NH became the leading party of the European Coalition "Free Belarus".

The BSDP-NH experienced some major changes in 2005. Internal conflicts led to a split in the party. The vice-chairmen of the party (Vladimir Nistyuk, Vitaly Malashko and Yury Markovsky) accused party leader Statkevich of acting in violation of the party's charter and held separate talks on the creation of a united social democratic party. They went to the Ministry of Justice, to get support for their act and Nistyuk was appointed as interim chairman of the party which also claims to be the one and only rightful BSDP.

On 22 March 2005, a formal charge was brought against Statkevich over the street protests that were sparked by the internationally criticised 2004 parliamentary elections and referendum. The criminal proceedings were instituted under the Criminal Code's Article 342 that carries punishment for "the organisation of group actions disturbing public peace or active participation in them." Statkevich was sentenced to three years in corrective labour camp. Later, this was reduced to two years. Statkevich was released

on 22 May 2007. In 2010 he was among the democratic presidential candidates. After the violent crash of the opposition demonstration Statkevich was arrested and sent to prison again. On May 26, 2011, he was sentenced to six years in a maximum security penal colony. In August 2015, he was released together with five other opposition figures, after this was ordered by president Lukashenko.

Since the split of the party, the party is without registration and office, which makes it hard to operate effectively. Despite internal party disagreements, the BDSP-NH ran the 2012 parliamentary elections, but did not manage to enter parliament.

BDSP-NH did not participate in the 2019 parliamentary elections.

Belarusian Social Democratic Assembly (Hramada)

Party Leader: Siarhei Charachen
Number of seats: 0

The party was founded in 1998 and is led by Stanislav Shushkevich, who chaired the Supreme Soviet of Belarus from 1991 to 1994. In this capacity, in 1991, together with Russian President Boris Yeltsin and Ukrainian President Leonid Kravchuk, he signed the declaration that officially dissolved the Soviet Union (Belavezha Agreement). In the first presidential election of 1994, Shushkevich stood as a candidate, but was defeated by current president Lukashenko.

The party was a member of the Five Plus opposition coalition and supported the candidacy of united opposition candidate Alyaksandr Milinkevich in the 2006 election. The social democratic faction led by Aleksei Korol left the party and joined BDSP-H, led by Kazulin. The party is in favour of an independent Belarus that is no colony of Russia, but also not a member of NATO or the EU.

The party is still officially registered at the Ministry of Justice of Belarus. In the 2019 parliamentary election did not win any seats.

Other Parties

Communist Party of Belarus (CPB)

Party Leader: Tatsyana Holubeva
Number of seats: 11
<http://www.comparty.by/>

Although the Communist Party of Belarus was banned after the Moscow coup attempt of 1991, it has never lost its importance as a political movement. The party's support base consists mainly of pensioners and civil servants. Its programme models itself after that of the former USSR, opposing reforms and privatisation and having a clear preference for the Russian culture (while rejecting the Belarusian culture). It strives for leading the society on a socialist path of development resulting in the construction of a society of social justice based on the principles of community, strengthening of the Belarusian state, and restoration of voluntary state union of the peoples of the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics.

In the 2019 parliamentary elections, CPB won 11 seats.

Agrarian Party (AP)

Party Leader: Mikhail Schimanski
Number of seats:

In 1992, executives of agricultural enterprises founded the United Agrarian Democratic Party. The party changed its name to the

Agrarian Party in 1994. It has a program entitled 'democratic socialism', which promotes the full participation of the members of the party in the activities of state and local governments with delegated representatives in these bodies through elections, political education, and the education of citizens as well as the economic and social development of rural areas through the centuries-old spiritual culture of the Belarusian village. In the beginning, during the presidential election campaign in 1994, the party was in favour of creating a confederation of Belarus, Russia and Ukraine. It was one of the biggest parties. After the 1996 parliament reform, the AP split. It was not until 2000 that the AP returned to the political arena, this time as a fully pro-presidential party with Mikhail Schimanski as chairman. In the parliamentary election of 2019 the party won one vote.

Liberal Democratic Party (LDP)

Party Leader: Sergei Gaidukevich

Number of seats: 1

<http://ldpb.by/>

The Liberal Democratic Party was created in 1994 as the Belarusian successor of the Liberal Democratic Party of the Soviet Union. It is supportive of the Lukashenko regime, and its platform holds for the construction of parliamentary methods of law for a mixed economy by promoting the ideas of liberalism and liberal democracy. It shares a similar ideology to the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia and advocates the unification of Belarus with Russia.

In the 2004 parliamentary elections it won 1 seat in parliament, and in 2006 presidential elections its candidate got 3.5 percent support. In the 2019 parliamentary elections, one LDP member was elected.

Biographies

Aleksandr Lukashenko

President

Alexander Grigoryevich Lukashenko was born on 31 Augustus 1954 in a small village in eastern Belarus, where he was brought up by his single mother. Lukashenko graduated from Mogilev Pedagogical Institute in 1975, and the Belarussian Agricultural Academy in 1985. After serving in the Soviet army between 1980 and 1982, Lukashenko started a career in collective farming in the mid-1980s. At the end of this decade, he started to move into politics and in 1990 he became a deputy in the Supreme Council of Belarus. He was the only deputy to vote against the agreement that dissolved the Soviet Union. In 1993, Lukashenko was elected Chairman of the anti-corruption committee of the Belarusian parliament and in this function, he accused a number of senior government officials of corruption.

In 1994, Lukashenko was able to defeat four other candidates and became President of Belarus. In 2001, he was elected for a second term and due to a 2004 referendum which abolished the two-term presidential limit, he was able to seek re-election for a third term in 2006, a fourth term in 2010 and a fifth term in 2015. He announced in February 2020 that he would run for president in 2020, making it his sixth term if he wins.

Lukashenko has been controversial for his authoritarian instincts and is often referred to as 'the last dictator of Europe'.

He is married to Galina Lukashenko and they have two adult sons. Lukashenko also has an illegitimate younger son.

Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya

Leader of the Belarusian opposition

Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, born in 1982, is the de facto leader of the Belarusian opposition and democratic movement. After the fraudulent 2020 presidential elections, in which she took 10.2%, she had to flee Belarus after a governmental crackdown on the democratic opposition. She now works in exile from Poland.

Tsikhanouskaya has had a major role in the August 2020 protests after the presidential elections against the regime of Lukashenko.

While she had fled to Lithuania, she called upon her followers to keep on protesting. Thousands of Belarusians took to the streets - meeting heavy police repression. These protests continued until the beginning of 2021.

Tsikhanouskaya has been nominated twice for the Nobel Peace Prize. On April 21, 2022, she received the Roosevelt Four Freedoms Award for her work to achieve peaceful protesting against Lukashenko. Tsikhanouskaya's husband, Sergej Tichanovski, has been sentenced to eighteen years imprisonment in Belarus for organizing illegal opposition-related activities and is currently in prison.

Roman Protasevich

Major opposition figure

Roman Protasevich is a Belarusian political activist and blogger. He ran the "Nexta" Telegram channel, which became a main source of information while Belarusian authorities tried to disable internet access during the 2020 protests.

Since 2019, Protasevich was working from Poland. In 2020, Belarusian authorities put him on the "list of organizations and individuals involved in terrorist activities" for "mass unrest".

On 23 May 2021, Protasevich was scheduled to fly from Athens to Vilnius with RyanAir Flight 4978. Belarusian authorities followed him and diverted his flight to Minsk using a false bomb threat. Protasevich was incarcerated and, presumably, after a false concession now serves a years-long prison time. On the flight, his girlfriend Sofia Sapega was also arrested, she was sentenced to six years in prison in May 2022.

Roman Golovchenko

Prime Minister

Roman Golovchenko was born on August 10th 1973 in Zhodzina.

Golovchenko graduated in 1996 from the Moscow State Institute of International Relations and later also from the Academy of Public Administration (2003). In 2009, he was named First Deputy Minister of State and in 2013 he was made Ambassador to the United Arab Emirates. In 2018, he was named Ambassador to Qatar, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. He has also served as Minister of State Authority for Military Industry, before being named Prime Minister of Belarus in June 2020.

Mikola Statkevich

Leader Belarusian Social Democratic Party (People's Assembly)

Mikola Viktorovich Statkevich was born on 12 August 1956, to a family of teachers. In 1978, he graduated from the Minsk Higher Engineering zenith-rocket academy where he later worked as a teacher, and in 1986 he obtained a PhD.

In February 1991, he left the Communist Party out of protest and became a member of the Central Rada and Executive Committee of the Belarus Social Democratic Party (Narodnaya Hramada). In 1996 he became its chairman. In the same period (1991-1995), as a former military officer, he founded and headed the Belarus Union of Military, which had as its goal the creation of a Belarus army for the defence of independence and historic-patriotic education of society.

In 2000, he ran in the parliamentary elections, and in 2003 he became the leader of the European Coalition, which included a number of parties, trade unions, women's and youth organisations. The Coalition was in favour of a European direction of development. In 2005, he was sentenced to three years in prison for organising a street action on 18 and 19 October 2004 in Minsk against the (falsification of the) official results of the parliamentary elections and the referendum. After he was given amnesty, his sentence was shortened by a year.

In 2009, the congress of the European Coalition nominated him as its presidential candidate for the 2010 elections. Following a violent crackdown on an opposition demonstration on election night, he was arrested and imprisoned. Statkevich was found guilty of mass riot organisation on 19 December 2010 and on 26 May 2011, he was sentenced to six-year imprisonment in a maximum-security penal colony. In January 2012, Statkevich was transferred from the penal colony to a closed prison with much more severe conditions of confinement. Amnesty International reported in July 2012 that Statkevich had been moved to a "punishment cell" after refusing to sign a confession. He was finally released and given amnesty in late August 2015, likely as a measure to soften Western criticism in the run-up to the presidential elections of 11 October 2015.

Statkevich has two adult daughters.

Source

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