2006

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Recommended Citation

Hass, Jeffrey K. "Republic of Belarus." In *World Encyclopedia of Political Systems and Parties*, edited by Neil Schlager, Jayne Weisblatt, and Orlando J. Pérez, 111-16. 4th ed. Vol. 1. New York: Facts On File, 2006.

REPUBLIC OF BELARUS

(Respublika Bielorus')

By Jeffrey K. Hass, Ph.D.

A landlocked nation, Belarus is located in central-eastern Europe, with Poland and Russia on the western and eastern borders, Ukraine to the south, and Latvia and Lithuania to the north. The climate is between continental and maritime, with cold winters and cool summers. Much of the terrain is flat, and there are several square kilometers of marshland. Much of southern Belarus was contaminated by the Chernobyl nuclear accident in 1986; while Ukraine was host to the disaster, the radioactive fallout harmed Belarusian territory worse than Ukrainian land, contaminating more than 20 percent of Belarusian land and leading to, at one count, approximately 400,000 cancer deaths.

As of July 2005 Belarus had a population of roughly 10.3 million, with 45 percent male and 55 percent female. While the death rate was higher than the birth rate, immigration left population growth in only slight decline, at -0.09 percent. The life expectancy for males was 63.03 years and for females 74.69 years; however, such statistics might not take into account deaths resulting from Chernobyl radiation. Belarusians make up 81.2 percent of the population, followed by Russians (11.4 precent), with Poles, Ukrainians, and various others making up the remaining 7.4 percent.

The System of Government

The Belarusian political system is, in theory, democratic and following a federal structure. Belarus is divided into six *voblasti* and one municipality (Minsk, the national capital). According to the Belarusian constitution adopted on March 15, 1994, the legal system is one of civil law (rather than Anglo-American common law) and comprises three branches: the executive (president and prime minister), the legislature (Supreme Soviet), and the judiciary (Supreme and Constitutional Courts). In practice, however, Belarus is a dictatorship under Aleksandr Lukashenko, who has used executive power to undermine the constitution, the legislature, local power, the judiciary, the media, and basic freedoms such as freedom of association and speech.

EXECUTIVE

The executive branch is headed by the president, who serves as a national leader, and the prime minister, who acts as the head of government. The prime minister's duties are straightforward: He suggests and implements policies, leads the state bureaucracy, and coordinates the activities of the numerous ministries. However, the actual powers and duties of the president have been in flux.

Initially Belarus did not have a presidency. In 1991, in the wake of a failed August coup, the Supreme Soviet named its deputy speaker, Stanislav Shushkevich, to be the "president of the [Belarusian] parliament" and carry out the duties of a weak president; that is, Belarus did not have a formal, Western-style presidency but had instead a temporary presidential position. Additionally, Vyacheslav Kebich served as prime minister for the now-independent republic, carrying out such

duties as running the state bureaucracy and promoting and implementing domestic policies. Shushkevich's duties included meeting with foreign dignitaries and serving as a central figurehead for suggesting policies and legislation. However, in reality, Shushkevich had even fewer powers than the emasculated presidents of Eastern European nations or pre-Kuchma Ukraine.

Following labor protests in the autumn of 1993 and a signature campaign by the Belarusian Popular Front (BPF) to move parliamentary elections from 1995 to March 1994, the parliament in January 1994 removed Shushkevich as parliamentary president, leaving executive functions with the prime minister. On March 15, 1994, the parliament added an article to the draft constitution (also passed March 15, 1994) creating a presidency, and it called for elections to be held on June 26, 1994. Aleksandr Lukashenko won the first and second rounds of voting and became the first Belarusian president, and he then proceeded to consolidate power in the presidency.

According to the 1994 constitution, the president was a weak figurehead whose basic function was to nominate the heads of the Constitution Court and the Electoral Commission, represent Belarus on the international stage, take part in the work of the Supreme Soviet (including suggesting legislation), and, in general, head the executive branch. In November 1994, in a move to enhance his own powers, Lukashenko created the "presidential vertical line," sending presidentially appointed representatives to regions and districts to abrogate local political power and to answer directly to the president, rather than the regional and district electorate. Then in April 1995 Lukashenko called for a referendum in which Belarusians expressed 75 percent support for returning Soviet-era political symbols to prominence, 77.6 percent support for presidential powers to dissolve parliament (if it violates the constitution), 82.4 percent support for economic integration with Russia, and 83.1 percent support for making Russian a second official language.

In another move to enhance Lukashenko's power, Belarus held a national referendum in November 1996 to replace the 1994 constitution with a new version drafted by Lukashenko. Originally planned for November 7 (in honor of the Bolshevik Revolution), the referendum was moved by Lukashenko to November 24. While the Constitutional Court and the Election Commission ruled that the referendum was illegal—the 1994 constitution gave this right to call one only to the Supreme Soviet—Lukashenko ignored the parliament and the court and dismissed the head of the Electoral Commission. The newly passed constitution strengthened the powers of the president vis-à-vis the legislature—for example, the Senate was to be appointed by the president rather than directly elected. Additionally, the new constitution lengthened the term of office.

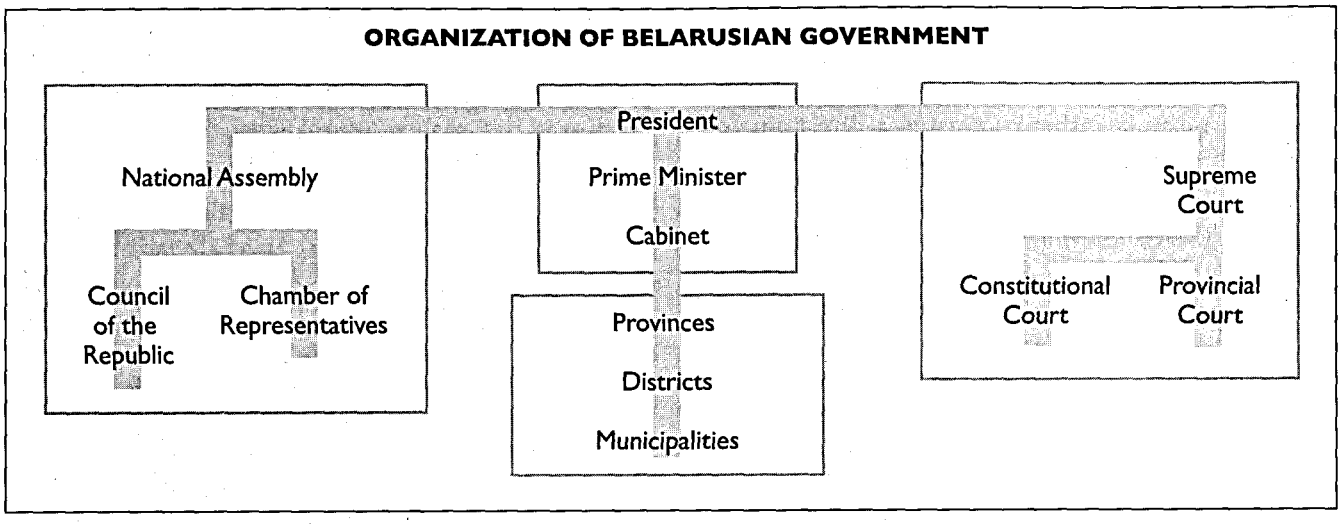
In the referendum 70.5 percent of Belarusians voted in support of Lukashenko's draft constitution while 7.9 percent supported the parliamentary draft of the constitution. Accusations of vote tampering followed the referendum but to little effect. In 2004 the constitution was revised again to eliminate presidential term limits.

LEGISLATURE

Lukashenko's 1996 constitution altered the legislature. It renamed the Supreme Soviet the "National Assembly," which henceforth was to be bicameral. It was now composed of the Chamber of Representatives (the lower house), whose 110 members were to be elected directly through single-mandate elections, and the Council of the Republic (upper house), appointed directly by the president and by regional authorities (those elected and those executive representatives appointed by the president). The first members of the lower house were those delegates of the old Supreme Soviet who had remained loyal to Lukashenko during the political confrontations of 1996.

The Council of the Republic is now composed of 64 members, of which 56 are elected at meetings of deputies of local- and *oblast*-level soviets; the others are appointed by the president. Under the 1996 revision the president, after his term, was to become a senator for life (the 2004 revision removed term limits from the office of president). The National Assembly comes up for election and appointment every four years.

According to the constitution, the National Assembly has the power to legislate. The Chamber of Representatives is authorized to "consider" legislation proposed by the presidency or by 150,000 or more citizens; further, the Chamber has the right to consider questions of no confidence and impeachment proceedings (at the risk of provoking dissolution). The Council of the Republic has the power to adopt or reject those laws passed by the Chamber and to elect six judges of the Constitutional Court. Bills that receive a majority vote in the Chamber (where legislation is initiated) must receive majority support in the Council. If the president signs the bill or lets it sit for two weeks, the bill becomes law; if the president vetoes the bill, it returns to the National Assembly for reconsideration and possible alteration. A two-thirds majority in both houses can override the presidential veto.



In practice, however, Belarus's legislature has been mainly a rubber stamp for Lukashenko. Not only is the legislature weak institutionally, but the Chamber delegates are those who were loyal to Lukashenko in 1996, and the senators are appointed by Lukashenko or his subordinates. In Stalinist fashion, Lukashenko has made the National Assembly "his" body through law and through the power of appointment. In the practice of power, the parliament has lost the fight and remains today in the shadow of the president.

JUDICIARY

It may as yet be too early to speak about an effective, independent judiciary. In theory the judicial branch is autonomous from other branches and answerable only to the law. The job of lower courts, at the local and district levels, is to adjudicate disputes and rule on criminal cases. Belarusian law follows the continental system, where courts apply laws rather than rule on them or use precedent to establish legal interpretations. Cases coming before the court are argued de novo each time.

However, the courts do not appear to have autonomy, which may be in part because of pressure from above. Lukashenko repeatedly disavowed the rulings and legitimacy of the pre-1997 Constitutional Court, and so the present court, being appointed by the president and aware of the history of interbranch relations, may be playing a game of political safety.

The highest judicial organ is the Supreme Court, which has the right and obligation to rule on the constitutionality of presidential decrees and parliamentary legislation and has the duty to rule on the grounds of potential presidential impeachment if the National Assembly makes such a petition. Six of the eleven judges are appointed by the president, and the remainder are appointed by the Senate.

Lower courts, which deal with criminal cases and with arbitration of conflicts, are in theory supposed to follow Western-style procedure. However, court cases have been closed to the public, defendants have not been allowed to call witnesses in their defense, and judges have been hesitant to rule against the heavy-handed tactics of the state. In their defense, judges cite the lack of space for proper open proceedings and an attempt to speed up court proceedings as reasons for such apparent violations of standard international judicial practice; just as likely may be the attempt of the executive branch to use the judiciary to silence opposition and create political order.

REGIONAL AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Local government in Belarus remains problematic to systematize, due to power struggles and Lukashenko's power acquisition. Belarusian local government follows a three-level hierarchy. At the top of the hierarchy, Belarus is split into six *voblasti*; the next level is 141 *raiony* and 38 cities; at the lowest level are towns, villages, and settlements (1,592 total). In theory, each level is to be run by elected deputies and executive figures, who sit for four-year terms and have authority over local budgets, local policies, and local politics (subject to the constitution and national laws).

In theory, local governments are autonomous and local political leadership is chosen through direct elections. However, Lukashenko undermined this auton-

omy in 1994. First, he disbanded local councils and legislatures. He then placed local regions under local administrations headed by centrally appointed officials. In this way Lukashenko created a direct line of command from the president to the regions; handpicked representatives act to implement presidential commands and power in the regions and in practice to act as local watchdogs—in essence re-creating a chain of command reminiscent of that of the republican Communist Party structure.

The Electoral System

According to the 1996 constitution, a president's term is for five years; elections are called by the Chamber of Representatives two months before the end of one term or in the case of an invalid election. For a presidential election to be valid, more than 50 percent of registered voters must cast legitimate ballots; to win, a candidate must receive 50 percent of votes cast, or else there will be a runoff two weeks later between the top two vote getters.

The term of office for Chamber members and senators is four years. In elections held in October 2000 and March 2001, 81 of the 110 representatives elected were not formally aligned with any party. The largest formal party representation was for the Communists (6 seats) and Agrarians (5 seats). Parties opposed to Lukashenko's regime boycotted the elections and gained no formal representation in the Chamber of Representatives.

Some former deputies opposed to Kukashenko have created a "shadow government," known as the Consultative Council of Parties. This shadow government is not quite the same as the British shadow governments, in which opposition party leaders act as if in parallel posts in order to confront the ruling party in a more organized and effective manner. The Belarusian shadow government is a group of opposition leaders confronting the regime; however, its status is illegal.

The 1996 referendum allowed Lukashenko to run for another term as president, and he handily and expectedly defeated his opposition, Vladimir Goncharik, gaining 75.6 percent of votes in the first round. (Opposition figures claimed the real vote was much closer.) In 2002 Lukashenko settled scores with the opposition, sentencing journalists and editors critical of him to hard labor for "defaming" his image and cracking down on opposition generally. In the summer of 2004, before the upcoming parliamentary elections, Lukashenko proposed another referendum—that he be allowed to run for yet another term, in official violation of the Constitution. This referendum was approved in October 2004. Lukashenko will remain in office after the 2006 presidential election, assuming he wins it.

The Party System

Given political developments in the late 1990s and early 2000s, especially Lukashenko's drive to centralize all power in the presidency and his person, it may be premature to talk about developed political parties. Except for the descendants of the Communist parties, most parties in Eastern Europe are not fully developed; in Belarus the case is extreme because representative democracy, the very basis for a party system and party development, has been hindered. First, elections are founded on individual-based, rather than party-based, procedures: voters elect individuals and not party lists, hindering the development of a few strong parties. Further, by disbanding the freely elected parliament of 1995 and replacing it with a handpicked parliament, and by wielding the police against any political activity (individual or organized) that seems to threaten his position, Lukashenko has effectively stood in the way of party organization and evolution. Some opposition party leaders have been arrested or have been forced to flee as political refugees; others have been harassed. After the proroguing of the 1995 parliament, some party members (such as those of the Belarusian Popular Front) created a shadow government to organize the opposition.

Thus it is difficult to develop a clear picture of political parties, since they remain inactive and oppressed and information such as membership figures remains vague at best (when available).

Major Political Parties

COMMUNIST PARTY OF BELARUS

(Kommunisticheskaya Partuya Belarusi; KPB)

The Communist Party of Belarus was temporarily banned from 1991 to 1993, when its members formed the Belarusian Party of Communists (PKB). By 1993 the KPB was legalized, although not all its original members returned from the PKB out of policy differences. The KPB supports closer ties with Russia and

Russian culture and is resistant to economic reforms, for example subsidies for industry and the population, minimal privatization and restructuring, and the like. This is probably why the KPB draws its approximately 2,000 to 3,000 members and electoral support mostly from state officials and pensioners, especially around Minsk. The party's goals are also close to Lukashenko's policy line, and unsurprisingly the party supports Lukashenko's leadership. The president, in turn, has not bothered the KPB as he has others.

BELARUSIAN PARTY OF COMMUNISTS

(Partiya Kommunistov Belaruskaya; PKB)

The Belarusian Party of Communists formed in 1991 to replace the temporarily banned KPB and rejoined the KPB when it returned in 1993. However, after the 1996 referendum some PKB members elected to withdraw the party from this union, and it now is independent and has approximately 2,000 to 3,000 members. While the PKB desires a strong state role in the economy, it does not support Lukashenko and joined the Consultative Council of Parties, the so-called shadow government.

BELARUSIAN POPULAR FRONT

(Adradzennie)

The Belarusian Popular Front, or Adradzennie, was formed on June 25, 1989, as the initial main opposition party to the Communists. The Popular Front continued resistance to Communist domination of the Supreme Soviet in 1992 and in 1994 called for early parliamentary elections, demanding that political and economic reforms and restructuring be carried out. The Popular Front came into conflict with Lukashenko over his heavy-handed tactics in dealing with the legislative branch, and it eventually rose to lead active opposition (such as demonstrations) and the shadow government. While the party has, by several claims, close to 10,000 members, some of its leaders are not in Belarus out of fear of harassment or worse. (Zenon Poznyak, an important party leader, received political asylum in the United States.) Adradzennie has been one of the leaders of anti-Lukashenko opposition. The party supports total Belarusian independence and culture and is strongly anti-Communist. The moderate and more radical wings continue to cooperate.

Minor Political Parties

Other smaller parties and parliamentary factions have organized for elections and party activity in Belarus but are less significant than the major parties. The United Democratic Party, founded in November 1990 and drawing its membership from various social strata, favors market reforms, creation of a true democracy, and independence from Russia. The Belarusian Social Democratic Assembly (or Hramada) draws from workers, peasants, and the intelligentsia. The Hramada takes a middle position between those of the Communists and the Popular Front, advocating a market economy with state control in key areas and membership in the Commonwealth of Independent States but independence from Russia. The Belarusian Peasant Party, drawing on peasants, supports market reform, land privatization, and democratic development. The Agrarian Party has lately become more pro-European and joined the Consultative Council of Parties. Other groups include the United Civic Party, the Christian Democratic Union, and various other small organizations.

Other Political Forces

Street protests following the October 2004 election demonstrated popular unrest, though Lukashenko has dismissed popular revolution as impossible. Western observers have denounced alleged human rights violations and voting irregularities in Belarus, calling for reforms that Lukashenko has firmly refused to implement.

National Prospects

Belarus is one of the less fortunate of the former Soviet republics. With an economy suffering from structural weaknesses and a polity engaged too much in conflict and power building to implement economic reforms, the Belarusian economy is unlikely to "take off" anytime soon. Further, Lukashenko's efforts to centralize power in the presidency, and in his own person, have evoked protests that only help destabilize the political landscape.

If Belarus is to progress, three issues must be dealt with. First is the creation of political institutions and traditions of democracy. Belarus has had perhaps the hardest time of all the nations of the former USSR in creating democracy, mostly because

of the actions of Lukashenko and his coterie. The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) warned in June 1997 that thanks to the actions of the president and executive branch and the inability of the authorities and police to respect civil rights, Belarus was headed toward a totalitarian form of government.

There are few counterweights to strong presidential rule. A powerful group with outside resources has not developed (unlike in Russia), and opposition groups are weak and not well organized. Belarus's lack of importance on the world stage may have helped Lukashenko avoid the scrutiny that Boris Yeltsin underwent. Finally, the bulk of the Belarusian population does not seem actively opposed to Lukashenko's actions; in fact, Lukashenko appears to have some (tacit) support from those who desire a strong leader.

For political stability to be achieved, either a compromise between Lukashenko and his opposition must be reached or one side must win the political battle. In the early 2000s Lukashenko showed no signs of suggesting a compromise on any terms but his own. A democratic outcome for Belarus appeared dim as of 2005, and it was likely that any degree of political calm would only be achieved by repression. There was a ray of democratic hope, however. Lukashenko's popular support appeared to be waning in 2005. In addition, while the economy had not crashed during his reign, there were signs of trouble as the state continued to support unproductive enterprises. Poll data suggested that a majority of Belarusians did not support a third term for the president. This opposition might not translate into a Lukashenko defeat in 2006: the propaganda machine was churning out praise of the president, and there was a widespread informal perception that opposition was futile or that the majority of Belarusians actually support Lukashenko.

The second issue that must be addressed is one of solving the problem of national identity. While Belarus does enjoy an historical heritage, stretching back to ties with the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and the Commonwealth of Poland in the 13th and 16th centuries, it lacks a widespread sense of contemporary unique identity as is the case in Ukraine or the Baltic states. Can local dialects, which differ from Russian, be considered Belarusian? How many Belarusians speak a "native tongue" fluently and as a first language? When we consider that until Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev undertook repressive measures in 1991, the Belarusian population at large did not support independence (as did the populations of Ukraine or the Baltic countries), this problem stands out.

The third issue is a need to clarify relations with Russia. In 1999 Russia and Belarus signed a treaty agreeing to form a two-state union with political and economic integration; neither country, however, has taken serious steps to carry this out. On the one hand, the increasing integration of Belarus's economy into Russia's could result in important improvements. While adopting Russia's tariff and tax structures may bring initial pain, obtaining resources will be easier and cheaper, and being under Russia's "economic wing" may force additional economic reforms. Lukashenko has been supportive of integration; he even voted against the Belarusian Supreme Soviet's resolution to leave the Soviet Union. However, Lukashenko also wants Belarus to be admitted to Russia as an "equal partner," and it is not at all obvious that Russian leaders have such plans. As of the early 2000s Russia's president Vladimir Putin was chilly toward both Lukashenko and a merger between the two countries, so the idea of merger remains a question mark.

Were Belarus to be swallowed bit by bit into Russia, it might have at best a status as some sort of "special *oblast*," but this would not shore up Lukashenko's power, especially as regions in Russia have gained more autonomy and democratic procedures for choosing leaders; this cannot appeal to Lukashenko's drive for power. On the other hand, nationalism and national identity in Belarus have been weak, far weaker than in the Baltic states, Ukraine, or Eastern Europe; a unique, independent Belarusian identity does not seem so widespread beyond the elite as is the case in (western) Ukraine. Integration into Russia could cut out such an embryonic identity and could lead nationalist-inclined elites to grow even more vocal.

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