

Belarus

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Map: Belarus

Since being elected president of Belarus in 1994, Aleksandr Lukashenko has been running his country in an increasingly authoritarian manner. In his struggle for increased power, he has alienated himself from parliament, the constitutional court, his own prime minister and most political parties.

Background

Belarus is widely perceived as an inconsequential country on the international scene, despite its geopolitically important location, its relatively developed economy, the size of its population, and the fact that it retained a nuclear armament after the fall of the Soviet Union. The main reason for this perception is that Belarus has not revealed a drive for a high profile internationally – or, indeed, for independence.

The major issue in Belarusian politics since 1991 has been the country’s relationship to Russia. The public mood generally favours close ties with Russia, and Lukashenko has strongly favoured a union of the two countries.

Russia and Belarus are very close culturally. Many Russians consider Belarusian to be merely a Russian vernacular; in any case, only about 10% of Belarusians speak Belarusian. Russian nationalists typically include Belarus, together with Ukraine and northern Kazakhstan, in their image of a greater Russia uniting closely related

peoples. Out of Belarus’s population of 10.4 million, approximately 80% are Belarusians, 13% Russian, 4% Polish, 3% Ukrainian and 2% belong to other groups.

Russia’s dominance over Belarus is illustrated by the fact that more than half of Belarusian military officers are Russian citizens. And when Belarus became independent, not a single Belarusian diplomat in Moscow was Belarusian. Russia accounts for some 80% of Belarus’s foreign trade, and it supplies 90% of Belarus’s energy and 80% of its raw materials. Thus, Belarus is highly vulnerable economically in relation to Russia. Belarus’s debt to Russia by mid-1996 amounted to some USD 1.2 billion – a strong motivating factor for further integration with Russia.

Belarus’s weak drive for independence can be at least partly accounted for by the fact that the country’s history lacks any real statehood that the contemporary state could present itself as reincarnating.

With the partitions of Poland in 1793 and 1795, Belarus, which had been under the Polish-Lithuanian monarchy for centuries, became part of the Russian Empire. Among Belarusian nationalists today, there is a tendency to point to rebellions against the tsarist state, particularly the uprising in 1794, on the territory of contemporary Poland, Belarus and Lithuania, led by the Belarusian nobleman Tadeusz Kosciuszko, and the Polish uprisings in 1830 and 1863, which attracted some support in Belarus.

With the retreat of revolutionary Russia in World War I, Germany began its annexation of the territory of Belarus. In March 1918, under occupation, an All-Belarusian Congress Executive Committee declared the creation of the Belarusian People’s Republic. In 1919, however, hopes of independence were crushed as the Red Army took control. During World War II, German troops occupied all of Belarus. A quarter of the population was lost in the war against Nazi Germany.

In 1988, early in the period of perestroika, a Belarusian independence movement emerged in the form of the Belorussian Popular Front (BNF). However, this organization did not play a decisive politi

cal role, as did popular fronts in some other Soviet republics, notably the Baltic states.

Since independence, Belarus, formerly among the most developed Soviet republics, has suffered a sharp economic decline. The republic has consistently lagged behind most other former Soviet republics in instituting political and economic change.

Post-Soviet Developments

In 1990, the first multi-party elections to the Supreme Soviet were held. However, the republican Communist Party controlled most of the media at the time, and most of the prominent candidates were members of the party. Thus, the Communists won a large majority of the seats. The main opposition party at the time, the liberal, moderately nationalist National Front, received a mere 10% of the vote.

The Supreme Soviet elected in 1990 remained the republic’s legislative organ until the 1995 parliamentary elections. During its five-year term, however, the political

circumstances in the country changed significantly. The major change was, of course, the 1991 breakup of the Soviet Union. But a new constitution in March 1994 also introduced new rules to the political game.

As independent Belarus was being governed by Soviet laws, its first post-Soviet leader was the chairman of the Supreme Soviet, Stanislau Shushkevich, who succeeded Nikolai Dementyev in September 1991. Politically, Shushkevich was generally a centrist. However, the Soviet constitution did not give him great powers, and the conservative parliament, as well as financial limitations, blocked most of his liberal initiatives.

Reforms were taking place much more slowly in Belarus than in Russia, and the BNF decided that nothing would change unless the government and parliament were changed. Therefore, in early 1992 the party initiated a petition calling for a referendum on the issue of new elections. Nearly half a million signatures were collected, but the call was ultimately rejected by the parliament in late October that year.

After gaining its independence, Belarus, under the leadership of Shushkevich, took some steps towards economic reform: a new internal currency, the Belarusian ruble, was introduced in May 1992, and some privatization was initiated. However, the conservatism of the parliament blocked significant reforms. Allegations of corruption were frequently heard in relation to the sale of state property.

The major developments in Belarusian politics in 1993 related to the struggle for influence between Shushkevich and the Supreme Soviet. In April, the Supreme Soviet voted overwhelmingly in favour of Belarus's joining the collective security pact of the CIS, signed by the majority of CIS members in May 1992. Shushkevich, however, blocked Belarusian membership, arguing that it would go against Belarus's self-pronounced neutrality.

In July, Shushkevich was defeated in a Supreme Soviet vote of confidence, following his refusal to sign the CIS treaty on collective security. However, as the parliament was inquorate because of a boycott by the BNF, Shushkevich was able to remain in office.

Still, throughout 1993, his position gradually weakened in relation to that of Prime Minister Vyacheslav Kebich. Kebich was more strongly oriented towards Russia than was Shushkevich. He supported Belarus's participation in the collective security pact and was willing to cede Belarusian sovereignty to Russia in exchange for an economic union. The largest parliamentary faction, the conservative 'Belarus', supported Kebich, thereby enabling him to impose his policies over Shushkevich's.

Ultimately, Shushkevich was ousted as head of state following a parliament vote of no confidence in late January 1994, on charges of failing to tackle government corruption that were brought by Lukashenko, then head of the parliament's anti-corruption commission. A vote aimed at Kebich was defeated. The vague nature of the charges against Shushkevich – he was accused of 'personal immodesty' – suggested that they were simply a pretext for removing him. Shushkevich had become increasingly unpopular among the conservative parliamentary majority. He was succeeded by one

of Kebich’s cronies, Interior Ministry General Mechyslav Hryb, who was also supported by ‘Belarus’ in the parliament. Hryb did not, however, command as much authority as Shushkevich.

With Shushkevich out, Kebich was free to join both the security pact and a monetary union with Russia. The monetary union treaty was signed in April 1994 by Prime Ministers Kebich and Chernomyrdin. The treaty implied significant concessions for Belarus – in a two-stage process, the country was to remove trade and currency restrictions, and abolish the Belarusian ruble.

During the political struggles, little of significance was done to improve the Belarusian economy. Inflation was running higher than in Russia, at about 30% per month. As Russia increased fuel prices, the energy crisis worsened. Steps were taken towards greater state control of prices. Harsh public reaction to a state initiative to raise the prices of food, electricity and municipal services led the government to announce measures – including wage compensation and subsidies for money-losing companies – which further spurred inflation. The parliament approved a three-year plan to privatize 50% of the republic’s enterprises, but it went largely unimplemented.

The next major development in Belarusian politics took place in March 1994, when the Supreme Soviet first agreed to create the post of president and then almost unanimously adopted a new constitution to replace the Soviet one, which had been in effect since 1978. The constitution turned Belarus into a presidential republic, described as ‘a unitary, democratic, socially oriented, law-governed state’, and proclaimed the goal of becoming a nuclear-free, neutral power. The constitution granted extensive powers to the president.

The first Belarusian presidential elections were held in May and June 1994. In the run-off, Lukashenko won a surprise victory over Kebich, garnering 81.5% of the vote. A former collective farm boss and an MP since 1990, Lukashenko had gained a name in Belarusian politics as the leader of the Supreme Soviet’s controversial Interim Anti-Corruption Commission, which was abolished a few months before the presidential elections.

Lukashenko had run a populist campaign, making some highly contradictory political statements. As president, he had said, he would ‘stop inflation, fight corruption, crush crime and restore ties with the republics of the former Soviet Union’. His enthusiasm for integration with Russia was a striking element of his programme. In a speech to the Russian State Duma shortly before his election, Lukashenko called for reuniting Russia, Ukraine and Belarus into a single state. He also called for ‘acknowledging’ that the creation of the CIS had been a ‘mistake’. On other occasions, he gained attention by expressing his admiration for the leadership qualities of Adolf Hitler and KGB founder Feliks Dzhherzhinskiy.

Upon assuming office in July, Lukashenko sent out a variety of signals with regard to what policies he intended to pursue. Whereas he had campaigned in favour of a state-controlled economy, he appointed a cabinet that was a mixture of conservatives and reformers. It was to be led by Mikhail Chigir, a pro-market banker whose views on the economy coincided more closely with those of reformist Central Bank Director Stanislav Bahdankevich than with what Lukashenko had promoted.

Despite his campaign promises to halt privatization, Lukashenko in the first few months made moves towards implementation of market reforms. In the autumn, he lifted price restrictions on a number of consumer goods. However, mass protests led him to demand a retraction of the reforms. As the prime minister and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) refused, he had to relent. However, shortly afterwards the president acted to water down the effects of the move by doubling the minimum wage. Otherwise, Lukashenko kept his campaign promises to effectively continue an anti-market economic policy. Privatization was halted.

During Lukashenko’s campaign, Russia had actually been rather lukewarm towards his overtures; the larger neighbour preferred Kebich, with his low-key, friendly ways, to the erratic Lukashenko. The February 1995 Russian–Belarusian treaty on friendship and cooperation, which called for joint efforts to protect the Belarusian border and the establishment of a single administration of the customs union, largely resembled the one that Kebich had entered into in April 1994. That treaty had gone largely unimplemented. Under both agreements, the Belarusians allowed for the stationing of Russian troops in Belarus, and in both instances, it was clear that they were doing so in the hope that Russia would respond by easing the debt burden on Belarus. By late 1994, the debt to Russia stood at USD 420 million. By then it was clear that the Russians did not intend to spend precious money on nurturing the Belarusian economy. In September, Russian Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin stated there would be no monetary union with Belarus, because the two countries had diverged too much economically; he specifically pointed out that the average monthly income in Russia was 12 times higher than in Belarus.

Lukashenko’s integration efforts caused so much opposition from nationalists that the president felt obliged to include the issue in a referendum, held simultaneously with the first round of parliamentary elections, in May 1995. It consisted of four questions – on making Russian a state language on a par with Belarusian; on re-introducing the Soviet state symbols; on further economic integration with Russia; and on giving the president the right to dissolve parliament. All questions were supported by 75–85% of the voters. The question on dissolving the parliament was made non-binding. The question on economic integration was the most vaguely worded one, and the president interpreted the vote as supporting integration in general. Within days of the vote, Prime Minister Chigir announced that Moscow would move the Russian customs border to the western border of Belarus. That frontier has since been jointly patrolled by Russian and Belarusian personnel.

The public sentiments behind the referendum result were revealed in an opinion poll conducted at the time of the vote. Here, 95% agreed that price controls on food and basic goods were necessary, while only 3% disagreed. Asked whether only the state should own heavy industry and large enterprises, 67% agreed and 22% disagreed. On the question whether Belarus should continue its own independent path of development or form a new union with Russia, 35% opted for the former and 62% for the latter.

The election law governing the parliamentary elections made it very hard to fill a quorum; the law required more than 50% turnout, and that a candidate had to receive

more than 50% of the votes to be declared the winner. Only 18 deputies were successfully elected in the first round, and a further 102 in the second and final round.

International observers criticized both the elections and the referendum for having been neither free nor fair. In particular, they pointed to the candidates' poor access to the media. Furthermore, the election law limited campaign spending to 600,000 rubles – some USD 50 – provided by the state. Political parties were not allowed to campaign for candidates. This ensured that many candidates remained unknown to the electorate, reducing the interest in voting. Lukashenko himself repeatedly encouraged voters not to take part in the elections; he was not in favour of having any parliament, new or old. The president said he would not vote, and purposely spoiled his ballot.

Relations between the parliament and the president soured further during 1995. The term of the Supreme Soviet elected in 1990 expired in May, but since a quorate new parliament had not been elected, it continued to serve. Lukashenko disputed its right to do so, and demonstratively boycotted its legislation. In October, the Constitutional Court ruled that the Supreme Soviet remained a legitimate body. Lukashenko retaliated by saying that he would not allow a group of judges whom no one had elected to overrule his decrees.

With two more rounds of parliamentary elections held in November and December, a quorum was finally reached – the total number of deputies elected reached 198, exceeding the minimum two-thirds required. The result suggested there is support in Belarus for the legislature to balance the president.

A majority of those elected did not have party affiliations; among those that had, most belonged to the Communist Party and the Agrarian Party. Notably, the reformist and nationalist grouping BNF failed to secure any seats, not least because of a smear campaign in state-controlled media in the run-up to the elections.

During his visit to Russia in February 1996, Lukashenko agreed with Russian President Boris Yeltsin on a ‘zero option’ on debts, which cancelled Belarus’s USD 1.27 billion debt to Russia for gas and credits as well as Russia’s USD 914 million debt for ecological damage caused by Russian troops and their stationing and as compensation for nuclear weapons removed from Belarus.

An enthusiastic Lukashenko proceeded to intensify the integration moves. In late March, he announced that a union treaty with Russia would be signed on 2 April. Some 40,000 people gathered in Minsk on 24 March to protest against the treaty, while it was being debated and approved in the Supreme Soviet. The gathering was peaceful, al

though some protesters were reportedly beaten by OMON (special designation police) forces. A couple of days later, 20,000 people in support of union demonstrated in Minsk as the leaders of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia and Belarus signed an agreement on furthering economic and humanitarian integration – effectively a customs union – within the context of the CIS.

On 2 April, Presidents Yeltsin and Lukashenko signed a union treaty forming a Community of Sovereign Republics (SSR). That day, in Minsk, 30,000 people voiced

their opposition to the agreement in a demonstration which had not been sanctioned by the authorities, as the law demands. Lukashenko responded by arresting hundreds of protesters, journalists who were covering the event and anti-government leaders. Most of those arrested were convicted in ‘administrative trials’ and then jailed for three to ten days.

The union treaty contained wide-ranging provisions covering political, economic and military cooperation. It provided for a common foreign policy and shared use of ‘military infrastructure’; the formation by the end of 1996 of a common transportation system, a common power grid, a common science and technology development centre and a common news information agency; the use of the production capacities of both sides for common interests from the beginning of 1997; and, by the end of 1997, an economic unification that will prepare the countries for the introduction of a common currency.

The SSR’s ruling body would be a supreme council, comprising the heads of state and government, parliamentary leaders and the chair of an executive committee. The executive committee would be formed to act as a permanent body, monitoring compliance with the treaty. A parliamentary assembly would also be established, with an equal number of representatives drawn from the two parliaments. Russia’s prime minister, Viktor Chernomyrdin, was appointed chair of the executive committee on 2 April.

Outside observers quickly noted that the agreement greatly enhanced Yeltsin’s appeal to segments of the Russian electorate in his battle for the presidency with Communist Party leader Gennady Zyuganov. They also pointed out weaknesses in the deal, noting in particular that the exact nature of the integration was unclear, since the countries are to be both sovereign and integrated. The treaty contains no mechanisms forcing the two sides to unite and no precise timetables for the proposed integration, and it does not provide the overseeing bodies set up to implement the process with any binding powers. The fact that the leadership of the SSR was to alternate between Russia and Belarus was enough to raise serious doubts about Russia’s intentions; it was very hard to imagine the Russian leaders’ ceding authority to their Belarusian counterparts.

Basically, Russia has achieved its primary interests in Belarus – keeping troops stationed there and using it as an avenue of export of goods. From a Russian perspective, the economic argument for union must make little sense. Stanislau Bohdankevich, whose liberal Civic Union party has grown to be the largest opposition party, holding 20 seats in parliament, called the union ‘an ordinary bluff’, since Russia would not spend hard currency to prop up Belarus. Given Yeltsin’s victory over Zyuganov in the Russian presidential elections, this seems true. Basically, after struggling to win the votes of Soviet nostalgists, the Yeltsin regime is now back to business as usual.

Unlike his Russian counterparts, Lukashenko remains strongly committed to a state controlled economy: in 1995, strict foreign currency regulations were re-imposed and privatization was again halted. In late March 1996, the president got a budget through parliament with a fiscal deficit above 6%, which is bound to cause further inflation.

On 26 April, the third major rally in a month protesting Lukashenko’s policies took place in Minsk, when 50,000 people demonstrated on the tenth anniversary of the Chernobyl accident. Protest

ers clashed with OMON forces, and several were taken to hospital with injuries. Some 200 were arrested. A few days later, arrest warrants were issued for BNF leaders Zyanon Poznyak and Syarhei Naumchyk for their role in organizing the unauthorized demonstration. The two responded by fleeing the country; eventually, they applied for political asylum in the United States, thus finally putting Belarus in the headlines in the international press.

In late July, Lukashenko, in a new turn in his battle with the Supreme Soviet, demanded that the assembly amend the constitution to extend his term from five to seven years, until 2001. He also called for the creation of an upper legislative house whose members would be presidential appointees. If the Supreme Soviet refused to meet his demands, he warned, he would bypass the assembly with a national referendum.

Not surprisingly, the Supreme Soviet did refuse, and the president responded by announcing that a referendum would be held on an amended version of the constitution. Furthermore, it was reported, the amendments to be voted on would include changes whereby the president would appoint half of the judges in the Constitutional Court, private ownership of land would be outlawed, and the president could not be removed unless he changed his citizenship.

In the period leading up to the referendum, which following a compromise was set to be held on 24 November, antagonism grew in Belarusian politics. Several demonstrations were held to denounce Lukashenko’s regime. A few days before the referendum, Prime Minister Chigir resigned, stating that he did so as a protest against the president’s dictatorial tendencies.

Officially, the referendum ended with over 70% of the votes in favour of Lukashenko’s constitutional proposal. With that, the president had secured support for a very strong concentration of power in his own hands.

But this was not the last word regarding the division of power in Belarus. The opposition disputed the referendum result, claiming there had been widespread voting irregularities. Furthermore, debate raged about whether the referendum should be considered binding; Lukashenko had earlier insisted it must be.

In late November 1996, confrontation still loomed in Belarus. The strongest figure in the conflict was undoubtedly Lukashenko. However, his unconciliatory approach had prompted the opposition to act in a more unified manner, and it had become a stronger force.

Belarus Today

Concerns are growing inside and outside Belarus over Lukashenko’s increasingly authoritarian ways. The circumstances surrounding the 1995 parliamentary elections have already been mentioned. One consequence of the development is that inside Belarus, the once-scattered opposition parties and movements are moving closer to each other, forming an embryonic anti-Lukashenko coalition. (The parliament is still left-leaning; the largest parties are the Communist Party and the Agrarian Party, which hold 42 and 33 seats respectively. About half of the representatives are independent; most of these are left-wingers.) In late July, the leaders of Belarus’s seven most influential parties issued a statement claiming that Lukashenko’s intention regarding the referendum was to institutionalize ‘the unchecked power of a single person for many years to come. The country can be turned into a totalitarian state.’ Lukashenko responded that he found such statements ‘humorous’.

International observers are becoming increasingly alarmed over the character of Lukashenko’s regime. In early 1996, the US State Department reported that the Belarusian government’s record on human rights had ‘worsened markedly as Belarus turned back towards

Soviet-era authoritarian practices’. According to the State Department’s 1995/96 report on Belarus, special formations of Interior Ministry troops occasionally used force against members of parliament, opposition political gatherings and union activities.

The Soviet law on demonstrations, which is still valid, requires an application at least ten days in advance to local officials. The government has sharply curtailed the rights of workers to organize and bargain collectively. The judiciary is not independent and has encountered difficulty acting as a check on the executive branch and its agents. While the constitution establishes a presumption of innocence, conviction rates have not changed from the Soviet era. Nearly 99% of completed cases result in conviction.

According to the US report, government restrictions on freedom of speech and the press, peaceful assembly, religions and movements have increased. Despite the circulation of more independent publications, freedom of the press has not increased. Most newspapers, magazines and journals are state-controlled, and the state increasingly censors the press. Furthermore, it often interferes with the independent media.

One particularly worrisome episode occurred in December 1995, after a deputy read a report on corruption in the president’s administration in parliament. Although the report later proved to be merely a ploy for attention, it became significant when it was revealed that the government had attempted to prevent the press from informing the public about it. That month, Lukashenko temporarily banned four independent newspapers. Over the next few months, he fired five chief editors of major state-subsidized papers.

In late July, at a press conference regarding harvesting, Lukashenko declared that he categorically prohibited ‘all meetings and demonstrations during the time when the

peasant is in the field, when he is working. Everything must be put off until winter.’

The Lukashenko regime has made little progress in terms of economic reform. The economy remains largely state-controlled – not much more than 10% is in private hands. On 14 September, Central Bank President Bahdankevich, a leading advocate of liberal reform, was removed from the government.

In the autumn of 1995, the IMF approved a 12-month standby credit of some USD 300 million in support of the government’s economic programme for 1995/96. However, in early 1996, the IMF put a hold on the loan, citing its alarm over the state of affairs in Belarus. Tellingly, in July 1996, Belarus lost its right to vote in the Council of Europe because it failed to pay its dues. By then it had not paid in nine months, and on 1 June its debts to the council stood at USD 10 million.

Belarus’s annual per capita income has fallen dramatically over the last five years. In 1995, the GDP fell by 10%. Official unemployment runs at less than 5%, but underemployment is significantly higher. Claims from the regime that it is achieving macro-economic stability appear dubious. The implementation of the February ‘zero option’ is still dragging on, although it was reported in late July that Russia and Belarus had reached an agreement on a mechanism for the repayment of the latter’s debt, similar to the ‘zero option’.

Scepticism regarding the market was most recently revealed in the summer of 1996 when, as part of a ‘reformation’ of the banking business, a number of small commercial banks were forcibly merged with the state-controlled international Belvneshekonombank.

To the West, Belarus has been interesting mostly from a security standpoint, in particular by virtue of its possession of nuclear weapons from the Soviet years. Upon the dissolution of the USSR, Belarus had the highest concentration of military personnel and equipment of any Soviet republic. Up to 80% of Belarusian industry was associated with the Soviet military-industrial complex. The republic has, however, not

shown any interest in maintaining a large military force; at present, among Europe’s former communist states, only Albania has a smaller military budget.

Over the last year, several actions by the Belarusian leadership have strained the country’s relationship with the West. In September 1995, the Belarusian air force shot down a US hydrogen balloon which had entered Belarusian airspace, killing the two pilots. In February 1996, the country halted its reductions of conventional arms under the Conventional Armed Forces in Europe Treaty. And in June, it stopped transferring nuclear missiles to Russia – according to an earlier plan, the last missiles should have been out of Belarus by that month.

Then, in late July, in an episode reminiscent of the Soviet years, Russian friends of Belarus spread the word of an alleged US plot against Lukashenko: Viktor Ilyukhin, a Communist Party deputy and chairman of the Duma’s security committee, claimed

that the CIA was planning to assassinate ‘one or two’ members of Lukashenko’s opposition and then blame the killings on him. The chairman of the Belarusian KGB, Vladimir Matskevich, said he doubted the reliability of Ilyukhin’s sources.

Anti-Westernism is not a characteristic of the Belarusian regime as much as pro-Russianism is. It is most likely that the halt in disarmament is largely motivated by economic considerations, not by Lukashenko’s fear of NATO encroachment. This assessment is supported by the fact that Belarus joined the Partnership for Peace treaty in January 1995. The country also ratified the START I and Non-Proliferation (of nuclear weapons) treaties in 1993.

Conclusion

Since gaining power, Lukashenko has proved to be just as erratic as his 1994 election campaign suggested he would be. In his struggle to amass more power in the hands of the executive, he has alienated the parliament, the constitutional court and most political parties.

Being close to Russia and the Russians does not bother most Belarusians; on the contrary, they regard their larger neighbour as a possible saviour from the torrents of post-Soviet developments. However, the extent to which Russia is willing to take on the burdens of further integration, having already gained most of what it could wish for, is an open question.

Lukashenko looks set to continue the pursuit of his ‘double project’ of gathering power in his own hands and simultaneously ceding it to Russia. But considering his lust for power and admiration of those who wield it, one is free to speculate about his motives for doing so.