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Belarus: Background and U.S. Policy Concerns

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Summary

In the past decade, Belarusian President Aleksandr Lukashenko has snuffed out Belarus's modest progress toward democracy and a free market economy and created an authoritarian, Soviet-style regime. Belarus held parliamentary elections in October 2004, as well as a referendum to permit Lukashenko to seek a third term in office in 2006. In a vote condemned by the U.S., EU and OSCE as falling well short of international standards, Lukashenko won the referendum and his supporters won all of the seats in the parliament. Belarus's economy is the most unreformed in Europe, according to an assessment by the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD). Repression in Belarus has increased since the victory of pro-democratic forces in neighboring Ukraine in January 2005.

Of the republics of the former Soviet Union, Belarus has perhaps the closest historical and cultural ties to Russia. Efforts to establish a political and economic "union" between the two countries have had substantial public support in Belarus. Nevertheless, the pace of integration between Belarus and Russia remains slow, in large part due to Lukashenko's refusal to undertake economic reforms. Current Russian policy toward Belarus appears to be focused less on forcing the pace of integration efforts directed from the top, and more on gaining control of Belarus's economic assets (particularly oil and natural gas pipelines), while minimizing the costs of subsidizing the unreformed Belarusian economy. Russia and Belarus have close military ties. Russian and Belarusian air defenses are closely integrated, and Russia has supplied Belarus with its best air defense equipment. A small number of Russian troops remain in Belarus, in part to run a naval radio station and an early warning radar station. Russian strategic bombers are also stationed in Belarus, although reportedly without nuclear weapons. Russia appears to value the sometimes unpredictable Lukashenko as an ally, particularly since a pro-Western leadership came to power in Ukraine.

U.S. officials have sharply criticized Lukashenko as "Europe's last dictator." They have also expressed concerns about Belarus's arms sales and other ties to rogue regimes, such as Saddam Hussein's Iraq. The United States pursues a policy of "selective engagement," which limits ties to the regime, while providing modest support to pro-democracy organizations in Belarus. The 108th Congress responded to the situation in Belarus with legislation. In the first session of the 108th Congress, the Belarus Democracy Act (H.R. 854 and S. 700) was introduced. On February 25, 2004, the House International Relations Committee approved a modified version of the bill. The bill authorizes aid for pro-democracy forces in Belarus and funding for increased broadcasting to Belarus by Voice of America and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. The bill supports sanctions on Belarus and top leaders of the Lukashenko regime until Belarus meets specific democratic and human rights criteria. The bill also requires the President to report within 90 days and every year thereafter on the sale by Belarus of weapons or weapons-related assistance to regimes supporting terrorism, and on the personal wealth of Lukashenko and other senior Belarusian leaders. The President signed the modified Belarus Democracy Act on October 20, 2004 (P.L. 108-347).

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Belarus: Background and U.S. Policy Concerns

Introduction

In the past decade, Belarusian President Aleksandr Lukashenko has snuffed out Belarus's modest progress toward democracy and a free market economy and created an authoritarian regime. His regime, in rhetoric and policies a throwback to the Soviet era, is increasingly an anachronism located among a Central Europe integrated into Euro-Atlantic institutions, a Ukraine that has announced its intentions to follow the same path, and a Russia that is increasingly authoritarian but moving forward with economic modernization. Those advocating a stronger U.S. role in trying to bring democratic change to Belarus say that the country is important to the United States because, as what U.S. officials have called "Europe's last dictatorship," Belarus is an obstacle to the U.S. goal of making Europe "whole and free." Another concern is Belarus's support for pariah regimes, in particular through arms sales.

Political and Economic Situation

Lukashenko dominates the Belarusian political scene, controlling the parliament, government, security services, and judiciary through a large presidential administration and substantial extra-budgetary resources. He has reduced potential threats from within his regime by frequently removing or transferring officials at all levels, often claiming they are incompetent or corrupt. His tight control over an unreformed economy has prevented the rise of powerful "oligarchs," as has occurred in Ukraine and Russia. The Lukashenko regime also controls almost all of the media, which it uses to burnish Lukashenko's image and attack real and imagined adversaries. Lukashenko is known for his political unpredictability and for making rambling and rhetorically colorful public statements.¹

Lukashenko was elected as President of Belarus in 1994 on a populist, anti-corruption platform. He called a referendum in 1996 to approve a new constitution to dramatically increase his powers and weaken those of the legislature and judiciary and extend his term until 2001. The proposal was approved by an overwhelming majority. Lukashenko won re-election in September 2001. Observers from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) condemned the 1996 referendum and 2001 vote as not free and fair. Belarus held parliamentary elections in 2000 that were also condemned by international observers as not free and fair.

¹ Vitalii Silitski, "The Tsar and His Boyars," *Transitions Online*, June 4, 2004, [<http://www.tol.cz>].

The State Department's Country Reports on Human Rights for 2004 judged Belarus's human rights record to be "very poor." It says the government has harassed, arrested, and beaten opposition figures and forced the closure of independent media and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The regime sharply restricts activities of independent trade unions and some religious groups.

A continuing human rights issue in Belarus has been the disappearances of former parliament chairman Viktor Gonchar, his associate Anatoly Krasovsky, former Interior Minister Yuri Zakharenko, and Russian television cameraman Dimitry Zavadsky in 1999. All had been involved in opposition activities or criticized the Lukashenko regime. U.S. officials have demanded that the Belarusian government bring to justice all those involved in the disappearances. In March 2002, the regime convicted four Interior Ministry soldiers for the murder of Zavadsky. The 2004 State Department human rights report said that there were "credible reports" of the involvement of high ranking government officials in the murders, but that the Belarusian regime has made "no credible efforts" to investigate their possible involvement.

Belarus held parliamentary elections on October 17, 2004. An OSCE observation mission found the election to fall significantly short of international standards. The report cited the exclusion of opposition candidates, detention of opposition campaign workers and domestic observers, restrictive campaigning rules, unbalanced media coverage, flawed vote counting, and a lack of transparency in vote tallying. As a result, government-supported candidates won all 110 seats in the lower house of the parliament.

Simultaneously with the parliamentary vote, Lukashenko held a referendum on lifting the two-term limit for the Presidency in the Belarusian constitution. In order for the referendum to be approved, at least half of all registered voters has to vote in favor. Belarusian election officials claimed that 77% of all registered voters approved the referendum, with turnout of 89%. However, an independent exit poll by Gallup/Baltic Surveys found that no more than 48% of registered voters approved the referendum. Moreover, the actual figure vote in favor was likely small, since the survey used official turnout figures, which most observers viewed as inflated. The approval of the referendum question clears the way for Lukashenko to run for a third term as President in 2006.

Since his "victory" in the October 2004 elections, Lukashenko has intensified a crackdown against his opponents that began well before the vote. In just one example, in December 2004, a Belarusian court sentenced Mikhail Marinich, a prominent opposition leader, to five years in prison on the charge of having stolen computer equipment from an NGO he headed. The legal owner of the equipment, the U.S. Embassy in Belarus, also said that Marinich had not stolen it.

The increased repression may be motivated in part by the success of the democratic "Orange Revolution" in Ukraine from November 2004-January 2005 and the overthrow of the Akayev regime in Kirghizstan in March 2005. Opposition groups are preparing to oppose Lukashenko in 2006 Presidential elections, but they face many problems, including weak organizational structures outside of Minsk and other large cities; ideological and personal divisions that may make choosing a united

opposition candidate difficult; and of course, heavy government repression and media bias. It may therefore be very difficult for the opposition to beat Lukashenko in the 2006 election or to force his ouster in a way similar to events in Ukraine and Kirghizstan in 2005.

Economic Situation

Belarus's economy is the most unreformed in Europe, according to most observers. Fiscal and monetary policies remain lax, although the government has avoided a return to hyperinflationary policies of the 1990s. Inflation in 2004 was 19.5%, according to the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Very little progress has been made toward privatization of state-owned firms or collective farms. Indeed, in 2004 Lukashenko expanded an existing "golden share" law. According to the law, the government can exercise control of a privatized state firm even if it holds only a small percentage of the shares. Lukashenko proposed extending this law to all firms, including wholly private ones that were once state-owned. Lukashenko may be motivated by fears that Russian companies might openly or covertly buy up control of Belarusian firms.

However, despite these problems, Belarus's Gross Domestic Product grew by a reported 9.9% in 2004. Although Belarus's economy may be buoyed by rapid growth in neighboring Russia, many experts doubt that Belarusian statistics are entirely accurate. Using different statistical methods, the IMF put Belarusian GDP growth at 6.4% in real terms in 2004. In addition, production figures may be exaggerated by officials to avoid punishment by Lukashenko for not meeting planned targets. Growth in industrial production is also made possible by government subsidies to ailing firms. Collective farms are also propped up by subsidies, although private plots held by peasants are more productive. It is unclear how long Lukashenko can maintain such growth rates and stable but low real wages without large privatization revenues or external financing from Russia or international financial institutions.²

Relations with Russia

Of the republics of the former Soviet Union, Belarus has perhaps the closest historical and cultural ties to Russia. Efforts to establish a political and economic "union" between the two countries have had substantial public support in Belarus. In a July 2003 State Department-sponsored poll, 44% of Belarusians said they support full merger of Belarus and Russia into a joint state, with a single president and parliament, while 30% favored keeping separate Russian and Belarusian states. In a similar survey undertaken in February 2002, 54% favored separate states and 34% supported a single state. Some Belarusians may favor union with Russia in order to participate in Russia's increasing economic dynamism.³

² "Belarus: Economy Benefits from Russian Growth," *Oxford Analytica Daily Brief*, February 17, 2004 and *Economist Intelligence Unit Country Report: Belarus*, June 3, 2004.

³ *Belarus Opinion Alert*, State Department Office of Research, July 28, 2003.

The pace of integration between Belarus and Russia remains slow. During the 1990s, Russia and Belarus adopted a large number of documents on the establishment of political and economic “union” between the two countries, most of which remain unimplemented. Putin has been openly contemptuous of Lukashenko’s grandiose rhetoric about integration. In a gesture that may have signaled impatience, perhaps even contempt, for Lukashenko, Russian President Vladimir Putin proposed in June 2002 that the best form of integration would be the simple incorporation of Belarus into Russia, an idea vehemently rejected by Lukashenko. Lukashenko has apparently also feared that Russia would try to replace him with a more pliable figure. Lukashenko has at times restricted retransmission in Belarus of largely state-controlled Russian television, which sometimes carries stories critical of Lukashenko. Lukashenko has also harassed opposition figures reportedly linked to Moscow and has replaced senior intelligence officials having especially close ties with their Russian counterparts with staunch loyalists. However, after democratic revolutions in Ukraine and Kirghizstan in 2005, Moscow may decide that, despite his failings, Lukashenko is Russia’s most dependable ally among the former Soviet countries, and may therefore now seek to bolster rather than undermine him.

Efforts to move forward on economic union have been stymied by Lukashenko’s reluctance to cede control of monetary policy to Moscow as a condition for a currency union, which would involve the adoption of the Russian ruble by Belarus. As a result, Russia has repeatedly postponed setting a date for a joint currency for the two countries. Current Russian policy toward Belarus appears to be focused less on forcing the pace of integration efforts directed from the top, and more on gaining control of Belarus’s economic assets, while minimizing the costs of subsidizing the unreformed Belarusian economy. For his part, Lukashenko has attempted to prevent Russia’s takeover of key Belarusian firms.

One important example has been Belarus’s dependence on cheap Russian natural gas and the battle for control of oil and natural gas pipelines in Belarus. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia’s state-owned natural gas firm Gazprom has supplied Belarus with natural gas at Russian domestic prices, \$30 per 1000 cubic meters, providing a large indirect subsidy to the Lukashenko regime. However, in January 2004, Gazprom cut off supplies to Belarus and demanded it pay \$50 per 1000 cubic meters, the price paid by Ukraine, but still short of the \$80 paid by other international customers. Gazprom reportedly made the move because of Belarus’s refusal in 2003 to sell it a controlling share in Belarus’s gas-pipeline network. Lukashenko angrily blasted the Russian government, accusing it of “terrorism” and of taking the most hostile steps against Belarus since the Nazis invaded the country in 1941. He said his country would tighten its belt to find the money to pay the increased gas prices.⁴ The two sides reached agreement on a price of \$47 per 1000 cubic meters at a June 2004 summit. They also confirmed Russian control of oil pipelines on Belarusian soil, but the issue of the gas pipelines has not been resolved. The two sides have agreed to keep 2006 gas prices at the same level as 2005.

Russia and Belarus have close military ties. Russian and Belarusian air defenses are closely integrated, and Russia has supplied Belarus with its best air defense

⁴ *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Belarus and Ukraine Report*, March 2, 2004.

equipment. Although they do not have joint armed forces, a regional task force of Belarusian and Russian ground forces conducts joint military exercises. A small number of Russian troops remain in Belarus, in part to run a naval radio station and an early warning radar station.

NATO, the European Union, and Belarus

Belarus's relations with NATO are poor. Belarus strongly opposed NATO enlargement, often with more bitterness than Russia did. In 2004, after the second wave of enlargement, Lukashenko continued to say that NATO represents a military threat to Belarus. Belarus is a member of the Partnership for Peace program, but has not been very active in it.

Belarus's ties with the European Union have also been difficult. Although Lukashenko has often called for closer economic ties with the EU, he has strongly condemned EU criticisms of his regime as interference in the country's affairs. Since 1997, the EU has followed a policy of limiting its official contacts with the Lukashenko regime. Belarus is the only ex-Soviet country without a Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) with the EU. What little aid the EU gives to Belarus is focused on supporting civil society groups, independent media and other pro-democracy elements in Belarus. Because it does not have a PCA, Belarus is excluded from the EU's recently unveiled "European Neighborhood" policy, which seeks to improve ties with countries around the newly-enlarged EU. The strategy includes "action plans" for Ukraine, Moldova and countries in the Middle East and North Africa, but not Belarus. EU officials have stressed that the EU would continue to support "political change" in Belarus.⁵ The EU has budgeted 10 million Euros in aid to Belarus's population under the TACIS program for 2005-2006

On August 6, 2004, the EU announced that it had agreed that Yuri Sivakov, the Minister of Sport of Belarus should be barred from entering Greece to attend the Olympic Games in Athens. The statement noted that Sivakov, formerly Interior Minister of Belarus, had been identified as one of the key figures in the 1999 disappearances of Viktor Gonchar, Anatoly Krasovsky, Yuri Zakharenko, and Dimitry Zavadsky, in an April 2004 Council of Europe report. After the announcement, Sivakov announced that he would not attend the Games. Belarusian officials angrily denounced the EU move.

In September 2004, the EU barred from its territory high officials involved in the murder of the four murdered and disappeared journalists and politicians, as well as those involved in subsequent cover-ups. In December 2004 elections, the EU announced an extension of its visa ban to "persons who are directly responsible for the fraudulent elections and referendum in Belarus on October 17, 2004 and those who are responsible for severe human rights violations in the repression of peaceful demonstrators in the aftermath of the elections and referendum in Belarus."⁶

⁵ *RFE/RL Newslines*, Part II, May 13, 2004.

⁶ "EU's Relations with Belarus," EU Commission website, (continued...)

On March 10, 2005, the European Parliament passed a resolution calling on EU states to recognize that Lukashenko is a “dictator.” The resolution calls on the EU and member governments to freeze the assets of Lukashenko and his senior officials; expand the list of Belarusian officials banned from receiving visas; create radio and television stations in neighboring countries to counter regime propaganda; regularly bring up the issue of human rights in Belarus in EU consultations with Moscow; and, working with other democratic countries, increase support for independent media, civil society groups and other democratic forces in Belarus.⁷ However, the EU has not so far not supported economic sanctions on Belarus as a whole. Indeed, Belarus currently enjoys EU tariff reductions under the Generalized System of Preferences (GSP), although these are currently under investigation by the EU due to Lukashenko’s repression of independent trade unions.

Poland has urged the EU to not establish new dividing lines in Europe. Poland’s position is based on several factors, including the fact that since joining the EU in May 2004, Poland has the main responsibility for guarding the EU’s border with Belarus. Lukashenko and other Belarusian officials have issued veiled threats that the situation on the border could worsen if ties with Western countries deteriorate. Belarus could make the situation uncomfortable for Poland by allowing more human trafficking to occur through Belarus to Poland or by creating obstacles for goods transiting Belarus to or from Poland. Belarusian border guards have reportedly seized and confiscated cargos in the past, often with dubious legal justification.⁸ Another factor is long-standing historical links to Belarus, including a significant Polish ethnic minority. Polish officials have spoken in favor of eventual EU membership for a reformed Belarus, albeit in the “very long term.” Poland has opposed trade sanctions on Belarus.⁹ The Baltic states, new EU members that also border on Belarus, have also called for closer Western engagement in bringing democracy to Belarus. Both Poland and the Baltic states have worked closely with Belarus’s pro-democracy media, labor unions and political parties, including by sponsoring international conferences on Belarus.

U.S. Policy

The United States recognized independent Belarus on December 25, 1991. U.S. officials hailed the removal of all nuclear weapons from Belarus in November 1996. However, U.S.-Belarus relations deteriorated as Lukashenko become increasingly authoritarian. In March 1997, a State Department spokesman announced a policy of “selective engagement” with Belarus on issues of U.S. national interests and “very limited dealings” on other issues. U.S. aid to Belarus has been meager in recent years, reflecting the selective engagement strategy. The United States provided \$8 million

⁶ (...continued)

[http://europa.eu.int/comm/external_relations/belarus/intro/index.htm#initiatives]

⁷ See the European Parliament website, [http://www.europarl.eu.int/home/default_en.htm]

⁸ Mikhail Vanyashkin, “Rubber-Stamped Daylight Robbery,” *Transitions Online*, January 30, 2004.

⁹ “Polish Foreign Minister: Eastern Dimension Must Become Key EU Policy,” *Ukraine Business Report*, April 29, 2004.

in bilateral aid to Belarus in FY2004, focused mainly on supporting pro-democracy NGOs and independent media, as well as fighting HIV/AIDS (a serious problem in Belarus) and trafficking in persons. The Administration estimates it will provide \$6.8 million in aid in FY2005, and has requested \$7.55 million for FY2006.¹⁰

The United States has been strongly critical of Belarus's failures in democratic development and human rights. After Lukashenko's victory in the September 2001 presidential election, the Administration sharply criticized Lukashenko, charging that he had "stolen" the election and calling him "Europe's last dictator."¹¹ U.S. officials have demanded that the Belarusian government bring to justice all those involved in the disappearances of the four members of the opposition in 1999. In November 2002, the United States announced that it would join 14 EU countries in imposing a visa ban against Lukashenko and other top Belarusian officials due to Belarus's closure of an OSCE human rights monitoring mission in the country. The visa ban was lifted in April 2003 after the OSCE office was reopened.

In addition to U.S. opposition to Lukashenko's domestic policy, the United States has criticized Belarus's relations with rogue regimes. In April 2003, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Stephen Pifer charged that substantial evidence existed that Belarus had provided weapons and training to countries and groups that support terrorism, including Iran and Saddam Hussein's Iraq.¹² Belarus's assistance to Saddam's regime may have also extended beyond the regime's collapse. One high-ranking aide to Saddam was reportedly captured by U.S. forces last year with Belarusian passports for himself and other key regime leaders, including Saddam's sons.¹³

The United States has worked closely with the European Union on policy toward Belarus. On March 19, 2004, Pifer visited Minsk in a joint mission with EU representatives. A U.S.-EU joint statement after talks with the Belarusian government, political parties, civil society groups, independent media, and others, expressed "deep concern over the deteriorating democratic situation in the country," in such areas as infringement of media freedoms, banning of NGOs dealing with human rights, restrictions on freedom of association and on demonstrations, and attacks on academic freedom. The delegation stressed the importance of a "free and fair process leading up to the October 2004 parliamentary elections." The statement said that U.S. and EU relations with Belarus could improve if Belarus implements political reforms.¹⁴

On October 20, 2004, in a statement announcing his signing of the Belarus Democracy Act of 2004, President Bush said the October 17 Belarusian elections were undertaken "in a climate of abuse and fear," noting that OSCE and other observers found that Lukashenko's victory "was achieved by fraudulent means." He added that

¹⁰ State Department FY2006 Congressional Presentation on Foreign Assistance, February 2005.

¹¹ *Associated Press* wire dispatch, September 17, 2001.

¹² *AP* wire dispatch, April 16, 2003

¹³ Andrei Sannikov and Mark Lenzi, "Belarus's Terrorist Ties," *Washington Post*, June 12, 2004, 21.

¹⁴ Press Statement by Joint EU-U.S. Mission to Belarus, March 19, 2004.

“at a time when freedom is advancing around the world... there is no place in a Europe whole and free for a regime of this kind.” The President stressed that “the fate of Belarus will rest not with a dictator, but with the students, trade unionists, civic and religious leaders, journalists, and all citizens of Belarus claiming freedom for their nation.” In December 2004, the United States, in concert with the EU, enacted a visa ban on Belarusian officials involved in electoral fraud and human rights violations.

The United States is also concerned about human trafficking in Belarus. According to the State Department’s 2004 Trafficking in Persons report, Belarus is a country of origin and transit for women and children trafficked for sexual exploitation. It is listed as a “Tier 2” country. This means that it does not meet minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking, but is making “significant” efforts to do so. The report says Belarus has demonstrated “political will” to fight trafficking, but needs to do more in the protection and assistance to victims. Belarus’s record has improved in recent years. In the 2002 report, Belarus was listed as a “Tier 3” country, that is, one not meeting minimum standards for ending trafficking and not making significant efforts to do so. Such countries may be subject to U.S. sanctions under the Trafficking Victims Protection Act (P.L. 106-386).

Congressional Action

Members of Congress have spoken out strongly against human rights abuses in Belarus in Congressional hearings, floor statements, speeches and proposed legislation. In the first session of the 108th Congress, the Belarus Democracy Act (H.R. 854 and S. 700) was introduced. On February 25, 2004, the House International Relations Committee unanimously approved a modified version of the bill. It authorizes aid for pro-democracy forces in Belarus, as well as funds for increased broadcasting to Belarus by Voice of America and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. The bill calls for sanctions on Belarus, including expressing the sense of the Congress in favor of a visa ban against senior Belarusian officials; a prohibition on strategic exports to Belarus; a prohibition on U.S. financial assistance to the Belarusian government; and expressing the sense of the Congress that the United States should oppose multilateral financial aid to Belarus. These conditions would remain in place until Belarus meets specific democratic and human rights criteria. The President can waive the sanctions if he certifies that it is in the U.S. “national interest” to do so. The bill expresses the sense of the Congress that the President should coordinate with European countries to take similar measures against Belarus.

The bill also requires the President to report within 90 days and every year thereafter on the sale of weapons or weapons-related assistance to regimes supporting terrorism, and on the personal wealth of Lukashenko and other senior Belarusian leaders. While supporting the bill’s objectives, the Administration opposed mandated sanctions included in previous versions of the bill, saying they would reduce needed diplomatic flexibility.¹⁵ The President signed the modified Belarus Democracy Act on October 20, 2004 (P.L. 108-347).

¹⁵ Discussions with U.S. officials.

On July 22, 2004, the House passed H.Res. 652 by a vote of 421-0. The resolution calls on Belarus to hold free and fair parliamentary elections this fall, including by guaranteeing full transparency of election procedures; multiparty representation on all election commissions; unimpeded access by opposition parties to the media; an end to harassment of candidates, opposition parties and independent media; freedom for local and international election observers to operate; and other criteria for a free and fair vote.

In the 109th Congress, Representative Christopher Smith introduced H.Con.Res. 102 on March 16, 2005. The resolution condemns the repression of the Lukashenko regime, including during the October 2004 elections and subsequently, called on Belarus to cease its repression, called on the U.N. Human Rights Commission to pass a resolution condemning Belarus's human rights violations, and calls on the U.S. government and other governments to continue to speak out against human rights abuses of the Lukashenko regime.

Policy Options

Many policy options have been proposed to deal with the problems posed by the Lukashenko regime. These options are not mutually exclusive and may be used in combination. Unilateral U.S. action, while it may put some pressure on the regime, could be less effective than actions supported by the European Union and, if possible, Russia, due to the greater economic and other links they have with Belarus.

- One approach would be to bolster the Belarusian opposition, particularly in the run-up to the 2006 Presidential elections. The United States and its allies could increase aid to Belarusian independent media, opposition political parties and non-governmental organizations from current, modest levels. However, the regime shows little sign of relaxing its grip to permit the opposition to contest a free and fair election, as it showed during the October 2004 parliamentary elections. Indeed, it appears to be stepping up repression. There may also be a limit to how much additional aid the relatively weak, oppressed, and internally divided opposition to Lukashenko can absorb. Moreover, Lukashenko has taken every opportunity to paint the opposition as taking orders from foreign powers because of the aid it receives.
- One could try to ease the isolation of the Belarusian population by expanding exchange programs to permit more Belarusians to be exposed to changes taking place in neighboring Poland and the Baltic states. Internationally-supported media outlets operating in neighboring countries could serve to break the regime's media monopoly.
- Another possible course of action would be to impose additional sanctions on Belarus or the Lukashenko regime. The United States and the EU have imposed a visa ban on a number of top Belarusian leaders. However it is unclear whether increased sanctions against the leadership would have any effect, other than causing it to dig in

its heels. Sanctions against Belarus as a whole could cause hardship to ordinary Belarusians.

- The United States could also try to enlist the assistance of Russia, arguing that Russia would be better off with a democratic, market-oriented Belarus than a sometimes unpredictable dictatorship. Russia's support, overt or tacit, would be very valuable, given Belarus's economic and psychological dependence on Russia. However, Moscow appears to view Lukashenko as a useful ally on its borders. As noted above, Russian policy under Putin has so far focused on gaining control of Belarus's economic assets, not in ousting Lukashenko. Moreover, while Russia has urged Belarus to undertake economic reforms, it may be less eager to promote democracy there, particularly at a time when Russia itself appears to be moving toward authoritarianism. In addition, Russia has tended to view Belarus as lying within its own sphere of interests, in which it would prefer to act without Western support or interference. This Russian attitude has been reinforced by the victory of pro-Western Viktor Yushchenko in Ukraine's December 2004 Presidential elections, which Russian leaders viewed as a humiliation for Moscow and a challenge to its geopolitical interests in the region.
- The United States could attempt to re-engage with the Lukashenko regime as a way to encourage it to move toward a democratic course. Although Lukashenko's grumbling about Russia's hard bargaining over energy and other issues could conceivably be viewed as an opening, this option has generated very little if any support, mainly due to the belief among many observers that Lukashenko is firmly committed to his present course, and therefore that true change can only come after Lukashenko is gone.