



Integrated Country Strategy

BELARUS

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1. Chief of Mission Priorities

Belarus remains the only post-Soviet country where there has been virtually no political or economic reform over the last 30 years. Since being elected president in 1994, Alyaksandr Lukashenka has steadily consolidated power through authoritarian means and a centralized economic system. Several years of gradual improvements in the bilateral relationship culminated in the first visit by a Secretary of State to Belarus in over 25 years in February 2020 and the appointment of the first U.S. ambassador to Belarus in nearly 15 years. However, the fraudulent presidential election in August 2020 and its violent aftermath fundamentally altered Belarus's political landscape and galvanized the people of Belarus to organize at a grassroots-level against the Lukashenka regime. The regime responded by desperately trying to eliminate all sources of anti-regime sentiment: it expelled and arrested thousands of political activists, journalists, and NGO staff, and "liquidated" hundreds of civil society and media organizations. Only entities entirely controlled by and loyal to the regime have been allowed to continue. Increasingly the regime has turned to designating all its detractors as "extremists" or "terrorists," making even reposting a news article from an "extremist" news media source a crime punishable by up to seven years in prison. There are over 1,000 political prisoners in the country, many of whom were arrested merely for attending peaceful protests or for posting commentary on social media critical of the government.

As Western nations ratcheted up the pressure on the regime to change course, Lukashenka responded with increasingly extreme measures. He diverted a civilian aircraft under the pretext of a bomb threat to arrest a dissident blogger, he weaponized irregular migration creating a humanitarian crisis on Belarus's border with the EU, and he slashed the Western diplomatic presence in the country, expelling Western ambassadors and diplomats including four rounds of forced staffing reductions at U.S. Embassy Minsk. The U.S. presence in Minsk has been reduced from 21 USDH positions and over 120 LE staff in December 2020, to six USDH and 20 LE staff as of March 2022 with the specific purpose of limiting U.S. influence and reach. These edicts forced the closure of U.S. Embassy Minsk's entire USAID and Public Diplomacy sections. In August 2021 a Belarus Affairs Unit (BAU) hosted at U.S. Embassy Vilnius was created to

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supplement Embassy Minsk's capacity. The BAU currently consists of six USDH positions and two LE staff. Embassy Minsk and the BAU operate as a single Mission Belarus in two locations under the overall guidance of the U.S. Special Envoy for Belarus resident in Vilnius.

Despite the extreme repression of the Lukashenka regime, the citizens of Belarus remain steadfast in their call for a democratic government that respects human rights. Although many of our bilateral cooperation programs are paused and our ability to engage the government of Belarus (GOB) is severely constrained, Embassy Minsk stands with the people of Belarus and provides support that will generate new opportunities for citizens to live with dignity and self-determination. Our approach is to engage Belarusian where they are - whether in Belarus or in exile. This includes a particular focus on the major hubs for the democratic forces in exile – Vilnius, Warsaw, and Kyiv. Effective outreach and engagement with these Belarusian communities requires concerted inter-embassy resources, coordination, and cooperation.

The historic events of 2020 demonstrated the impact of sustained U.S. engagement with Belarusian audiences, NGOs, and the private sector over the last decade despite limited official relations. The Embassy is taking the long view on Belarus and laying the groundwork for a future moment in which we can do more in the bilateral relationship. We will move our goals and objectives forward to the extent possible in this challenging environment and given U.S. Embassy Minsk's severely limited resources and capacities. Mission Belarus is focused on holding the current regime to account for its violations of human rights, promoting people-to-people ties, increasing support for civil society, and expanding space for the private sector.

Specifically, the Mission's focuses on three goals:

- Human rights are widely respected and democratic institutions strengthened.
- U.S. engagement strengthens regional stability and protects American interests.
- Advancing the possibility for private sector growth and entrepreneurship expand to counter non-market and coercive economic practices.

The Mission's top objective remains the promotion of a stronger, more active civil society, greater respect for democratic values, and enhanced access to information for the people of Belarus to increase citizens' demand for democratic governance and reforms that would lead to a free market-oriented economy. This will require promotion of concepts of democratic governance and free markets. Continued foreign assistance, public diplomacy, and D&CP resources for programs are critical to strengthening civil society and civic participation, increasing access to unbiased information, and enhancing democratic political actors' ability to compete through a mix of in-country and cross-border. Through direct meetings, public outreach, and supportive statements, we will also engage Belarus's civil society actors and the increasingly diverse groups engaging in civic and political life both in and outside of Belarus to help strengthen their role in Belarusian society and encourage the government to engage in meaningful and concrete dialogue resulting in real political reforms and more sustainable economic prosperity

Embassy Minsk and the BAU will increase Belarusians' understanding of American interests and values through key Public Diplomacy elements of media engagement, professional and education exchanges, and American Center outreach. We will provide training opportunities for Belarusian independent media, mostly in exile, on countering disinformation, and strengthening investigative journalism. We will prioritize professional and educational exchange programs that focus on entrepreneurship, capacity building, investment, and trade, to counter non-market and coercive economic practices. The virtual American Center will connect key stakeholders, activists, civil society representatives, alumni, and community leaders with programming focused on developing civic activism and building stronger communities. These lines of efforts, combined with programs funded under ESF/AEECA, will support civil society in and out of Belarus, and contribute to more open and competitive political and economic systems.

Along with support for civil society we will continue to seek ways to support the growth of the private sector in Belarus and in the fast-growing Belarusian business communities outside the country. Growth in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) is essential to preparing for their contribution to the transition to a market economy. This includes helping some SMEs

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maintain ties to Belarus as they grow their businesses in exile. With the tools still available, Embassy Minsk will promote entrepreneurship in Belarus, focusing on expanding the number of small and medium-sized enterprises and further developing business education and training, a particular challenge given the extent of state control over education and training tools. As innovation-based startups and existing companies demonstrate higher growth potential and less dependency on traditional markets, new SME support will help develop the ecosystem for innovation-based entrepreneurship both inside and outside Belarus. Access to international finance will prove difficult for SMEs which have recently relocated outside of Belarus and the business climate in the country will further deteriorate if the Lukashenka regime continues to view entrepreneurship with suspicion and favor state control of the economy.

Finally, Embassy Minsk and the BAU will advance specific U.S. interests where prudent. Engagement with the Belarusian authorities will remain limited to those few remaining areas of mutual concern, including nuclear safety and humanitarian assistance. Some security and military-to-military engagements will continue, when defined as in U.S. interests. Without additional staff Embassy Minsk's consular section is limited to providing American Citizen Services and emergency visa assistance.

2. Mission Strategic Framework

Mission Goal 1: Human rights are widely respected and democratic institutions strengthened. **Mission Objective 1.1:** Increase the ability of Belarusian civil society and the democratic forces in exile to be effective advocates for citizens' rights and to enable their meaningful participation in political processes.

- **Mission Objective 1.2:** Through U.S. support Belarusian independent media is empowered as a voice to report objectively.
- **Mission Objective 1.3:** The Belarusian public is capable of holding state institutions accountable to operate transparently in a way that respects the rule of law.

Mission Goal 2: Our engagement strengthens regional stability and protects American interests.

- **Mission Objective 2.1:** Belarus contributes to regional stability by increasing reducing transnational security issues originating from Belarus and minimizing the negative influence of Belarusian regional security-related narratives.
- **Mission Objective 2.2:** Maintain Embassy Minsk's limited ability to protect American citizens' interests in Belarus.

Mission Goal 3: Encourage private sector growth and entrepreneurship to counter non-market and coercive economic practices.

- **Mission Objective 3.1:** Work with democratic forces to maintain human capital and resources in the private sector in preparation for the post-Lukashenka era economic transition.
- **Mission Objective 3.2:** Develop Belarusian private sector and entrepreneurship ecosystem while avoiding Belarusian regime entities.

Management Objective 1: Establish adequate staff and resources across multiple missions to optimize our capacity to function effectively as the local context permits.

3. Mission Goals and Objectives

Mission Goal 1 | Human rights are widely respected and democratic institutions strengthened.

Description | The authoritarian regime in Belarus continues to consolidate power and to repress and restrict civil society and the independent media. It has taken no steps to hold perpetrators accountable for human rights abuses against Belarusian citizens. However, Belarusians remain politically aware and the Belarusian democratic forces in exile work actively to rally international support for a future democratic Belarus. Through continued engagement with and programming to support the pro-democracy movement and independent media over the next three to five years, the United States can take advantage of this opening to lay the groundwork for a democratic Belarus in which human rights are widely respected and the state is accountable to its citizens.

Objective 1.1 | Increase the ability of Belarusian civil society and the democratic forces in the country and in exile to be effective advocates for citizens' rights and to enable meaningful participation in political processes.

- **Objective 1.1 Justification** | In the wake of the fraudulent presidential election in 2020, Belarus witnessed an inspiring surge in civic activism. The peaceful mass protests, which lasted for months and took place throughout the country, showed the majority of Belarusians rejected the election results and, after a quarter century of Alyaksandr Lukashenka's rule, wanted political change. The Lukashenka regime responded with a brutal crackdown, arresting tens of thousands, forcing the closure of all independent media and jailing leading opposition leaders and journalists. There are over 1,000 political prisoners in the country, a number which continues to grow. The Lukashenka regime seeks to crush civil society and democratic forces, and with it the aspirations of Belarusian citizens for a more democratic and accountable government. By forcing thousands into exile, jailing others, and passing legislation on extremism, Lukashenka

has silenced protests and restricted citizens' access to independent sources of information. The regime has unleashed a barrage of disinformation to discredit democratic leaders, human rights defenders, and independent journalists. Fearing a democratic and more independent Belarus would integrate with Europe, the Kremlin has contributed resources and expertise to this effort. This Mission Goal will not be achieved if the Lukashenka regime and its Kremlin sponsors succeed in destroying civil society and democratic forces, including by isolating them from Belarusians inside the country. The Mission will seek to enable civil society and democratic leaders – both inside and outside the country – to continue their work protecting human rights, empowering their fellow citizens, and increasing public support for a democratic Belarus in which all citizens can participate.

- **Objective 1.1 Linkages** | This objective supports Strategic Objective 3 in EUR Bureau's Joint Strategic Plan: Strengthen democratic institutions, uphold universal values, and promote human dignity. Specifically, it supports Strategic Objective 3.1 and 3.2 on strengthening democratic institutions and advocating for equity, accessibility, and rights for all. In addition, it supports the Interim National Security Strategy's goal to "join with like-minded allies and partners to revitalize democracy the world over" and "impose real costs on anyone who interferes in our democratic process."
- **Objective 1.1 Risks** | The greatest risk is that the regime will succeed in neutralizing Belarus' democratic forces - both those inside and outside the country - enabling it to consolidate its position and eliminate citizens' demands for democratic reforms and political participation as a threat. On a more operational level, U.S. assistance risks exposing those inside the country to persecution and loss of liberty, while exposing the broader movement to accusations of being associated with or controlled by foreign governments.

Objective 1.2 | Belarusian independent media is empowered as a voice to report objectively.

- **Objective 1.2 Justification** | Since the summer of 2020 the Lukashenka regime has relentlessly targeted and persecuted independent media outlets and journalists,

including nontraditional reporters and commentators such as bloggers and YouTube video producers. Media consumption habits in Belarus have undergone significant change, and there is value in helping emerging media practitioners, such as YouTube vloggers, to put out content that is fair, objective and interesting. Dozens of journalists are now political prisoners, most of them arrested for reporting on protest actions or simply for working for a media outlet the regime wanted to destroy. And many media outlets have been destroyed. No major independent media outlet now operates within the borders of Belarus, and almost no independent journalists work publicly in the country. While some news outlets – including newspapers that have seen their printers cancel contracts and are unable to find other presses that will work with them – have shut down, many on-line media outlets have fled the country and now report on Belarus from Lithuania, Poland, Ukraine and other countries.

While state-run media, which regularly publish and broadcast disinformation, have become even more propagandistic, dishonest, and vengeful, the reporting in independent media has by and large remained objective and of reasonable quality. There is a growing disconnect between pro-change and pro-regime populations and between populations in Belarus and populations in exile. These disconnects could lead to conflict or to a challenge of reunifying populations in a new Belarus. Independent media reporting has suffered because of the lack of access to events and sources in Belarus, the difficulty of verifying information coming from Belarus, and the massive disruption of the journalistic community that has made it more difficult for journalists to mingle and to support, mentor and train others in the field. Journalistic work also has been hampered by logistical and financial challenges. For example, many news outlets have lost their newsrooms, equipment and software, archives, revenue streams, and access to bank accounts. The U. S. government will seek to enable independent media inside and outside Belarus to continue their work reporting objectively on issues of concerns to the people of Belarus, including the political crisis, human rights, economic issues, and the Lukashenka regime.

- **Objective 1.2 Linkages** | This objective supports Strategic Objective 3 in EUR Bureau’s Joint Strategic Plan: Strengthen democratic institutions, uphold universal values, and promote human dignity. Specifically, it supports Strategic Objective 3.1 and 3.2 on strengthening democratic institutions and advocating for equity, accessibility, and rights for all.
- **Objective 1.2 Risks** | The greatest risk is that the regime will be able to maintain its pressure on independent media and journalists and continue the conditions that weaken – and could eventually kill – independent journalism and the demand for it by the people of Belarus. The regime’s designation of many independent media outlets and social media channels as “extremist” over the past year has further eroded demand for these outlets by creating a risk that their Belarusian subscribers will face prosecution. The media working in exile require substantial financial assistance during this period in which their previous, successful streams of revenue have been blocked or diverted. Grant assistance from the U. S. government or other donors increases the risk that media outlets receiving such grants will, consciously or subconsciously, tailor their reporting to please the donor rather than focusing on the needs and wants of the audience. Reliance on grants also subjects media outlets to accusations that they are mere puppets of the donors and increases the risk that they will lose credibility that many outlets have built over years or decades of independent operation. The longer media outlets must operate from abroad, the less the connected those journalists will be to conditions and people in Belarus, and the greater the risk of lack of relevance or understanding of issues of concern in Belarus.

Objective 1.3 | The Belarusian public is able to hold state institutions accountable, forcing them to operate transparently and respect the rule of law, in accordance with the demands of the Belarusian people and international norms/obligations.

- **Objective 1.3 Justification** | Belarusian state institutions currently operate in an undemocratic and nontransparent way. The Lukashenka regime has taken no meaningful action to hold accountable those responsible for human rights violations in

the fall 2020 post-election period. However, Belarusian civil society and the Belarusian democratic forces seek to hold state institutions accountable. Further, Mission Belarus benefits from high-level policy support for efforts to build democratic institutions and ensure accountability. Our work with civil society, the Belarusian democratic forces, Washington policymakers, and likeminded international partners capitalizes on these strengths. Further, work on building future state institutions will position Mission Belarus to be able to take advantage of any potential opportunities that may arise in the Belarusian political landscape over the next three to five years.

- **Objective 1.3 Linkages** | This objective supports Strategic Objective 3 in EUR Bureau's Joint Strategic Plan: Strengthen democratic institutions, uphold universal values, and promote human dignity. Specifically, it supports Strategic Objective 3.1 and 3.2 on strengthening democratic institutions and advocating for equity, accessibility, and rights for all. In addition, it supports the Interim National Security Strategy's goal to "join with likeminded allies and partners to revitalize democracy the world over" and "impose real costs on anyone who interferes in our democratic process."
- **Objective 1.3 Risks** | As discussed in the SWOT analysis, there is significant risk Lukashenka's continued consolidation of power and hostility towards Western governments will preclude any work with state institutions. In such an outcome, state institutions will remain undemocratic, and the Belarusian public will have very limited means to hold state institutions accountable. In this case, post will implement this objective by improving civil society's capacity to eventually hold state institutions accountable and by continuing to publicly call for accountability and democratic reform.

Mission Goal 2 | Our engagement strengthens regional stability and protects American interests.

Description | Engagement with Belarusian authorities and with reformers within Belarus is a component of countering Russian misinformation and motivating Belarus to become a force for stability within the region. Transparency on border security, military issues, and Consular

services, when possible, could reduce threat perceptions. Consular service at Embassy Minsk protects American citizens and aims to provide emergency consular services.

Objective 2.1 | Belarus is a contributor to regional stability by increasing regional security cooperation, reducing transnational security issues originating from Belarus, and minimizing the negative influence of Belarusian regional security-related narratives.

- **Objective 2.1 Justification** | Although the current regime is integrating more with Russia, it continues to emphasize a desire to maintain dialog and working relationships, including the Belarusian Ministry of Defense with the U.S. Department of Defense. In addition, Embassy Minsk benefits from a relatively high level of education and a population generally supportive of democratic values and norms and appreciative of U.S. policy and actions. This objective is specifically designed to leverage these strengths and opportunities to maintain current channels of communication and position the embassy to expand security cooperation if the opportunity arises.
- **Objective 2.1 Linkages** | This objective supports Goal 4 in EUR's JRS Goals and Strategic Objectives: Leverage Alliances and Partnerships to Address Global and Regional Threats and Challenges. Specifically, it works to counter Russian disinformation that threatens U.S. and European security (Objective 3) and supports respect for Belarusian sovereignty and peaceful resolution of regional conflicts (Objective 4). This objective also supports the National Security Strategy Interim Guidance of building partnerships beyond core alliances to address common challenges and widen the circle of cooperation. It also combats trends in the anti-democratic use of misinformation and disinformation, to exploit perceived weaknesses and sow division within and among free nations and erode existing international rules.
- **Objective 2.1 Risks** | As discussed in the SWOT analysis, the tendency of the Lukashenka regime to adopt anti-Western positions in line with Russia's, greater integration with Russia, and the increasingly negative influence Russia has on Belarusian public attitudes toward the West, all threaten productive security cooperation and dialog with Belarus. The few levers of influence the United States has with the current regime, coupled with

asymmetric actions to weaken Embassy Minsk's operational capacity, have limited our ability to implement U.S. policy. These threats and vulnerabilities increase the risk that Belarus will be unwilling to engage with Embassy Minsk on security issues or that Embassy Minsk will not be capable of executing significant engagement. In this case, Embassy Minsk will maintain transparency on security-related issues through dialog to counter anti-Western narratives.

Objective 2.2: Maintain Embassy Minsk's limited ability to protect American citizens' interests in Belarus.

- **Objective 2.2 Justification** | Despite a much-reduced consular section, Embassy Minsk is still able to provide the full range of American Citizen Services. This objective is designed to enhance this ability through additional staffing and crisis preparation.
- **Objective 2.2 Linkages** | This objective supports CA bureau Objective 1.1, timely and efficient delivery of consular services and objective 1.2, enhancing abilities to provide routine services to U.S. citizens. An efficient and professional consular section with adequate staff and facilities is essential for protecting American citizens and their interests.
- **Objective 2.2 Risks** | The Lukashenka regime has continuously eroded the consular section's ability to operate through forced drawdowns. Further staff reductions could leave the section unable to operate and leave the U.S. citizen population in Belarus vulnerable.

Mission Goal 3 | Encourage private sector growth and entrepreneurship to counter non-market and coercive economic practices.

Description | The Lukashenka regime uses state-owned enterprise dominance in nearly every sphere of the economy as a tool to control workers and restrict investment to those few individuals whom Lukashenka deems loyal. By design, this practice stifles free market growth and ensures that almost all economic activity in the country is controlled by the regime. Steps towards market liberalization, including space for small and medium-sized enterprises to

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develop, were quickly rescinded after mass protests following the fraudulent August 2020 election and many businesses and entrepreneurs fled Belarus. These small business owners are looking to coordinate business development efforts outside of Belarus with the goal of eventually returning and helping transition Belarus to a more free-market economy. Pockets of free enterprise remain in Belarus, including in the IT sphere, but SOE dominance hinders economic growth, investment, and innovation in traditional industry.

Objective 3.1: Work with democratic forces to maintain human capital and resources in the private sector to prepare for the post-Lukashenka era economic transition.

- **Objective 3.1 Justification** | Many entrepreneurs and small and medium enterprises left Belarus due to repression and persecution of private businesses following the August 2020 election. As they develop their businesses outside of Belarus, these businesspeople have the potential to facilitate the transition to a more market-oriented economy when conditions permit their return. The democratic forces of Belarus have begun to establish business associations outside of the country which provide an opportunity for us to engage and promote commercial coalitions, business development, and the eventual transition back to Belarus.
- **Objective 3.1 Linkages** | This objective supports Strategic Objective 3 in EUR Bureau's Joint Strategic Plan: Promote deeper trade, investment, and energy cooperation and forge a united front on non-market and coercive practices. Specifically, it supports Strategic Objective 3.2 and 3.3 on developing coalitions to counter non-market coercive economic practices and collaborating with Europe to create a Transatlantic digital economy. In addition, it supports the Interim National Security Strategy's goal to ensure that "all American companies can compete successfully abroad."
- **Objective 3.1 Risks** | As outlined in the SWOT analysis, entrepreneurs and owners of small and medium enterprises relocated outside of Belarus may, over time, lose hope and interest in returning to Belarus. Prolonged political uncertainty and the politically motivated persecution of tech companies could push those companies, and more

importantly Belarus's highly skilled IT workers, engineering cadre, and other professionals such as medical professionals, to leave Belarus permanently.

Objective 3.2 | Develop Belarusian private sector and entrepreneurship ecosystem.

- **Objective 3.2 Justification |** The ecosystem for innovation-based entrepreneurship growth in Belarus was fragmented before the 2020 fraudulent presidential election. Since that time, the ecosystem players have scattered into Belarus's neighboring countries, maintaining cohesion of this group and its linkages to current and potential entrepreneurs inside Belarus is critical. Private financing of venture projects in Belarus was gradually emerging before the political crisis and investors remain interested in Belarusian enterprises and human capital. Though an increase in investment into Belarus is not appropriate under current circumstances, helping entrepreneurs inside Belarus maintain access to private financing and business support services increases their viability and helps these enterprises to continue to provide non-state employment opportunities for Belarusians. Helping Belarusians outside Belarus access financing is vital to their survival.
- **Objective 3.2 Linkages |** This objective supports Strategic Objective 3 in EUR Bureau's Joint Strategic Plan: Promote deeper trade, investment, and energy cooperation and forge a united front on non-market and coercive practices. Specifically, it supports Strategic Objective 3.2 and 3.3 on developing coalitions to counter non-market coercive economic practices and collaborating with Europe to create a Transatlantic digital economy.
- **Objective 3.2 Risks |** The Lukashenka regime may continue to crackdown on domestic private enterprises causing individuals to decide to not create new businesses or to restrict their growth in order to minimize potential losses. The regime may restrict and demonize foreign investment into domestic private enterprises, which will restrain the potential growth of these businesses. Growing economic dependence on Russia may force private enterprises to sell to Russian and other non-Western markets decreasing the value firms receive for their products and stifling the entrepreneurial spirit.

Development partners will find it too difficult to work with private enterprises inside Belarus and 100 percent of assistance will go to Belarusian firms outside Belarus.

4. Management Objective

Management Objective 1 | Establish adequate staff and resources across multiple missions to optimize our capacity to function effectively as the local context permits.

- **Objective 1 Justification** | In February 2022, Belarusian authorities forced Embassy Minsk to reduce local staff to 20 individuals. Work that would normally be completed by locally employed staff is now completed by outside vendors, through contracts. Depending on the posture of the Embassy local and regional vendors would be utilized through service contracts to provide critical support for the mission. Additionally, post seeks to develop a contract for the Local Guard Force, which would enable the mission to free up 12 locally employed staff positions for other embassy needs, reducing our reliance on contracting. Projecting the timeline for a resumption of operations in Minsk is challenging.