

Belarus

The Development Challenge: Belarus gained independence in early 1990 and had a hopeful start in developing a market-based economy and democratic processes. However, for the past nine years of President Lukashenko's rule, the country has moved away from democratization, and the economy remains mired in state-controlled economic structures. Over the course of 2003, there were unprecedented attacks on political parties, independent media, and civil society writ large. The impetus for this harassment appears to be the President's desire to push for a third presidential term. Political freedom continues to be constrained, as numerous administrative and criminal measures are employed against political leaders attempting to exercise their rights. While Belarus' neighbors head towards the European Union, the country's policies are becoming more isolationist.

In 2002, the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) declared Belarus one of the 10 worst countries in the world in which to be a journalist.

In its 2003 Index of Economic Freedom, the U.S.-based Heritage Foundation characterized the economy of Belarus as "repressed." It ranked Belarus 151 out of 161 countries. The country still bears the hallmarks of a communist system: state-owned industries, collective and state farms, investment spending influenced by central fiat rather than by markets. The industrial base is deteriorating, and many state firms have negative net worth, kept afloat by government subsidies and orchestrated Russian import demand. Firms have little scope to rationalize production because of mandated wage increases and restrictions on employment reduction. Existing legislation hinders private business. The hostile climate for private investment inhibits foreign investment.

From a social perspective, the government is increasingly failing to deliver benefits and employment opportunities. While real wage growth is slow, the country budget for 2004 forecasts significant cuts in benefits and privileges for low-income citizens.

U.S. national interests: An authoritarian Belarus not only adds to regional stability, but credible allegations of the transfer of arms and dual-use equipment to states of concern underscore the importance of achieving a more open, transparent form of governance in Belarus. Although Belarus is currently led by an authoritarian regime and has a stagnant economy, it continues to have the potential, through pockets of its civil society, to develop both democratic institutions and a market-driven economic system.

The USAID Program: The USAID Strategic Plan for FY 2003 - FY 2005 for Belarus aims to engage diverse and, as yet, disempowered elements of Belarusian society, including independent media, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and pro-democracy groups, under the single Strategic Objective: "Increased citizen participation in democratic practices." This strategic objective is in harmony with the joint State Department/USAID Strategic Goal - "to advance the growth of democracy and good governance, including civil society, the rule of law, and respect for human rights and religious freedom."

Other Program Elements: There are two additional activities not funded under the country budget. First, the Citizens Network for Foreign affairs currently implements the West NIS (New Independent States) Agribusiness Volunteer Program in Belarus. This initiative will receive regional funding until 2007. The program objectives are to strengthen private farmer associations, to develop private agribusinesses and to stimulate the development of farmers' entrepreneurial initiatives. This program is in harmony with the Presidential "Volunteers for Prosperity" Initiative. Second, a \$100,000 seven-month anti-trafficking activity is being implemented regionally by Winrock International to reduce trafficking of Belarusian women by developing their job-market skills and by providing vulnerable women with economic opportunities in selected regions. These programs currently operate unfettered by governmental interference.

Other Donors: Multilateral: The U.N. Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria approved Belarus for HIV/AIDS prevention projects in 2004 and 2005. The United Nations Children's Fund signed a joint \$3 million plan with the GOB for the period until 2006 to promote children's and youth's health and protect their rights.

The World Bank's 2002-2004 Country Assistance Strategy for Belarus envisioned up to \$140 million in loans to the government for targeted social issues. However, as of November 2003, the strategy has not been approved. A \$1 million energy-saving project will be implemented in 2004. A World Bank \$260,000 program supports Belarusian NGO partnerships with Ukraine and Moldova. The United Nations Development program and Economic Commission's TACIS program jointly launched a \$1.5 million two-year program to combat trafficking in women. The European Bank for Reconstruction and Development has a limited portfolio of private sector development.

Data Sheet

USAID Mission:	Belarus
Program Title:	Citizen Participation in Democratic Practices
Pillar:	Economic Growth, Agriculture and Trade
Strategic Objective:	113-0210
Proposed FY 2004 Obligation:	\$4,250,000 FSA
Prior Year Unobligated:	\$667,000 FSA
Proposed FY 2005 Obligation:	\$4,000,000 FSA
Year of Initial Obligation:	FY 1999
Year of Final Obligation:	FY 2005

Summary: The USAID program in Belarus promotes increasing citizen participation in civil society, strengthening democratic political processes, and developing independent media.

Inputs, Outputs, Activities:

FY 2004 Program:

Strengthening civil society (\$1,700,000 FSA). USAID will advance its community initiative program aimed at involving citizens in democratic decision-making. Two approaches will be used: 1) support for community initiatives; and 2) capacity-building support to NGOs in these communities. Ten new sites will be selected for training in democratic governance, for community needs appraisal, and for formation of representative community boards. Awards will be granted to each of the selected communities. USAID will also provide 28 communities with the resources to promote a greater flow of information on issues important to the citizens. A grant competition will support NGO projects that mobilize targeted communities and render support to civic organizations at the national level. The NGO training will cover such areas as governance, volunteer recruitment, fundraising, and public advocacy. The implementing partner is the Counterpart Alliance for Partnership (CAP).

Strengthening the political process (\$1,000,000 FSA). USAID technical assistance is aimed at developing skills to address political party-building needs. Training topics will include campaign planning and management, public and media relations, message formulation, campaign techniques, and "door-to-door politicking." The development of these skills will be significant for the 2004 parliamentary elections in Belarus. Technical assistance will be given to a civic organization for conducting public awareness campaigns to educate Belarusians about their constitutional rights and democratic electoral processes. The implementing partners are the National Democratic Institute (NDI) and the International Republican Institute (IRI).

Supporting independent media (\$700,000 FSA, \$100,00 FSA carryover). The challenge for the program will be to ensure survival of the remaining independent print media and to maintain the flow and the quality of objective information. Legal defense will continue to be at the core of the USAID assistance. Assistance will be focused on extending the reach of media outlets and on assisting independent media's news production of topical, public-interest issues. The program will provide independent outlets with a range of free-of-charge electronic services, journalists' professional training, and consultations. The implementing partner is International Research and Exchanges Board (IREX/ProMedia).

Increasing legal defense capacity (\$350,000 FSA). USAID will implement the existing program promoting human rights and the rule of law by continuing to train local lawyers, activists, NGOs, and the citizenry. The objective is to advocate for greater adherence to law by Belarusian authorities. An indigenous network of about 25 Legal Advice Centers (LACs) will continue to receive technical assistance for improving government accountability through improved case preparation and lobbying techniques. The program, which combines legal education training and legal community action teams, will augment the

Civil Society Strengthening program in the selected sites. The implementing partner is the American Bar Association/Central East European Law Initiative.

Eurasia Foundation (\$250,000 FSA). The Eurasia Foundation small-grants program will promote private enterprise development, civil society development, and public administration and policy.

Program Development and Support (\$250,000 FSA, \$490,718 FSA carryover, \$76,434 FSA prior year recoveries). USAID will fund program administration and development costs, including evaluations.

FY 2005 Program:

Strengthening civil society in Belarus (\$1,700,000 FSA). USAID expects to expand the community improvement initiative program to ten new locations. New competitive awards will be made to communities with successfully implemented initiatives. The NGO training and grant program will also continue. The Implementing partner will be the same as above.

Strengthening the political process (\$1,000,000 FSA). USAID expects to continue the long-term capacity building program for pro-democracy parties. The program will focus on internal governance, party building, and membership recruitment and retention. Other needs might emerge from the 2004 Parliamentary elections. Assistance to watchdog civic organizations will also continue. The implementing partners will be the CAP, the NDI and the IRI.

Supporting independent media (\$700,000 FSA). With the state media's advantages in access and funding, the independent media face an uphill battle in their drive to penetrate the information blockade. USAID will continue to support the survival and development of the independent media. In particular, the program will work further with media on developing their alternative distribution systems. Legal support will also remain a priority. The implementing partner will be determined.

Increasing the legal defense capacity (\$250,000 FSA). The program will continue to focus on enhancing the ability of Belarusians to insist that the government respect the rights of individual citizens. Activities will include legal education seminars, professional advancement, and legal community action teams. The implementing partner will be the same as above.

Eurasia Foundation (\$250,000 FSA).

Program Development and Support (\$100,000 FSA). USAID will fund program development and administration costs, including evaluations.

Performance and Results: USAID helped to establish 18 public clubs. The clubs received training in community-organizing activities and community appraisal. These clubs provided their community members with access to information, training opportunities and a forum to discuss issues of local importance. A 10-session initiative by a Legal Advice Center (LAC) brought together local municipal leaders along with NGOs, for legal training and community development discussions. Some positive trends in party development this year can be directly attributed to USAID. At least one political party employed the new skills to develop their national platform. Several parties' regional branches developed campaign plans for the local elections. Ten newspapers developed alternative distribution systems to ensure delivery. In many regional towns independent papers significantly outsell the local state papers.

By the program completion, citizens will have launched 38 communities. The expected results will be increased numbers of informed citizens participating in community activities. Improved organizational capacity of pro-democracy political parties and more extensive voter contact should increase their electoral support at the future elections. In the course of the program's implementation, Belarusians become more knowledgeable about their political rights and responsibilities, and demand greater transparency of the electoral process. Legal action teams in 38 communities will jointly identify community problems and formulate action plans. The quality and the quantity of fair and objective news available to the Belarusians will continue to increase against a backdrop of more professionally trained journalists and sustainable independent media outlets.