



Integrated Country Strategy

Belarus

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1. Chief of Mission Priorities

Belarus is the only post-Soviet country where there has been no cogent political or economic reform over the last 25 years. Since being elected president in 1994, Aleksandr Lukashenko has steadily consolidated his power through authoritarian means and a centralized economic system. Belarus has retained most aspects of a centralized planned economy, with approximately 70 percent of GDP in state hands and limited foreign investment. The Belarusian economic “model,” which is based on subsidized Russian energy and access to Russian markets for non-competitive goods, hampers private sector growth and erodes Belarus’ sovereignty and independence. This model, with unsustainable economic growth based on Russian subsidies, allows the regime to limit political, economic, and social rights in exchange for stability and predictability for the population. Government restrictions on political and civil freedoms, freedom of speech and the press, peaceful assembly, and religion have remained in place

The new geostrategic reality following Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014 and stagnating economic situation in Belarus presents new opportunities to advance the bilateral relationship, continue to support Belarus’ sovereignty and independence, and enhance our long-standing democratic, human rights, and economic reform agenda. Lukashenko released six political prisoners in August 2015, a step for which the United States and the EU had advocated, and for which we responded with the temporary suspension of sanctions for six months – a decision that has since been extended five times. We have indicated to the Government of Belarus (GOB) that if it makes additional progress on democracy and human rights, the USG would be able to take further measures related to sanctions and other areas that would promote economic growth.

We seek to build on recent progress to strengthen our bilateral relationship. Further progress on democracy and human rights would also allow us to expand our bilateral relationship to sectors in which we have not engaged for nearly a decade such as military, law enforcement, and commercial cooperation. Our three goals are:

- *Belarus moves toward a more democratic and free market-oriented society.*
- *Belarus increases ties to the United States and Europe.*
- *Embassy Minsk promotes secure borders, open doors, and the protection of American citizens.*

Within the limits of selective engagement, State and USAID will continue cooperating with Belarusians country-wide in the private sector, civil society, and at working levels of the government in exchanges and projects of mutual benefit. The developmental challenges described above are aggravated by an operational environment in which the GOB remains suspicious of foreign assistance programs. U.S. NGOs have been refused permission to register and most American implementers lack a legal presence in-country. Cumbersome technical

assistance and humanitarian assistance registration procedures further hamper implementation of our development programs.

Given government dominance of the media, the United States must communicate directly to Belarusians our hope for their democratic and human rights aspirations and offer support. Democratic forces are weak, and Belarus' population is generally apathetic. Given the lack of rapid change in an atomized society still largely unfamiliar with Western civic and free-market institutions, the Integrated Country Strategy recognizes the need to build institutions and public support for reform over the long term. As much as possible, we should partner with the EU and other key partners who share our concerns about the continued existence of an authoritarian state in Europe.

Our top objective is 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 increasing exposure of vulnerable societies to American 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 programs (the latter due to GOB-imposed restrictions). Meanwhile, diplomatically, we will engage with the GOB to press for step-by-step reforms that would, in time, provide the underpinnings for democratic elections. We will also work with local civil society partners to ensure vulnerable groups are better served and better integrated into productive social and economic activities. These efforts will continue to emphasize civic participation and strengthening the role of civil society, as well as serve as positive models of constructive engagement and cooperation with the GOB where feasible.

A concurrent primary focus is to increase the share and competitiveness of the private sector in the economy of Belarus. Belarus is performing poorly on privatization and enterprise reform. Growth in the small and medium-sized sector and support to independent business associations and trade unions, as with civil society, is essential. It has the added benefit of expanding the democratic electorate and developing a culture of ownership in Belarus. Our efforts to foster private sector development and promote private sector reform will focus on strengthening independent business associations and entrepreneurs, expanding the small and medium-sized enterprise sector, and further developing business education and training. We will also work to attract additional American investment and increase bilateral trade, again with the aim of encouraging private sector growth.

We will continue to focus on increasing Belarusians' understanding of American interests and values. In doing so, we will compete for positive influence by increasing U.S. diplomatic and public diplomacy engagement with all sectors of Belarusian society in all regions.

The Russian narrative—whether about Ukraine, NATO, or who is to blame for the current economic troubles faced by the region or terrorist activities around the world—predominates in Belarus and leads many to blame the United States and/or the West for Belarus’ problems. Efforts to assist the media in Belarus have been scattershot; we must do a better job of coordinating both within the USG and with our EU partners. Exchange, cultural, educational, and sports diplomacy programs, small grants, and other public diplomacy programs will ensure that our message gets out to Belarusians. Now that our Consular Section is again fully operational, our outreach to potential applicants will demystify the visa process and encourage qualified applicants to visit the United States.

Finally, as we work to improve our bilateral relationship, we will re-engage in areas where we have had limited contact over the past years. We will begin to open a dialogue on the resumption of intercountry adoptions between our two countries and will engage with civil society as well as Belarusian authorities on global priorities such as nuclear safety, nonproliferation, counterterrorism, and environmental sustainability.

The greatest challenge we confront in operating in Belarus is the staffing cap placed on the Embassy by the GOB and the years of neglect to Embassy facilities. While before 2008 the Embassy was staffed with 35 full-time American positions – including a resident Defense Attaché, USAID Director, and MSG Detachment – there are currently only ten Americans at post. This full-time equivalent (FTE) staffing numbers should be quickly restored to allow for a rapid buildup when the GOB lifts the restrictions. In the meantime, post will continue to utilize the offshore support positions it has established at nearby U.S. embassies, including Embassy Vilnius for DATT support and Embassy Kyiv for USAID and LEGATT support. Post will continue to work with the GOB to open more American positions at the Embassy.

2. Mission Strategic Framework

Mission Goal 1: Belarus moves toward a more democratic and free market-oriented society.

Mission Objective 1.1: A stronger, more active civil society, democratic values, and enhanced access to information for the people of Belarus increases need for democratic governance and the government's respect for the human rights of all its citizens.

Mission Objective 1.2: A stronger private sector, enhanced economic independence, and increased U.S. trade and investment.

Mission Goal 2: Belarus increases ties to Europe and the United States.

Mission Objective 2.1: Increased diplomatic and public diplomacy outreach encourages Belarus to continue to play a helpful role in regional security.

Mission Objective 2.2: Engagement with Belarus to advance U.S. and common interests improves U.S.-Belarusian relations.

Mission Goal 3: Embassy Minsk promotes secure borders, open doors, and the protection of American citizens.

Mission Objective 3.1: Engage with the Belarusian Ministry of Internal Affairs' Immigration Department to promote border security and expansion of legitimate travel.

Mission Objective 3.2: Strengthen ties with the Belarusian Central Authority to promote intercountry adoption as a viable option for orphans as part of a broader child welfare spectrum.

Mission Objective 3.3: Continue to provide the full range of American and nonimmigrant visa services with professionalism and efficiency.

Management Objective 1: Restoration of secure communications.

Management Objective 2: Stabilize the Embassy Chancery and locate site for New Embassy Compound (NEC).

3. Mission Goals and Objectives

Mission Goal 1: Belarus moves toward a more democratic and free market-oriented society.

Description and Linkages: The promotion of democracy and free markets advance National Security Strategy (NSS) goals to use American influence to further our interests and benefit humanity. Moving Belarus towards a more democratic and free market-oriented society supports pillar IV of the NSS to seek partnerships with like-minded states to promote free market economies, private sector growth, political stability, and peace. At the same time, this goal supports NSS pillar IV by championing our values – including the rule of law and the advancement of individual rights by promoting strong, stable, prosperous, and sovereign states. Embassy goals support the State-USAID 2018-2022 Joint Strategic Plan, Goal 2, Objectives 2.1 (promote American prosperity by advancing bilateral relationships and leveraging international institutions and agreements to open markets, secure commercial opportunities, and foster investment and innovation to contribute to U.S. job creation) and 2.3 (advance U.S. economic security by ensuring energy security, combating corruption, and promoting market-oriented economic and governance reforms).

Mission Objective 1.1: A stronger, more active civil society, democratic values, and enhanced access to information for the people of Belarus increases need for democratic governance and the government's respect for the human rights of all its citizens.

Justification: Belarus has one of the most repressive governments in the region with respect to human rights and democratic freedoms. The GOB continues to block the development of an independent media, tightly manages all political activities, and harasses the democratic opposition. This environment has led to an increased level of apathy among Belarusians who see little reason to engage in the political process, even at the community level, because they believe doing so will have no impact and could, in fact, lead to harassment by the authorities.

The legal environment developed has inhibited civil society and political party development. Both civil society and political parties are often denied registration, and the government criminalizes actions taken on behalf of unregistered organizations. The GOB has also enacted strict procedures for organizations receiving foreign financing and often fails to register donors' grants in a timely period. Strict rules on who can gather and when along with almost impossible barriers to receive a permit for demonstrations severely restrict Belarusians' freedom of assembly. Electoral regulations also ensure nearly total dominance in elections at all levels by individuals and groups aligned with the president.

Despite this restrictive and often hostile environment, USG capacity-building efforts have yielded some results. U.S. assistance facilitated the advocacy efforts of civil society organizations, and they have become more active in advocating for the interests of their constituencies. The GOB has more frequently solicited recommendations from NGO experts on policy areas it deems non-threatening, such as business environment regulations,

environmental protection, social service provision, nature preservation, and cultural activities. This gradual change of the government's attitude in select areas, while welcome, most likely stems from a lack of government resources and consequent need for the professional expertise of local CSOs, as well as a desire for better relations with some international NGOs, rather than a change in overall mentality. The United States has an interest in increasing the demand for democratic governance and rule of law by working with actors who are engaged in community development, politics, and the media.

Continued USG support to advocacy groups will help change attitudes both in society and the government, and will lead to better services for vulnerable populations and their increased involvement in social and economic activities. Embassy Minsk will continue to encourage the GOB to increase protection for victims of trafficking, including by implementing a national identification and referral mechanism, while also supporting civil society organizations that provide prevention and reintegration services to people-at-risk and victims of trafficking.

Embassy Minsk's continued emphasis on exposing Belarusian citizens to western democratic societies and free markets has brought notable results in terms of combating negative stereotypes sustained by the state media and building ties with American organizations, communities, and individuals. Most importantly, U.S. exchange programs contribute to changing the dependent mentality of some Belarusians.

The participants of U.S. exchange programs universally acknowledge a boost in their professional life, community activism, and volunteer initiatives as a result of their first-hand experience. USG funds will continue to support American spaces, U.S.-based training, study tours, and speakers' programs, as well as professional and academic exchanges that reach the broadest number of beneficiaries and contribute to democratic and economic reform.

Mission Objective 1.2: A stronger private sector, enhanced economic independence, and increased U.S. trade and investment.

Justification: The GOB wields significant control over the economy. Approximately two-thirds of the population is employed by the state sector, which allows the GOB to maintain control over much of public life. According to the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development's estimates, the share of the private sector as a percentage of GDP in 2010 was 30 percent, and analysts uniformly agree that this estimate has not measurably changed in the last decade. This share is the lowest among the Commonwealth of Independent States and transition countries. The majority of the private sector in Belarus is represented by small- (including micro) and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). Increasing the number, vitality, and competitiveness of these SMEs will be one of the primary drivers for Belarus' transition to a more free market-oriented society. Additionally, results achieved under this Objective are anticipated to contribute to democratization in the country and a more independent Belarus less susceptible to economic coercion because of its dependence on certain states. Essentially, by enhancing the private sector, citizens' reliance on the state for their economic well-being will

be reduced. Their increased economic independence may lead to greater societal demand for more transparent, accountable, and inclusive governance.

U.S. trade and investment in Belarus is relatively low, with just over \$134 million in 2017 and \$135.7 million in the first quarter of 2018. Additional U.S. investment in and trade with Belarus could spur private sector growth in Belarus and increase U.S. prosperity.

Mission Goal 2: Belarus increases ties to Europe and the United States

Description and Linkages: This supports pillars III and IV of the NSS. First, it will preserve peace through strength as envisioned by pillar III. By supporting a Belarus that is part of a Europe that is whole, free, and at peace. The pursuit of this goal will help advance American influence under pillar IV by setting the conditions for peace, prosperity, and the development of successful societies. It also supports the State-USAID 2018-2022 Joint Strategic Plan, Goal 1, Objective 1.3 (counter instability, transnational crime, and violence that threaten U.S. interests by strengthening citizen-responsive governance, security, democracy, human rights, and the rule of law); and Goal 2, Objective 2.2 (promote healthy, educated and productive populations in partner countries to drive inclusive and sustainable development, open new markets and support U.S. prosperity and security objectives).

Mission Objective 2.1: Increased diplomatic and public diplomacy outreach encourages Belarus to continue to play a helpful role in regional security.

Justification: As the Ukraine crisis deepened, the GOB offered to host talks aimed at ending the fighting in eastern Ukraine. The first talks, held in September 2014, led to the “Minsk Process” and a meeting of the presidents of Ukraine, Russia, Germany, and France in Minsk in February 2015. Though closely politically allied with Russia, Belarus has taken a neutral position on regional disputes, ever keen to protect its own sovereignty and territorial integrity. President Lukashenko values his role as host to the Minsk Process and could continue to play a helpful role in regional security.

Since the 2015 release of political prisoners and the successive incremental improvements in the bilateral relationship, Embassy Minsk has worked with the GOB to advance other policy interests that contribute to European security. Issues like combating trafficking in persons, countering weapons trafficking, and building cooperation in nuclear safety have provided opportunities for cooperation and confidence building that serve our bilateral relationship; these efforts should be continued and expanded. The removal of Belarus’ highly enriched uranium comports with the U.S. goal of securing nuclear material worldwide.

Mission Objective 2.2: Engagement with Belarus to advance U.S. and common interests improves U.S.-Belarus relations.

Justification: The U.S.-Belarus relationship has long centered on our concerns about the human rights and democracy situation in Belarus, blocking possible progress in areas of mutual

interest. The GOB is interested in expanding military-to-military contacts, another possible avenue for broadening the bilateral relationship.

Mission Goal 3: Embassy Minsk promotes secure borders, open doors, and the protection of American citizens.

Description and Linkages: Promoting border security is a key NSS goal. Assertive engagement with the Government of Belarus to improve information sharing practices and document integrity standards is part of Embassy Minsk's strategy of promoting border security, a key NSS goal and a requirement under Presidential Proclamations 9645 and Executive Order 13768. Another important component of border security involves increasing the entire spectrum of people-to-people ties in order to improve Belarus' economic, cultural, and political relationship with the United States. Initiation of a constructive dialogue on the resumption of intercountry adoptions between the United States and Belarus is a key component in this effort to strengthen the bilateral relationship. Furthermore, Executive Order 13780 requires assertive liaison with the GOB to correct the current imbalance in visa reciprocity. An efficient and professional consular section with adequate staff and facilities is essential to achieving all of these objectives, as well as fulfilling our primary responsibility of protecting American citizens and their interests.

Mission Objective 3.1: Engage with the Belarusian Ministry of Internal Affairs' Immigration Department to promote border security and expansion of legitimate travel.

Justification: Executive Order 13780 required the Department to "review all nonimmigrant visa reciprocity agreements and arrangements to ensure that they are, with respect to each visa classification, truly reciprocal insofar as practicable with respect to validity period and fee." INA sections 221(c) and 281 require that the Secretary of State establish visa validity and fees, respectively, according to what foreign governments provide to U.S. citizens. As such, the Department of State must match visa validity and fees to match the visa issuance practices of the GOB. Presidential Proclamation 9645 and Executive Order 13768 require posts to work with host country officials to improve document integrity and information sharing practices.

Mission Objective 3.2: Strengthen ties with the Belarusian Central Authority to promote intercountry adoption as a viable option for orphans as part of a broader child welfare spectrum.

Justification: The GOB changed its adoption procedures between 2004 and 2005, requiring an agreement of cooperation between the central authorities of a foreign state and the Republic of Belarus in order to process intercountry adoption cases. The United States and Belarus have not entered into such an agreement at this time, and there have not been any cases of U.S. adoptions of Belarusian children since 2004. Belarus' internal adoption practices have matured during the intervening period, but there are still children who are unable to find adoptive families domestically, in which cases intercountry adoption should be a viable option.

Mission Objective 3.3: Continue to provide the full range of American and nonimmigrant visa services with professionalism and efficiency.

Justification: Nonimmigrant visa services were recently expanded at Embassy Minsk. Maintaining a high level of customer service while the section's workload continues to escalate is a top priority for Embassy Minsk.

4. Management Goals and Objectives

Management Objective 1: Restoration of secure communications.

Justification: In 2008, the GOB expelled the ambassador and reduced the U.S. diplomatic mission to five FSOs. Due to this small footprint, the Embassy was unable to maintain secure communications and Marine Security Guard. Secure communications are vital for timely response to security situations, sensitive discussions, and internal deliberations not appropriate for release to the public. Having a method to communicate securely with Washington and other regional posts would greatly enhance Minsk's security posture.

Management Objective 2: Stabilize the Embassy Chancery and locate site for New Embassy Compound.

Justification: Due to the reduced USDH presence, the chancery has decayed to an unoccupiable condition. The stabilization of our Chancery building will prevent further damage and potentially dangerous instability to the former Chancery building. With the recent expansion of nonimmigrant visas services at U.S. Embassy Minsk and the introduction of a new 30 day visa-free stay in Belarus, the demand for Consular Services has increased tremendously, Post will modify and expand the current Consular waiting room. With Minsk officially placed on OBO's top 80 New Embassy Compound replacement list, Post will begin to lay the groundwork in order to make this complex project possible.