

Belarus

by Yaraslau Kryvoi

Capital: Minsk
Population: 9.47 million
GNI/capita, PPP: US\$17,610

Source: World Bank *World Development Indicators*.

Nations in Transit Ratings and Averaged Scores

	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
National Democratic Governance	7.00	7.00	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75
Electoral Process	7.00	7.00	6.75	6.75	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	6.75
Civil Society	6.50	6.50	6.25	6.00	6.00	6.25	6.50	6.50	6.50	6.25
Independent Media	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.50	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75
Local Democratic Governance	6.50	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75
Judicial Framework and Independence	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00
Corruption	6.25	6.25	6.00	6.00	6.00	6.25	6.25	6.25	6.25	6.25
Democracy Score	6.68	6.71	6.57	6.50	6.57	6.68	6.71	6.71	6.71	6.64

NOTE: The ratings reflect the consensus of Freedom House, its academic advisers, and the author(s) of this report. If consensus cannot be reached, Freedom House is responsible for the final ratings. The ratings are based on a scale of 1 to 7, with 1 representing the highest level of democratic progress and 7 the lowest. The Democracy Score is an average of ratings for the categories tracked in a given year. The opinions expressed in this report are those of the author(s).

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

July 2015 marked the 25th anniversary of Belarus's declaration of independence from the Soviet Union. After a brief period of democratic transition in the early 1990s, the country gradually developed into a consolidated authoritarian regime under President Alyaksandr Lukashenka. In October 2015, Lukashenka secured a fifth term in an election that observers from the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) did not recognize as free and fair. However, unlike the December 2010 presidential election, the 2015 voting was not followed by violence or imprisonment of major opposition figures.

Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the subsequent conflict in eastern Ukraine had an important psychological impact on Belarusian authorities. The government is increasingly concerned by Russian actions in Ukraine and is trying to distance itself from its eastern neighbor. Belarus is also suffering from the effects of Russia's economic downturn. In an attempt to improve relations with the West and offset the influence of an increasingly assertive Russia, the Belarusian administration released all political prisoners in August 2015.

The release of prisoners and decreased state persecution of the political opposition contributed to a modest improvement in the country's political environment. However, the executive remained firmly in control of all branches of power, with very little public oversight of its activities. The conflict in Ukraine persuaded both the authorities and a significant part of the population that political changes could undermine stability in the country, and this was used as a justification to stifle dissent and to preserve the existing political regime.

In October 2015, following the prisoner release and peaceful election, the European Union (EU) suspended restrictive measures against hundreds of Belarusian officials and other individuals seen as linked to human rights violations. Similarly, the United States temporarily lifted sanctions against several major Belarusian companies. After hosting important negotiations on the resolution of the Ukraine crisis, which culminated in a February 2015 summit attended by the leaders of Germany, France, Russia, and Ukraine, Belarus had worked to intensify its contacts with Western Europe and the United States. It had also softened its anti-Western rhetoric, attempting to pursue a more balanced foreign policy and cautious economic reforms.

After the presidential election, most international observers praised the nonviolent treatment of political opponents, minor improvements in the election legislation, and opportunities for the opposition to campaign. However, nothing changed at the fundamental level. The authorities continued to abuse their monopoly on television during the campaign period; used administrative resources to increase the turnout of voters, particularly by coercing people to participate in early voting; and failed to conduct a transparent vote count, among other election irregularities.

The situation for civil society improved slightly in 2015, with more opportunities for advocacy campaigns, local fund-raising, and attempts by high-level officials to engage with civil society groups, especially on economic reforms. The release of all political prisoners in August also helped to open space for civil society activities. Separately, Belarusian authorities joined the Bologna Process on European standards for higher education, and began to encourage participation in pan-European research projects and networks, such as Horizon 2020.

However, civil society organizations still face significant challenges, including obstacles to registration as legal entities and the threat of criminal sanctions for operating without registration. Although new domestic fund-raising mechanisms are gaining popularity, the government maintains restrictions on funding for civil society organizations, particularly from foreign sources.

The authorities continued to suppress independent broadcast and print media in 2015, marginalizing the voices of those who disagree with the regime. Although state television has started to invite prominent opposition figures to prime-time talk shows more frequently, this has not changed the nature of public debate in Belarus. Foreign media outlets struggle to obtain official accreditation in the country. Internet-based media generally remain available to most users, but the government continued its policy of restricting access to some opposition websites at state-controlled institutions.

The authorities took a number of steps to address corruption in 2015, including adoption of a new anticorruption law, after a public consultation, and the implementation of a national program to combat crime and corruption. According to various enterprise surveys, Belarus is often regarded as one of the least corrupt countries in the Commonwealth of Independent States, but implementation of anticorruption measures remains selective in practice and lacks transparency.

Score Changes:

- **Electoral Process rating improved from 7.00 to 6.75** due to a reduction in political violence and persecution of opposition figures, and the relative openness of criticism of the government in the October presidential election.
- **Civil Society rating improved from 6.50 to 6.25** due to the release of civic activists from prison and an increase in political space for advocacy campaigns and fund-raising during the year.

As a result, Belarus's Democracy Score improved from 6.71 to 6.64.

Outlook for 2016: The authoritarian nature of the political regime in Belarus will not change in 2016. The executive branch, with President Lukashenka at the top, will avoid implementation of significant reforms, though economic modernization is likely to continue without much fanfare. That would be in part a result of the gradual replacement of Soviet-minded conservatives with a new generation of officials, but also a response to major problems in Russia, the country's main financial supporter. Economic and political pressures from an increasingly assertive Kremlin will lead to more attempts by Belarus to improve its relations with the West. The authorities can be expected to continue treating the political opposition and media without unnecessary brutality, while denying them the freedom necessary to change the political status quo.

MAIN REPORT

National Democratic Governance

2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
7.00	7.00	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75

- The Republic of Belarus is proclaimed by its constitution to be a democratic social state, based on the rule of law, that admits the priority of generally acknowledged principles of international law and ensures the conformity of legislation with them. In practice, however, many democratic institutions are not functioning, and power is concentrated in the hands of President Alyaksandr Lukashenka, who has effectively placed the judiciary and the legislature under his control. Lukashenka has ruled the country since 1994, relying on economic subsidies from Russia and the repression of political opposition and human rights activism. From this point of view, no major changes occurred in 2015.
- An economic downturn caused by falling oil prices and shrinking demand for Belarusian imports in Russia persisted during the year, particularly in terms of wages and purchasing power. In 2010 the authorities promised a monthly wage of \$1,000 per month, but the real figure fell to \$500 in 2015; instead of positive economic achievements, the president now pledges to ensure job security and protection from the Ukraine conflict.¹ After 20 years of economic growth, Belarus lost ground overall in 2015, with gross domestic product declining by 3.9 percent in the first 11 months of the year.²
- Lukashenka emphasizes that any reforms will focus on improving the existing political and economic structures rather than replacing or dismantling them.³ At the same time, ministers in charge of the economy admit that Belarus has in fact started a number of economic reforms aimed at reducing the country's dependence on Russia and attracting foreign investors.⁴ In 2015 government officials began to publicly recognize that the long-term development of Belarus requires property protections, separation of powers, and market-based competition,⁵ and there was growing evidence of quiet economic reforms.⁶
- The country's governmental system is generally stable, as the bureaucracy and business elite are loyal to the authoritarian leader through inclusion in the distribution of rents and privileges.⁷ In 2015 there was no general consensus among political groups and citizens that democracy should be the basis for the country's political system.⁸ Citizens' trust in public institutions remained quite low.⁹ Observers noted the lowest recorded level of public willingness to protest, with only 9.3 percent of respondents saying they were ready to participate in meetings and pickets, and 1.6 percent saying they were ready to go on strike.¹⁰ The authorities continued their practice of refusing permission to hold mass events.¹¹
- The executive plays a key role in policymaking; the president is the chief decision maker on most important issues. The structure of security organs remains largely unchanged since Soviet times,¹² and legislation severely restricts public access to government information, especially regarding the military and security, much of which is classified.¹³ The bicameral parliament lacks the resources and capacity to fulfill its lawmaking and investigative responsibilities. In practice, the parliament mostly confines itself to rubber-stamping proposals prepared by the executive. The administration drafts nearly all legislation, which receives very little meaningful discussion in the parliament.¹⁴ It took the parliament less than an hour to adopt the 2015 budget.¹⁵

Electoral Process

2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
7.00	7.00	6.75	6.75	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	6.75

- The constitution guarantees universal and equal suffrage and government by the will of the people, as expressed through regular, free, and fair elections conducted by secret ballot. However, elections on all levels are far from meeting international standards in practice.
- The 2015 presidential election was peaceful, unlike in 2010, though it was not regarded as free and fair by international election-monitoring organizations.¹⁶ The lack of violence against the opposition during the campaign and after the election became one of the reasons why the European Union and the United States suspended most of their sanctions on Belarusian individuals and entities. The warming of relations with the West also reflected Belarus's increasing concerns about Russia's more aggressive policies in the region.¹⁷
- The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) concluded that Belarus failed to address key deficiencies in its election laws in 2015. International experts praised reforms that increased donation and spending limits and allowed the period for collection of funds to begin prior to candidate registration. However, they found that the overall legal framework for elections could not guarantee a process in accordance with Belarus's international commitments.¹⁸ Observers noted that the candidates were left with insufficient resources for meaningful campaigning,¹⁹ while the authorities used administrative resources as well as state budget funds to promote the candidacy of the incumbent president.²⁰ The international monitors also reported that they were not allowed to follow all stages of the election process, such as signature verification and tabulation of results.
- Independent domestic observers questioned the validity of the results and called the election nondemocratic, citing evidence of both turnout and vote-count manipulations.²¹ Domestic observers also noted the election commissions' lack of impartiality, use of administrative resources to favor the incumbent, and coercion of citizens to participate in early voting.²²
- The signature collection and verification process for candidate registration is largely free, and the authorities do not interfere, but it is poorly regulated by the electoral code and lacks a clear procedure for the selection and verification of signature samples.²³ Those in pretrial detention or serving a prison sentence are denied voting and candidacy rights, irrespective of the gravity of the crime. Although the 2015 presidential candidates could campaign throughout the country and convey messages to the electorate in a relatively unhindered way, campaigning was possible only in specially designated venues, and only after notification of the local government or election administration, which is not consistent with international standards.²⁴
- The composition of territorial and precinct-level election commissions included a record-low number of opposition members, who were unreasonably denied membership in nearly all cases. International experts also pointed to the absence of sufficiently detailed procedures for transparent vote counting and tabulation, and for publishing preliminary and final results with a breakdown by polling station.²⁵ The observers were not allowed to check the accuracy of turnout figures announced by election commissions.²⁶
- The authorities reported a record-high early voting turnout of over 36 percent of all eligible voters in 2015.²⁷ Government agencies held meetings where employees were encouraged to vote early, and the same was done by university administrations, student dormitories, military units, and other state-controlled organizations.²⁸ Districts with a higher prevalence of early voting in the 2010 presidential election had notably demonstrated not only greater turnout, but also greater support for the incumbent president. International observers noted that public servants and officials campaigned during working hours on behalf of the incumbent. Lukashenka also benefited in 2015 from endorsements by managers of various state institutions, including military officials and public servants.²⁹
- Compared with the 2010 presidential campaign, the state-owned electronic media increased the airtime devoted to election coverage, but Lukashenka still dominated. According to the aggregated data, he received around 60 percent of all election-related time on the main state television news programs, with all such coverage assessed as very positive. Other candidates received nearly 5 percent each.³⁰ Despite the increased media content and high official turnout rates, public interest in

campaigning remained low, with many people expressing the belief that the political situation cannot be changed through elections.

Civil Society

2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
6.50	6.50	6.25	6.00	6.00	6.25	6.50	6.50	6.50	6.25

- By the end of 2015, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) were reporting a general positive trend in conditions for civil society and human rights in Belarus,³¹ noting in particular the release of political prisoners. A number of successful advocacy campaigns,³² improvements in the operation capacity of NGOs, and new local fund-raising mechanisms were also welcomed by observers.³³ In addition, high-level officials no longer shied away from events organized by critically minded civil society organizations.
- According to a national survey conducted by the Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies (IISEPS), the share of Belarusians who were aware of NGOs stabilized at around 50 percent in 2014–15, which was almost 20 percentage points more than in 2013.³⁴ The portion of the population involved in public benefit activities is large and has remained on the same level (71–74 percent) for four years. Based on this data, the potential for public and social activism in Belarus appears high.³⁵
- A total of 596 NGOs operated in Belarus as of January 1, 2015, and very few new organizations were registered during the year.³⁶ Independent civil society groups face great difficulty in registering as legal entities,³⁷ and Article 193.1 of the criminal code penalizes activities by unregistered organizations. A leading Belarusian human rights organization, Viasna, is unregistered in Belarus, as are a number of other groups. Over a hundred civil society organizations are registered abroad due to the legal and regulatory obstacles they face inside the country.
- Early in 2015, the Belarusian government maintained pressure on individuals who have been acknowledged as political prisoners by international human rights organizations.³⁸ But on August 22, the authorities released six such prisoners: Mikalay Statkevich, Mikalay Dzyadok, Ihar Alinevich, Yawheni Vaskovich, Artsyom Prakapenka, and Yury Rubtsov.³⁹
- In 2015, a number of crowdfunding platforms, such as Talaka.by and MaeSens, were used to raise money in Belarus for various activities, including publishing books and supporting museums.⁴⁰ However, restrictive legislation generally makes it difficult to fund civil society initiatives, particularly those touching on sensitive political issues.⁴¹
- The largest NGOs remain under effective state control. These include the Belarusian Republican Union of Youth (BRSM), the Federation of Trade Unions, and the Belarusian Union of Women.⁴² The authorities also promote an alternative government-controlled organization for the country’s ethnic Polish minority.
- Political parties face significant difficulties when attempting to register and are typically forced to function as “political clubs” rather than formal parties.⁴³ For example, the Belarusian Christian Democracy party has submitted documents for registration to the Ministry of Justice at least five times since 2007, without success. The group also finds it difficult to rent space for conferences.⁴⁴
- Independent trade unions operate in a difficult environment and function alongside the state-dominated Federation of Trade Unions. However, in 2015 the authorities simplified the procedure for setting up trade unions under an ordinance signed in June.⁴⁵ They notably removed a previous rule that a union must include at least 10 percent of all employees in a given company to receive recognition.
- The authorities continued to put pressure on members of “nontraditional confessions,” primarily Protestant groups. For example, Protestant ministers in Homel were threatened with criminal charges

for activities on behalf of unregistered religious organizations. The houses and apartments of ministers have been searched by police officers.⁴⁶ However, there were some positive developments during 2015. Minsk authorities for the first time allowed Protestants to gather for a large collective prayer event.⁴⁷

- In 2015 government officials began to engage more actively with civil society organizations, which in the past were viewed as political adversaries. A number of high-level officials spoke at an event organized by independent Belarusian economic think tanks, including a deputy head of the Presidential Administration and the head of the Main Economic Department of the Presidential Administration.⁴⁸ The authorities appear to have become more tolerant and even supportive of independent cultural initiatives, such as those aimed at encouraging the use of the Belarusian language and popularizing Belarusian national culture.⁴⁹
- In May 2015 Belarus’s accession to the Bologna Process was approved in a resolution by European education ministers.⁵⁰ As a result, Belarus formally entered the European Higher Education Area, which seeks to achieve consistency and the harmonization of national higher education systems in European countries. Although this does not necessarily guarantee reforms, it creates more opportunities for exchanges and international cooperation for Belarusian students and academics.

Independent Media

2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
6.75	6.75	6.75	6.50	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75

- The constitution guarantees freedom of expression and prohibits censorship. A wide range of national and local television broadcasters as well as a number of print media outlets function in the country.⁵¹ According to the Ministry of Information, there are 1,586 print outlets, 273 broadcast stations, and nine news agencies. However, in practice state-owned media dominate the landscape and are subsidized by the government; in addition, state bodies and state-owned organizations are obliged to subscribe to state media.
- The distribution of newspapers is controlled by the state through the state-owned postal system Belpochta and the kiosk distribution network Belsayuzdruk. In 2015 Belpochta refused to carry independent newspapers including *Barysawskiya Naviny*, *Intex-press*, and *Novy Chas*.⁵² It is possible to buy some independent papers, such as *Narodnaya Volya* and *Nasha Niva*, but the state distribution system imposes caps on the number of copies that can be distributed. Some independent newspapers have switched to internet-only publication because of printing and distribution restrictions.⁵³
- During the 2015 presidential election campaign, instead of covering the competition between different political forces and platforms, the state-owned media focused on technical aspects of the election process, including preparation of voting places and the related activities of local authorities. Although the independent media covered the presidential candidates and opponents of the regime, their very limited readership and the general sense that the outcome was predetermined meant that there was no lively debate in the society.⁵⁴
- The authorities seek to further limit access to online media. A series of amendments to the law on mass media that were signed in December 2014 took effect in January 2015, expanding the government’s powers to ban websites and allowing blocks on those deemed harmful to Belarus’s “national interests,” among other provisions.⁵⁵ According to a regulatory directive that came into force in February 2015,⁵⁶ the authorities can also restrict access to proxy servers and anonymizers, which users have employed to circumvent existing obstructions and reach blocked websites. In what was reportedly the first application of the “national interests” clause to an online media outlet, the Ministry of Information restricted access to KYKY.org online journal in June.⁵⁷

- Until August 2015, the authorities imposed a series of fines on journalists for contributing to foreign media without accreditation.⁵⁸ However, after independent reporters publicly complained to Lukashenka in August administrative prosecutions of freelance journalists who contributed to foreign outlets ceased.⁵⁹,
- In February the Ministry of Information issued warnings to the independent regional newspapers *Intex-press*, *Hantsavitski Chas*, *Borisovskiye Novosti*, *Reklamny Borzhomi*, and *Hazeta Slonimskaya*, mostly for minor infractions like abbreviating the ministry’s name.⁶⁰ In August, *Hazeta Slonimskaya* faced an administrative proceeding and possible fines for “dissemination of untruthful information that damages the honor and dignity of the Belarusian president.”⁶¹
- In the course of the 2015 presidential election campaign, state media dedicated most coverage to the incumbent. However, other candidates were given opportunities to convey their messages to the public in two blocs on the main television and radio channels, and major state-funded newspapers published all candidates’ election programs.⁶²

Local Democratic Governance

2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
6.50	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75

- The constitution provides for local government institutions, but they are not autonomous bodies responsible to the local community. There are several tiers of local councils and executive committees, with each directed and supervised by those above it in the hierarchy.
- Subnational executive bodies have no direct democratic legitimacy, since they are formed and controlled by, and accountable to, the president and central government. The executive chairman at the regional (*voblasts*) level is usually appointed personally by the president, and usually from among his closest associates.
- Local governments have been granted some authority to set the rates of certain taxes and issue exemptions and concessions. However, these competences do not allow the financial independence of local governments and their budgets, as local finance remains part of a national system administered by the central government. Revenues and expenditures in local budgets are determined and approved in a centralized manner. The principle of fiscal decentralization has an essentially declarative character in Belarus.
- Belarusian law guarantees citizen input and transparency, as it endorses the principle of openness, due regard for citizen opinion, and full information on local decision-making. According to the law, the councils are accountable and responsible to citizens, and deputies are obliged to receive citizens at least once a month. In practice, however, accountability of local governments to citizens is virtually absent. Similarly, the law permits citizens to visit sessions of the councils and initiate draft decisions or propose their initiation, amendment, or abolition, but in reality the session agendas and results are almost never open to the public.
- The last local elections in 2014 demonstrated that the population is not interested in local politics and does not see local political activism as a means of solving common problems.⁶³ Political parties, both opposition and progovernment, almost disappeared from the local councils. Only a handful of deputies affiliated with the opposition currently occupy meaningful positions at the local level.
- Belarus lacks a single approach to the development of local governance, which adversely affects the creation of relevant legislation and the coordination and implementation both national and regional programs.⁶⁴ Training in the field of local self-government is virtually absent.⁶⁵ Regional councils are almost completely dominated by the heads of state enterprises and organizations, who hold 75–90 percent of the seats.⁶⁶ A narrow group of state bureaucrats cannot represent all parts of society, so the councils instead serve as a mechanism for communication among elites and assist the local executive.

- In 2015 the Hrodna region was the first to establish an association of local councils. The law has provided this opportunity since 2010, but no council had taken the initiative. However, the statements of those who created the association indicate that it was designed not to extend democratic principles or the autonomy of local government, but to improve the positions of regional elites and their opportunities for external cooperation.⁶⁷

Judicial Framework and Independence

2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	6.75	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00	7.00

- Formally, the constitution and legislation provide protections for fundamental political, civil, and human rights, but many of those protections do not function in practice. The judicial branch, like the legislative, remains almost entirely dependent on the executive. As is the case with other state officials in Belarus, the salaries, bonuses, and benefits of judges are defined by the Presidential Administration. Other conditions subject to the will of the executive include judges' right to improve their living situation and access to preferential housing loans.
- Presidential powers also extend to disciplinary proceedings and sanctions against judges.⁶⁸ In 2015 the president dismissed four judges from the economic court for "actions not compatible with the high position of judge." However, the authorities have not revealed further information on the alleged misdeeds.⁶⁹
- The authorities continue to use courts for the preventive detention of political activists.⁷⁰ Although the authorities released all political prisoners before the 2015 presidential election, the move can be considered temporary and tactical rather than a permanent renunciation of all such detentions. During their whole period of imprisonment, the political detainees faced pressure and harsh conditions.⁷¹ Judges typically uphold local authorities' decisions to ban mass events when they are challenged in court.⁷²
- Acquittals in criminal cases are extremely rare. Statistics published by the Supreme Court in August 2015 showed that during the first half of the year, the acquittal rate fell to 0.26 percent, compared with 0.4 percent the previous year.⁷³ In 2015 the courts continued to violate the rights of Belarusian-speaking people, regularly denying motions to conduct legal proceedings in Belarusian.⁷⁴
- Violations of the rights of prisoners remain a serious problem in Belarus. Although prison conditions have generally improved in recent years,⁷⁵ inmates' right to contact citizens and institutions outside prison is restricted.⁷⁶ The penal system in Belarus remains under the control of the Ministry of Internal Affairs rather than the Ministry of Justice, which increases the risk of human rights violations, according to observers.⁷⁷

Corruption

2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
6.25	6.25	6.00	6.00	6.00	6.25	6.25	6.25	6.25	6.25

- The authorities and the public display a high intolerance for official corruption. Although petty corruption, such as bribery of police or customs officials, remains relatively uncommon in Belarus, higher-level corruption is more difficult to detect and represents a serious problem. Much of the economy is still controlled by the state, which creates fertile ground for graft. However, according to various international organizations, Belarus performs better than Ukraine or Russia when it comes to corruption.⁷⁸

- Belarus has addressed in a satisfactory manner only four of the 24 recommendations listed in a 2012 report by the Council of Europe’s Group of States against Corruption. The country has achieved progress on the training and specialization of law enforcement personnel, consideration of a new mechanism for confiscation of assets, and the introduction of accounting and reporting obligations based on international standards, but reforms have not moved forward in other areas.⁷⁹
- According to a 2015 survey of Belarusian businesses, the areas most affected by corruption are governance and the ability to settle disputes in court; the least affected are the country’s economic growth, foreign investment, and the development of domestic markets. Some 67 percent of businesses reported that the situation with corruption had not changed over the past year.⁸⁰
- A large part of the Belarusian economy remains in the shadows, as companies avoid paying taxes and social security contributions.⁸¹ Belarusian entrepreneurs think that the initiative for corrupt activities usually comes from state officials, according to opinion surveys. However, compared with previous years, fewer respondents in 2015 felt that only officials were responsible for corruption.⁸² The three sectors identified as most subject to corruption were construction, manufacturing, and finance.⁸³ The authorities have recently initiated a number of high-profile anticorruption cases, partly in these sectors. For example, several directors of state textile-manufacturing enterprises as well as the head of the state association of textile producers faced charges in 2015 and were awaiting trial at year’s end.⁸⁴
- In July 2015 the president signed the law “On Combating Corruption,”⁸⁵ which introduced additional incentives and controls to reduce corrupt behavior by officials. Among other provisions, the law offers citizens an opportunity to take part in the drafting of rules and the activity of anticorruption bodies, penalizes officials for taking bribes by withdrawing their pensions, requires property declarations to account for the assets of officials’ children.
- The new law is particularly focused on strengthening state oversight of the income of officials and their relatives.⁸⁶ However, asset declarations and other such data remain hidden from the public. Prior to the law’s passage, the prosecutor general argued that it was unnecessary and unethical to require public officials to publish information about their income.⁸⁷
- During the drafting process for the anticorruption law, the Prosecutor General’s Office organized a public discussion on its content, and public authorities and other organizations submitted more than 300 proposals, some of which were incorporated into the legislation.⁸⁸ The Prosecutor General’s Office also reported that it had intensified enforcement of existing anticorruption rules, conducting hundreds of inspections that led to more warnings and criminal investigations compared with 2014.⁸⁹
- In early 2015 it was reported that more than 60 officials had been under investigation for corruption over the previous year, including eight people from the president’s “reserve list” of the most trusted officials.⁹⁰ The Prosecutor General’s Office found that during the last nine months of 2015, the number of corruption crimes in Minsk decreased by 20 percent, with half of the crimes involving bribery.⁹¹
- The authorities developed annual plans to implement the national Program to Combat Crime and Corruption. The measures include organizing educational programs for state bodies and other institutions to study the issues of anticorruption legislation, as well as annual monitoring of public opinion on the performance of regulatory agencies and courts, which can be used to improve their efficiency and public confidence in their integrity.⁹²

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