

# Executive Memorandum

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## The U.S. Should Oppose Dictatorship in Belarus

*Ariel Cohen, Ph.D.*

President Alexandr Lukashenka of Belarus has added a referendum to the October 17 parliamentary elections, asking Belarusians to allow him to participate in the next presidential election (prohibited by his own tailor-made constitution) and to remove the presidential term limits from the constitution.

Lukashenka, an authoritarian, anti-Western populist and former collective farm boss, took office illegally after the 1996 constitutional coup. If the October 17 referendum passes, he will have taken a giant step toward becoming a “president for life”—an unseemly sight in democratic Europe. Not only could he run for a third term in 2006, but for an indeterminate number of terms thereafter. This would allow him to remain in office indefinitely—particularly given his policy of preventing political parties from competing in parliamentary elections, having equal access to the media, or placing their own observers on local and regional electoral commissions as provided by law.

The authoritarian Belarus has become a near-pariah state in Europe, especially after Lukashenka caused several opposition leaders to “disappear” in the late 1990s. Sources in Minsk confirmed that the dictator’s henchmen murdered them. The U.S. and the EU countries responded by jointly agreeing to deny travel visas to a list of Belarusian offi-

cial from Lukashenka’s inner circle. This may be a step in the right direction, but it is insufficient. Lukashenka can simply retaliate by banning U.S. and EU officials from visiting Belarus.

**Moscow Apprehensive.** Some in the Putin Administration are also apprehensive about Lukashenka and resent the basket-case Belarusian economy that is an albatross around their country’s neck. Moreover, the Putin Administration is aware that Lukashenka nurses an ambition to engineer a unification between Russia and Belarus in such a way that he could run for president of Russia. In fact, Lukashenka has expressed his admiration for Hitler and Stalin.

Russians should know that, if they absorb Belarus or even tolerate the abuses of power, the influence of Lukashenka’s authoritarianism may exacerbate their own country’s uneasy relationship with democracy. Furthermore, the world’s indifference to Lukashenka’s power grab may encourage President Vladimir Putin’s entourage to advise

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- Belarusian President Alexandr Lukashenka thinks he is the permanent ruler of that country, but the people of Belarus deserve better.
  - The U.S. executive branch and Congress need to do more to support democracy in Belarus.
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This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:  
[www.heritage.org/research/russiaandeurasia/em945.cfm](http://www.heritage.org/research/russiaandeurasia/em945.cfm)

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Putin to remain in power after 2008, when his term ends.

**Cooperation with Europe.** The U.S. and Europe have numerous interests at stake in Belarus, including how its failed democracy may influence its neighbors, particularly Russia and Ukraine, which will elect its next president on October 31. Belarus is also suspected of selling weapons to rogue regimes, such as Iran and Saddam's Iraq. Anti-Western arms dealers in Minsk may also be selling weapons to terrorist groups around the world, including those fighting in Iraq.

However, the West has some powerful tools for fighting the Belarusian dictator and his henchmen. In the past, the U.S. has worked with allies such as Italy and the U.K. to stop overseas shipments of Ukrainian arms to the Balkans in violation of international sanctions. Furthermore, the U.S. has never recognized an absolute sovereign immunity defense, which means heads of state can be prosecuted under U.S. law. The U.S. also has investigated leaders from the post-Soviet states, including Ukrainian President Leonid Kuchma (and most of his senior team) and the late Azerbaijani President Heydar Aliiev. Former Ukrainian Prime Minister Pavlo Lazarenko and former Panamanian President Manuel Noriega have been convicted in U.S. courts. There are many opportunities for Washington, London, Paris, Berlin, and Brussels to cooperate on Belarus.

On October 6, Congress passed the Belarus Democracy Act of 2004 (H.R. 854), sponsored by Representative Chris Smith (R-NJ) and others, to fund a broad range of measures to support democracy in Belarus. Although this is a beginning, the executive branch and Congress need to do more. Specifically, they should:

- **Denounce** publicly Lukashenka's violations of the constitution and electoral procedures, and the State Department should amplify its criticism of Belarus's flawed political system.
- **Declare**, with the EU, that the referendum and parliamentary elections are illegitimate if observers from the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe find election falsification or other violations.
- **Use** domestic and international law enforcement agencies, such as Interpol, in cooperation

with EU members, to coordinate criminal investigations into homicides, money laundering, and illegal arms trading linked to the Lukashenka regime.

- **Investigate** the disappearances of Lukashenka's political opponents, provided there is a jurisdictional nexus to the U.S. and/or Europe. Both the U.S. Justice Department and its European counterparts can do so. Moreover, Europe and the U.S. could initiate criminal proceedings against those in the president's circle who ordered and participated in the murder of opposition politicians and journalists.
- **Seize** assets of Lukashenka and his inner circle through criminal proceedings against illegal arms sales and money laundering operations if Belarus violated U.S. or international sanctions. The U.S. and EU would be entitled to enforce such sanctions even if the violations did not occur in America or Europe.
- **Fund**, together with the EU, an international broadcasting operation by opposition radio and television stations from countries around Belarus, and expand people-to-people and educational exchanges.
- **Consult** with Russia regarding possible political changes that would make Belarus more democratic and predictable. Such a coordinated effort would benefit Russia by making the transit route for Russian gas to Europe less prone to Lukashenka's interference and would eliminate the need for Russia to support the Belarusian economy with subsidized natural gas at a cost of over \$2 billion per year.

**Conclusion.** Lukashenka thinks he is the permanent ruler of Belarus, but the people of Belarus deserve better. From day one, the next Congress and Administration should provide leadership to help make Belarus free.

—Ariel Cohen, Ph.D., is Research Fellow in Russian and Eurasian Studies in the Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Institute for International Studies at The Heritage Foundation. The author thanks Scott Horton, a partner at the law firm of Patterson, Belknap, Webb & Tyler, and Paul Rosenzweig, a Senior Legal Research Fellow at The Heritage Foundation, for their assistance with this paper.