

How the Biden Administration Should Approach Belarus

Alexis Mrachek

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Belarus has been rocked by political turmoil since fraudulent elections in 2020, and authorities continue to hold political prisoners and commit human rights abuses.

The Biden Administration must ensure that U.S. solidarity with the pro-democracy movement and support for opposition leader Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya are unwavering.

The Administration should host Tsikhanouskaya at the White House, show solidarity with the Belarusian people, and voice support for Belarus's territorial integrity.

Belarus has been rocked by political turmoil since the fraudulent presidential election last August. Belarusian citizens today continue to protest the election result on the streets, and authorities continue to hold political prisoners and commit human rights abuses against the protestors. So far, approximately 30,000 citizens¹ have been arrested for protesting, supporting the opposition, defending human rights, or journalistically covering events related to the crackdown.

President Joe Biden must now develop a clear strategy toward Belarus. To support Belarusians' pursuit of democracy, the United States should host Belarusian opposition leader Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya at the White House, pass new and relevant legislation to formalize U.S. assistance to the pro-democracy movement, support Belarusian civil society, call for

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the release of political prisoners and journalists in Belarus, and keep sanctions on relevant Belarusian authorities and entities in place.

Background

On August 9, 2020, Belarus held its presidential election. Then-26-year incumbent Alyaksandr Lukashenka, known as the last dictator in Europe, claimed victory. However, local observers declared the election to be fraudulent.² Once the polls closed, the Belarusian people took to the streets to protest the outcome and have been protesting ever since. Belarusian security forces have detained nearly 30,000 citizens³ and beaten and injured hundreds.⁴

In the few weeks before the election, Belarus witnessed a vast change in its political climate. Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, formerly a full-time stay-at-home mother, became the main opposition candidate against President Lukashenka after her husband, opposition blogger Siarhei Tsikhanousky, was arrested for organizing pro-democracy protests. Support for Tsikhanouskaya had grown exponentially since mid-July when she announced her candidacy. Tens of thousands attended her rallies.⁵ Since last August, Tsikhanouskaya has been residing in Lithuania for safety.

International Actions Supporting Belarusian Democracy

A number of senior leaders and officials from European countries have met with Tsikhanouskaya to demonstrate their support for her and the pursuit of democracy in Belarus. Vice President of the European Commission and EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Josep Borrell also met with her.⁶ In addition, some of the nations that have met with her include Austria,⁷ Belgium,⁸ Canada,⁹ Estonia,¹⁰ France,¹¹ Germany,¹² Greece,¹³ Ireland,¹⁴ Italy,¹⁵ Latvia,¹⁶ Lithuania,¹⁷ the Netherlands,¹⁸ Norway,¹⁹ Poland,²⁰ Portugal,²¹ Slovak Republic,²² Slovenia,²³ Spain,²⁴ Sweden,²⁵ and Switzerland.²⁶ However, the only high-level meeting to take place between Tsikhanouskaya and the U.S. government was when former U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Stephen Biegun met with her virtually.²⁷

U.S. Actions Toward Belarus

During the 116th Congress, the House of Representatives passed an omnibus bill, H.R. 8438, in support of the Belarusian democracy movement. However, the Senate never passed it, and thus the bill never became law.

According to the summary, the bill “expands the [U.S.] President’s authority to impose sanctions related to Belarus to include activities surrounding the disputed 2020 Belarusian presidential election and subsequent government crackdown,” and “expands authorized assistance to Belarus.” Furthermore, the bill “expands authorized assistance related to Belarus to include assistance to (1) counter internet censorship and surveillance technology, (2) support the work of women advocating for freedom and human rights, and (3) support political refugees fleeing the crackdown in Belarus.”²⁸ The Belarusian opposition movement received the bill extremely favorably and Tsikhanouskaya herself thanked the United States for its passing in the House.²⁹

The United States also recently reinstated an Ambassador to Belarus, Julie Fisher, after a 12-year hiatus of not having an Ambassador there. Ambassador Fisher has already met with Tsikhanouskaya.³⁰

Under the Biden Administration, the U.S. has made some statements of solidarity with the people of Belarus³¹ and the House of Representatives introduced a new resolution in their support, H.Res. 124,³² in the first session of the 117th Congress.

It is as important to demonstrate support for the Belarusian people and their pursuit of democracy as it is to condemn the Lukashenka regime.

The Trump Administration took some actions against the Belarusian government, such as sanctioning Belarusian individuals and entities,³³ restricting visas,³⁴ and calling for the release of political prisoners in Belarus.³⁵ The Biden Administration, so far, has added additional visa restrictions on 43 Belarusians “responsible for undermining Belarusian democracy,”³⁶ and the 117th Congress has held a hearing with Tsikhanouskaya as the sole witness.³⁷

What the Biden Administration Should Do

President Biden has been in office for two months now and his Administration should develop a clear strategy toward Belarus. Belarus desperately needs the United States’ assistance and support. To continue supporting Belarus’s pursuit of democracy, the Biden Administration and U.S. Congress should:

1. **Host Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya at the White House.** Several European allies have hosted Tsikhanouskaya in their capitals. Former Deputy Secretary of State Biegun did meet with her, but it would demonstrate much more support for Belarus if President Biden himself were to meet with her in person at the White House. An official visit is in order.

- 2. Replace the current Belarusian flag at the State Department and on the State Department’s website with the traditional flag.** Currently, the red and green version of the Belarusian flag is on display at the State Department and on the State Department’s website. However, this flag has Soviet ties and reinforces Lukashenka’s regime.³⁸ Since last August, Belarusian protestors have been using the traditional white-red-white version of the flag. In order to visually show support for the Belarusian people, the State Department should put up the white-red-white flag in the lobby and display this same flag on the State Department website.³⁹
- 3. Pass legislation that supports the Belarusian people and condemns the Lukashenka regime.** Ideally, this legislation would be both practical and symbolic. At the very least, the legislation should support Belarusians’ democratic pursuits, condemn the fraudulent election and subsequent human rights abuses by Belarusian security forces against peaceful protestors, and broaden the U.S. President’s authority to punish the Lukashenka regime, whether by sanctions or other means. The legislation should also allow the U.S. to provide more assistance to Belarusian refugees, as well as entities or individuals fighting the rampant Internet censorship and online surveillance in Belarus.
- 4. Implore the Belarusian government to release political prisoners and journalists.** Crackdowns on free speech in Belarus continue with the arrests of journalists. On February 18, for example, two Belarusian journalists employed with Belsat, a Polish media company, were sentenced to two years in a penal colony for reporting the news. This is an attempt by the Belarusian government to silence the media and restrict Belarusians’ access to non-state media. The U.S. embassy in Minsk has called for the release of these journalists⁴⁰ and other political prisoners, and Secretary of State Antony Blinken should do the same to increase pressure on the Lukashenka government.
- 5. Lead the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in planning for increasing defense measures in case of a fully integrated union between Belarus and Russia.** In the event that Russia might fully integrate with Belarus (meaning that Russia would absorb Belarus), the U.S. should lead NATO in planning for increased defense measures. Currently, Belarus borders three NATO members—Latvia,

Lithuania, and Poland. If Belarus and Russia were to fully integrate, the military situation in northeastern Europe would be fundamentally changed. As a defensive alliance, NATO would need to bolster its capabilities in the region. Planning for this should start now, and not after Belarus and Russia join as a union.

- 6. Reject the notion of a union-state between Belarus and Russia by issuing a Welles-like declaration if Russia moves to annex Belarus.** In 1940, acting Secretary of State Sumner Welles issued a statement declaring that the U.S. would never recognize the legitimacy of Soviet occupation of the Baltic states. In 2021, the Biden Administration issued a similar declaration stating that the U.S. will never recognize the legitimacy of Russian claims to Crimea.⁴¹ This would indicate that the United States would not ever recognize Belarus as Russian. Since 1991, Belarus has been an independent nation, and the U.S. should continue to recognize it as such.
- 7. Work closely with Europe, especially with Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland.** Because Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland border Belarus, they know the country best. Directly following the Belarusian presidential election, the three nations took on an informal leadership role.⁴² The U.S. should work with these countries to strategize about what course of action to take regarding Belarus.
- 8. Support Belarusian civil society through the U.S. State Department.** Civil society includes free and independent media, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), think tanks, universities, cultural institutions, and the like. Civil society is vital, as it provides information for both citizens and the government, monitors governmental policies, holds the government accountable, and defends citizens' rights.⁴³ According to Human Rights Watch, "Civil society activists, lawyers, rights groups, and independent media [in Belarus] face government harassment and pressure."⁴⁴ In order to support Belarusians' fundamental freedoms and rights, the U.S. State Department should engage with civil society institutions in Belarus. This could occur through a new State Department fellowship or program, for instance.
- 9. Keep sanctions on relevant Belarusian authorities and entities in place and be unafraid to expand sanctions in the future.** In December 2020, the U.S. Treasury Department imposed sanctions on

one individual and four entities in Belarus for their roles in the fraudulent August election and subsequent violent crackdown on innocent Belarusian citizens protesting peacefully.⁴⁵ As long as the crackdown continues, the U.S. must hold the Belarusian regime accountable by keeping sanctions on relevant authorities and entities in place. The U.S. should also not be fearful to impose more sanctions, such as Magnitsky Act sanctions for human rights abuses, when necessary.

Conclusion

The political turmoil in Belarus does not appear to be ending any time soon. Belarusians will likely continue to protest for months to come, as long as they are able to. The United States under both the Trump and Biden Administrations has shown a reasonable amount of support for their fight for democracy, but more needs to be done. The Biden Administration cannot forget Belarus and must ensure that U.S. solidarity is unwavering, especially in the months to come.

Alexis Mrachek is Research Associate in the Douglas and Sarah Allison Center for Foreign Policy, of the Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Institute for National Security and Foreign Policy, at The Heritage Foundation.

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