



WHO, IF NOT US? THE FIGHT FOR DEMOCRACY IN BELARUS



STUDY GUIDE

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This documentary provides a unique glimpse into the struggle for democracy in Belarus and the lives of three women after the major protests of 2020. These protests were the largest in Belarus's history, but the Lukashenko regime brutally suppressed them. Over the course of an entire year, the film follows these exceptional women from different generations, all of whom continue to tirelessly fight for a democratic Belarus.

About Belarus

The Republic of Belarus is a country in eastern Europe. It is landlocked and borders Latvia and Lithuania to the northwest, Russia to the north and east, Poland to the west, and Ukraine to the south. The official languages of Belarus are both Belarusian and Russian. Its capital city is Minsk. According to the country's official website, the population of Belarus is about 9.1 million. About 85 percent of the population is Belarusian, and 7.5 percent Russian. The next most common ethnicities are Polish and Ukrainian.¹

History

According to historians, human settlement of the area that is now Belarus dates back to the Stone Age, and throughout history this area has been controlled by a variety of different rulers. In 1918, it briefly became the Belarusian National Republic. In 1922, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) was established, and the Belorussian Soviet Socialist Republic became one of its four founding republics. The USSR eventually expanded to include fifteen republics, all of which were tightly controlled. Nationalism under the USSR was discouraged. In 1991, the USSR broke apart and Belarus became independent. It changed its name to the Republic of Belarus. In 1994, Belarus created a new constitution, which outlined many democratic rights and freedoms for its citizens, and laid out a process for democratic elections and a separation of legislative, executive, and judicial powers.

Alexander Lukashenko

Alexander Lukashenko was born in 1954. He was a teacher, spent time in the army, and then became a politician. In 1994 he was elected as the first president of the Republic of Belarus. Soon after he was elected--in 1996--Lukashenko revised the constitution significantly. Among other things, it was changed to give him additional powers, and the ability to serve a longer term in office. Since then, he has been re-elected numerous times, with members of the opposition and foreign critics arguing that elections have been undemocratic and unfair.

Under Lukashenko, dissent by the media and the people of Belarus has been suppressed, and economic and political reforms have been prevented. Some people have called him "Europe's last dictator." He has also amended the constitution numerous times, to his benefit. In 2024, Lukashenko announced that he would run for election again in 2025.

¹ <https://www.belarus.by/en/about-belarus/key-facts>

Under Lukashenko, the Belarus flag has also changed. When Belarus left the Soviet Union in 1991, it adopted the traditional red and white flag from its brief period as the Belarusian National Republic in 1918. However, when Lukashenko came to power, he replaced that with a red and green flag that resembled the one that country had used under Soviet rule. The red and white flag is frequently used by people who are protesting Lukashenko's rule.

2020 Protests

In 2020, there were widespread protests after another disputed election in which Lukashenko claimed to have won 80 percent of the vote, while his opponent won 10 percent. Many people in Belarus and around the world disagreed with his victory. Tens of thousands of people protested. Lukashenko responded with violent force. Thousands of protestors were arrested and many were injured by police. In a 2020 report, the United Nations Human Rights Council, reports that there was “unnecessary and disproportionate use of force” against protestors. In addition, it says that 37,000 people were arrested, and many were tortured.² Michelle Bachelet, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, states, “The examination not only lays bare the violations inflicted on people trying to exercise their fundamental human rights, but highlights the inability of victims to access justice.” She adds, “The authorities’ extensive and sustained actions to crush dissent and repress civil society, independent media and opposition groups, while at the same time shielding perpetrators, points to a situation of complete impunity in Belarus.”³ The European Union, the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom all imposed sanctions on Belarus in response to its political oppression. Human Rights Group, Viasna, reports that as of September 2024, more than 1,300 people are being held as political prisoners in Belarus.⁴ Svetlana Tsikhanouskaya, who ran against Lukashenko in 2020, lives in exile in Lithuania.

Belarus and Russia

Since its independence, Belarus has retained strong economic and political ties to Russia, and has signed a number of agreements with that country. Belarus shares hundreds of miles of border with Ukraine, and it served as a staging ground for Russia's 2022 invasion of that country; thousands of Russian troops gathered in Belarus in what was said to be a joint military exercise, but turned into an invasion of Ukraine. Since then, there have been critiques that Belarus has supported Russia in the war. In 2022, Lukashenko amended Belarus's constitution again. This amendment allows Russian troops to be permanently stationed in Belarus, and also allows Russian nuclear weapons to be placed in Belarus. Finally, it grants Lukashenko lifetime immunity from prosecution. Following Belarus's role in the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, a number of countries imposed further sanctions on Belarus.

Study Questions

1. What are some ways that people in Belarus are suffering under the current government, as shown in the film?
2. How are they trying to change their situation?

² <https://www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/hrc/regular-sessions/session49/list-reports>

³ <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/03/1113582>

⁴ <https://prisoners.spring96.org/en>

3. In what ways are the people of Belarus attempting to support one another, as shown in the film?
4. Some of the people in the film talk about feeling guilty that others are in prison, while they are not. Why do you think they feel guilty?
5. Why do you think people have decided to stay in Belarus and protest rather than leaving the country?
6. How does the war in Ukraine affect Belarus, as shown in the film?

Additional Resources

Books

- Paul Hansbury, *Belarus in Crisis: From Domestic Unrest to the Russia-Ukraine War*. New York, Oxford University Press, 2023.
- Andrew Wilson, *Belarus: The Last European Dictatorship*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021.

Online Resources

- Belarus: Official Website of the Republic of Belarus, “Key Facts About Belarus.” <https://www.belarus.by/en/about-belarus/key-facts>
- Jonathan Masters, “The Belarus-Russia Alliance: An Axis of Autocracy in Eastern Europe,” Council on Foreign Relations, September 27, 2023. <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/belarus-russia-alliance-axis-autocracy-eastern-europe#chapter-title-0-7>
- Pavel Slunkin, “Lukashenko’s Long Shadow: Understanding Belarus’s New Political Architecture,” European Council on Foreign Relations, April 26, 2024. <https://ecfr.eu/article/lukashenkas-long-shadow-understanding-belaruss-new-political-architecture/>
- Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, interview, “A Conversation with Leader of the Democratic Opposition in Belarus Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya,” Atlantic Council, July 20, 2021. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/event/the-future-of-belarus-a-conversation-with-sviatlana-tsikhanouskaya/>
- United Nations, “Belarus: UN Report Reveals Extent of Violations in Human Rights Crackdown,” March 9, 2022. <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/03/1113582>

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