

### Belarus Program Summary

Dubbed “the last dictatorship in Europe,” Belarus has made few steps toward democracy since gaining independence from the Soviet Union in 1991. In fact, Belarus has experienced economic and political stagnation under the rule of President Aleksander Lukashenka. Elected in 1994, Lukashenka’s regime has become progressively autocratic.

Nine opposition candidates challenged President Lukashenka during the December 19, 2010 presidential election. Official election results released by the government showed that Lukashenka was re-elected for a fourth-term with an incredible 79.6 percent of the vote. Domestic and international observers declared the elections flawed and tens of thousands of Belarusians demonstrated against the falsified results. Police and military forces launched a brutal crackdown on the peaceful demonstration, causing severe injuries to hundreds. More than 700 opposition demonstrators, political and civil society activists, and prominent journalists have been arrested, fined and imprisoned for disputing the election on the night between December 19 and 20. Never before had so many Belarusians challenged the regime so openly.

The International Republican Institute (IRI) began assisting Belarusians in their struggle for democratic change in 1997, working in several key areas: Political party strengthening, coalition building, women empowerment and youth leadership development. These programs are the foundation of IRI’s mission to support democratic organizations and help their leaders and activists prepare for public policy roles in a future democratic Belarus.

### Political Party and Candidate Development

Belarus’ political parties are determined to build and improve their country and put it on a path towards freedom and democracy. In 2009, IRI worked with the united opposition coalition to develop messages and strategy to run issue-based campaigns in Minsk and throughout the regions of Belarus. IRI also trained candidates in campaign techniques including using technology to disseminate their message to a wide audience.

In 2010, IRI assisted pro-democratic forces in their preparations for the pre-election campaign period through message development and dissemination, and voter issue identification. IRI consulted and trained individual campaigns, political parties, and non-governmental organizations on campaign messaging, strategies and plans. IRI will continue to monitor the limited democratic space in Belarus and work with the opposition to find ways to continue their struggle for democratic change.

### Youth Leadership Development

To ensure the future of democracy in Belarus, IRI is training the next generation of political leaders by offering them cross-cultural exchanges and trainings. The exchanges offer the Belarusian youth a forum in which they can freely discuss challenging issues and devise strategies to tackle those issues while cultivating contacts and building networks with like-minded activists in neighboring countries. In July 2009, IRI held trainings on message development and social networking websites as tools for campaigns for youth activists. IRI continued to train youth activists on campaign messaging during 2010 in preparation for the December 2010 presidential election. Campaign activists designed campaign messages, slogan and schedule of meetings with voters, prepared for television and radio appearances, and printed campaign materials. Belarusian youth activists conducted four successful citizen information and mobilization campaigns within Belarus. Following the post-election crackdown, IRI is continuing to assess the political situation and elaborate further assistance strategies for the youth groups in Belarus.

## Women's Initiatives

Women's participation is vital to the lasting success of any democracy. IRI is working with political party leaders to encourage the inclusion of qualified women candidates in all elections and in the development of party messages which resonate with women voters.

