

US introduces sanctions against Belarus

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On October 20, US President George W. Bush signed into law a bill that establishes sanctions against the former Soviet republic of Belarus and authorises the provision of assistance to groups opposed to the country's president, Alexander Lukashenko.

In June, the US Congress voted unanimously for the draft *Act of Democracy in Belarus*, which called for the destabilisation of Lukashenko's regime, criticising its poor human rights record and frequent resort to police-state measures against its opponents.

The law places a moratorium on most US financial aid to the impoverished east European state. It also demands that US representatives on the World Bank and IMF vote against the provision of any loans to Belarus. American intelligence is authorised to investigate the personal finances of the president, prime minister and all senior figures in the government and parliament.

Requiring that US spies keep checks on Belarussian arms deals to "rogue" states, the Act makes an attempt to link the measures against Lukashenko into the so-called "war on terror".

The US sanctions were enacted against a backdrop of public protests in Belarus over a constitutional referendum held on October 17. The poll, which international observers stated failed to meet normal democratic standards, gave Lukashenko a mandate to change the constitution, thereby allowing him to stand for a third term in office. Thousands of Belarussians came out onto the streets of the capital Minsk to register their opposition to the vote's results and the creeping authoritarianism of Lukashenko, many being beaten and arrested by the police.

Washington's piously titled *Act of Democracy in Belarus* has nothing to do with a desire among the Bush administration to spread democracy around the world. At the same time as the State Department was issuing "serious doubts" about the validity of the Belarussian

referendum, the US political and media elite were praising the blatantly rigged presidential elections in Afghanistan as a new dawn of democracy.

The sanctions mark a deepening of Washington's attempt to extend its power into the former Soviet Union and a direct warning to the administration of Russian leader Vladimir Putin, Lukashenko's closest ally. In particular, they express the drive by US imperialism to gain hegemony over the oil resources and transit routes of the former Soviet Union. Half of all Russia's oil exports and around 30 billion cubic meters of Russian natural gas are annually piped across Belarus to the European Union (EU). Russia's Druzhba oil export pipeline passes through the north of the country en route to a major oil terminal in Latvia, while Russian oil and gas also go through the country en route to Poland and Germany. Additionally, Belarus is estimated to possess its own reserves of 200 million barrels of oil.

The strategic orientation of President Lukashenko to Moscow runs counter to Washington's geopolitical ambition of dominating the weak and impoverished former Soviet states that surround Russia. Unlike its pro-US neighbours, the three Baltic States, whose official politics are marked by hysterical anti-Russian chauvinism, Belarus has been the closest regional ally of Moscow since the liquidation of the Soviet Union in 1991. Belarus is the staunchest supporter of the Russian-led Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), and for several years the leaderships of the two countries have been discussing a union, where Belarus would be absorbed into Russia as a semi-autonomous republic.

For the Belarussian elite, such a union would secure the lucrative energy subsidies that the country receives from Russia, whose energy corporations want, in turn, to secure their western oil and gas distribution network.

The US sees such a union as damaging to its ambition to win untrammelled dominance of Eurasia's energy

resources. As the diplomatic aftermath of the Beslan school siege showed, tensions between Moscow and Washington are building. When, in September, Putin insisted that Russian forces should be free to act outside of Russia's borders in pursuit of "terrorists," the Bush administration criticised the Kremlin's new belligerence, warning Putin to respect "democratic principles"—a coded threat not to challenge American imperialist meddling in the region.

But it is not sufficient for US imperialism to contain Russian influence; rather, it will employ every means at its disposal to roll back the power of its rivals. The political logic of the unfolding American campaign against Lukashenko is to replace the Belarussian president with a pro-US administration that will cool relations with Russia and add Belarus to Washington's collection of pliant ex-Stalinist eastern European allies.

The European powers are equally aware of the significance of Belarus to their interests and are themselves wary of any strengthening of Moscow's hand in the region. The European Commission has frequently criticised the Belarussian regime, and for many years the EU gave funds to "pro-democracy" organisations in the country until Lukashenko clamped down on foreign funding of organisations this year.

From November 2002, the EU banned senior politicians from Belarus from its member states as a punishment for Lukashenko's refusal to cooperate with European election monitors. However, the EU resumed normal diplomatic relations with the country in April 2004, hoping to increase its influence in the country by offering Belarus access to loans and aid tied to "reforms."

The move to introduce sanctions by the US Congress gained momentum after the EU's lifting of diplomatic measures against Belarus. With a Russia-Belarus union in the cards and the west European powers tentatively seeking to renew relations with Lukashenko, US foreign policy has issued its response. Further US-sponsored destabilisation in the region undoubtedly lies ahead.



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