

the essential guide to
customs & culture

CULTURE SMART!

BELARUS



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BELARUS

Anne Coombes

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contents

Cover
Title Page
Copyright
About the Author

Map of Belarus

Introduction

Key Facts

Chapter 1: LAND AND PEOPLE

- Geographical Snapshot
- A Brief History
- The Political Scene
- Domestic Policy
- The Economy
- Relations with Russia
- Relations with the EU
- Relations with the Rest of the World

Chapter 2: VALUES AND ATTITUDES

- The Belarusian Character
- Attitudes to the Countryside
- Attitudes to Work
- Communal Spirit
- Attitudes to Authority
- Women in Society
- The Generation Gap
- Attitudes to Money
- Attitudes to Russians
- Attitudes to Foreigners
- Attitudes to Homosexuality
- Attitudes to Minorities
- Superstitions

Chapter 3: FESTIVALS AND CUSTOMS

- State Holidays
- Other Festivals
- Weddings
- Funerals

Chapter 4: MAKING FRIENDS

- Names and Introductions
- Invitations Home
- Drinking
- Conversation

Chapter 5: DAILY LIFE

- A Typical Home
- The Family
- Work
- Education
- Military Service
- Weekends
- Everyday Shopping

Chapter 6: TIME OUT

- Promenading
- Churches and Religious Art
- Parks
- Eating Out
- Museums and Galleries
- War Memorials
- Opera, Ballet, Circus, and Theater
- Nightclubs
- The *Banya*
- Sports
- Shopping for Pleasure
- What to See in Minsk

Chapter 7: TRAVEL, HEALTH, AND SAFETY

- Arrival
- Getting Around
- Where to Stay
- Currency
- Health
- Safety
- Destinations

Chapter 8: BUSINESS BRIEFING

- The Business Environment
- Foreign Investment
- The Legal System
- Future Prospects
- Business Culture
- Meetings
- Negotiation
- Contracts and Fulfillment
- Renting Business Space
- Women in Business

Chapter 9: COMMUNICATING

- Russian versus Belarusian
- Formal and Informal Address
- Humor
- Swearing
- Body Language and Personal Space

- Services
 - The Media
 - Conclusion
-

Further Reading

Map of Belarus



introduction

Belarus has been much in the news in recent years. Its president is widely derided as Europe's "la dictator" and many think of it as a rather backward, insignificant country on the outer edge of the Western world. A stroll through the capital, Minsk, is often said to be like stepping fifty years back in time. It's not hard to imagine Soviet tanks rolling down the main avenue. It is more than just the architecture that harks back to this bygone age, though: try navigating the official bureaucracy, or getting waited on in a shop!

Belarus may have been long under the Russian thumb—and many of the older generation still feel strong ties to their "Soviet Fatherland"—but it is far from being a carbon copy of its neighbor. Centuries of "outside" rule have bred a form of stoicism that, among older people, borders on fatalism. Nevertheless, the Belarusians have their own quiet pride in their land and the younger are passionately patriotic, wanting to carve out an identity separate from Russia. Many traditions are shared with the Russians, but most Minskians would laugh at any comparison to Muscovites, whom they largely regard as materialistic and aggressive. While Moscow's culture and power are admired and respected, they are well aware that their Russian cousins consider them provincial.

Belarus occupies a key geographical position on the strategic crossroads from East to West between Moscow and Warsaw, Vilnius and Kiev. For centuries, armies have trudged across its plain, wreaking destruction. Now, it likes to think of itself as the ideal trade route—which it might be, were it not for the arcane customs procedures at the border.

Belarus's leadership has hitherto thrown in its lot with Russia; for almost a decade, they have been planning a Union State. However, the relationship has soured in the last couple of years, particularly since Gazprom began charging higher prices for its gas and oil. The president is now making overtures to the EU as never before, and the EU continues to urge him to respect human rights and introduce real democracy. A quick Internet search turns up stories of journalists and political figures who mysteriously disappear, of opposition party members imprisoned on apparently trivial charges, and a hair-raising catalog of alleged human rights abuses.

Regardless of their views on its leadership, few visitors leave Belarus without falling in love with it a little. Their conservative social views may leave something to be desired, but the people are disarmingly friendly, and you can't help admiring their resilience, bravery, and resourcefulness. Come what may—Second World War devastation, Stalin's purges, or the cruel post-*perestroika* years—they gird their loins and hang in there. In addition, they are spontaneous, thoughtful toward others, and love a good party. They work their way into your heart.

Pryvita ne! Welcome to Belarus!

Key Facts

Official Name	Republic of Belarus (<i>Respublika Byelarus'</i>)	
Capital City	Minsk (population 1.8 million)	
Major Cities	Gomel, Grodno, Mogilev, Brest, and Vitebsk	
Area	80,155 sq. miles (207,600 sq. km)	A little smaller than Great Britain
Borders	Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Russia, and Ukraine	
Climate	Moderately continental, between maritime and continental.	Over the last decades winters have become warmer.
Currency	Belarusian ruble (BRb)	Exchange rate US \$1 = 2,135 BRb; GB £1 = 4,229 BRb (May 2008)
Population	9,689,700 in 2007 (state statistics)	47 people per sq. km, with 72% in urban areas
Ethnic Distribution	Belarusian 81.2%, Russian 11.4%, Polish 3.9 percent, Ukrainian 2.4%, other 1.1% (1999 census)	
Language	Belarusian and Russian are the official national languages.	
Religion	Mainly Eastern Orthodox Christian (80 percent)	Other religions: Roman Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, and Muslim
Government	President is Head of State. The National Assembly consists of the Council of the Republic (64 seats; 56 elected by regional councils and 8 appointed by the president) and the Chamber of Representatives (110 seats, elected by universal adult suffrage).	There are 6 oblasts (administrative provinces) – Brest, Gomel, Grodno, Minsk, Mogilev, and Vitebsk, and one municipality—the capital of Minsk.
Media	State-run media dominates. Treatment of independent media has brought criticism from the EU and various media watchdogs.	Local TV channels broadcast mainly in Russian; the picture is often of poor quality due to shared aerials. International satellite is available in the top hotels.
Electricity	220 volts, 50 Hz	Standard two-prong plug (adapters needed)
Video/TV	PAL/SECAM system	NTSC TV does not work in Belarus.
Radiation	Levels in affected areas are monitored. An	The rest of the country is considered “safe” by the

	exclusion zone is in operation.	authorities.
Internet Domain	.by	
Telephone	The international dialing code is +375. The code for Minsk is 17.	To dial out of Belarus, dial 8 (for outside the city) then 10, followed by the country code.
Time Zone	GMT + 2 hours	In summer, clocks go forward one hour.

LAND & PEOPLE

GEOGRAPHICAL SNAPSHOT

Belarus is a landlocked country in Eastern Europe, bordering Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Russia, and Ukraine. It likes to boast that it is at the center of Europe, ideally positioned as a transit corridor for East–West trade. In some ways, this is true. Russia has been piping gas to Europe through Belarus for some time now. However, this arrangement is currently under some strain as Russia seeks to phase out the subsidies it has traditionally granted Belarus, in favor of charging more realistic prices for its products. Belarus can ill afford to pay market prices for its fuel and has used its power to interrupt the transit of supplies as a bargaining chip.

If you drive across Belarus, you'll see that it's quite flat, with many forests, lakes and swamps. Around 27 percent of the land is farmed. The major expressways are kept in fair condition, but, as you might expect, the less used rural thoroughfares are quite potholed. Winters are generally cold and snowy; 14°F is usual (−10°C) but temperatures can dip to −22°F (−30°C) on occasion. Spring and fall are rainy and cool, at 50–60°F (10–15°C), while summer is humid, with temperatures easily hitting 70°F (21°C), with occasional spurts up to 90°F (32°C).

Chernobyl

Reactor Number 4 at the Chernobyl nuclear power plant in northern Ukraine exploded on April 26, 1986. The measure of radiation released by the explosion was more than a hundred times that experienced by Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and Belarus lay directly in the path of danger, with winds blowing the fallout straight over the border. The south and southeast of the country remain particularly affected by radiation, having received around 70 percent of the total fallout. Infant mortality in affected areas is 20 percent above the national average, and two-thirds of all infant deaths are attributable to abnormal fetal development.

Initially, local people were kept largely in the dark over what had happened, and several days passed before evacuation began from the affected areas; most believed they would be returning. Of course, all the possessions they left behind were contaminated, so could never be recovered. Limited information was shared on the consequences to health. Naturally, many felt that they had been misled by the authorities.



The longer-term social and psychological effects have been significant. Incidences of depression and alcohol dependence in affected areas have risen, exacerbated by a lack of employment opportunities and a sense of fatalism. Many women from the region have long been scared of having children, fearing abnormalities, and those who move away usually try to keep their former homes a secret, anxious that men won't marry them. The Belarusian government is now implementing a revival plan to set up factories and provide modern housing, schools, and hospital facilities in the affected areas, addressing a desperate need. Gradually, hope is returning.

More than 80 percent of human radioactive contamination is thought to be caused by eating contaminated food, rather than exposure to the environment. Concern remains over the health of children (occurrence of thyroid cancer is particularly high), but experts are divided on long-term consequences for the population. 1.3 million reside in the Gomel and Mogilev regions, the most contaminated, with respectively 64 percent and 30 percent of their total areas affected, according to state statistics. A fifth of all farming land has been affected, and agriculture is still forbidden in parts of the south.

In the exclusion zone, the wilderness has returned, with wolves and other wildlife roaming freely. According to state figures, a total area of around 60,000 square miles (around 155,000 sq. km) is still contaminated, and will remain so for most of the next century. More than 770 square miles (more than 2,000 sq. km) of forest are affected, so eating berries or mushrooms from them is ill-advised. *Alpha* radionuclides slowly penetrate the soil they filter down into the water table and poison rivers and lakes—the water supply for thousands of people. Domestically produced food available in cities is regularly checked for radiation by the authorities and is generally declared to be at “reasonable” levels.



Agencies such as the United Nations Development Programme in Belarus have been working to improve the quality of life of those living in affected areas, from supporting ventures and training schemes that will enhance job opportunities for local people to showing them which foods are most likely to be contaminated and how to use radiation detecting equipment. In addition, a vast number of international charity groups (many based in Italy, Ireland, and the UK) have been working to improve the lives of young people in these regions. Some children travel abroad on recuperative trips. Hand-on help and financial funding have also been given to improve housing, health, and education facilities in affected settlements. The Belarusian government has been keen to accept support in alleviating the consequences of the Chernobyl catastrophe.

Population Decline

The country has a population of around ten million, having steadily declined between 1993 and 2006 at around 50,000 annually. This was largely due to deaths exceeding births, in addition to the emigration of young Belarusians. The government is now actively promoting family life—advocating that it is every young woman's duty to have at least three children (2005 UNESCO figures showed that the average was 1.2 births per woman). Various child benefits are being offered to encourage the trend.



In the late 1990s, almost two-thirds of pregnancies ended in abortion, while a significant number of babies were abandoned to orphanages. Teenagers' lack of sex education and access to contraceptives is partly to blame but many of these unwanted pregnancies happened to families who felt they simply could not cope with another child to look after, bearing in mind that most live in very small apartments and have limited incomes. Women living in Chernobyl-affected areas also feared for the health of their unborn children. The president has warned that low birth rates are a potential threat to sustainable economic development. On a positive note, state figures show that the birthrate rose by 6 percent in 2006 and abortions fell to around one in three pregnancies. In 2007, the birthrate rose by further 7.3 percent and mortality rates fell by 4 percent, resulting in a population fall of 3 percent.

The 2006 Independence Day parade included all those who had recently wed, resplendent in their beautiful wedding outfits. The campaign to promote marriage and family life was evident in 2006 proclaimed "The Year of the Mother," and continued in 2007 with "The Year of the Child," and in 2008 with "The Year of Health." As mortality levels begin to stabilize and birthrates rise, for the first time in a decade, it seems that positive population growth is within reach.

Young people in rural areas are increasingly heading for cities in search of opportunities: 73 percent of the population now live in urban surroundings. Around 30 percent of villagers are over sixty years of age. Additionally, women of childbearing age (15–49) made up just 21.5 percent of rural residents in 2005. The government is countering this by allocating significant funding to the development of agriculture and industry in rural areas, to promote employment and living standards.

A BRIEF HISTORY

Belarusians have only recently begun to think of themselves and function as an independent nation. Historically, they were passed from one neighbor to another—marched over, annexed, and dominated. This legacy helps to explain their characteristic traits of stoicism and acceptance.

Belarusian roots go back to the Slavic migrations into Eastern Europe between the sixth and eighth centuries, into territories already settled by Baltic tribes. They are mostly descended from East Slavic tribes—the Dregovichs, Krivichs, and Radimichs—some of whom mixed with the local Balts. The Slavs were pagan, agrarian people who traded in agricultural produce, game, furs, honey, beeswax, and amber. During the ninth and tenth centuries, the Varangians, Viking invaders, established trading

posts along the waterways linking Scandinavia to the Byzantine Empire, crossing the lakes and rivers of modern-day Belarus. This became a lucrative trade route and gradually the Varangians assumed sovereignty over the East Slavic tribes. In time they assimilated into the majority Slavic population.

The Principality of Polotsk

The first East Slavic state, Kievan Rus, emerged in the tenth century—a loose network of principalities along the trade routes from the Baltic to the Black Sea. Its major centers were Novgorod (in Russia), Polotsk (in northern Belarus), and Kiev (in Ukraine). Polotsk, on the Dvina River, was the dominant power on Belarusian territory, often asserting its independence within the grouping. It was also the first city in Belarus to embrace Christianity—in 992—via the Greek Orthodox Church, under the Metropolitan of Kiev. Nevertheless, pagan rituals and beliefs continued to flourish for many centuries.



Litva—The Grand Duchy of Lithuania

After the destruction of Kievan Rus by the Tatars in 1240, the principality of Polotsk was subsumed into the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, thus helping to shape Lithuania's political, religious, and cultural life. The Belarusian language, which had begun to form in the first half of the thirteenth century, became the official language of the Grand Duchy, a situation that lasted from the mid-fourteenth to the late-seventeenth century, when it was replaced by Polish.

In order to protect Lithuania from the depredations of the Teutonic Knights, whose ostensible mission was the conversion of the pagan peoples of Eastern Europe, in 1385 the Grand Duchy joined Poland in a dynastic union, thereby creating the largest country in Europe. The pagan Grand Duke Jogaila was baptized into the Catholic Church in order to marry Jadwiga, the heir to the Polish throne, and Roman Catholicism became the state religion.



In 1410, at the great Battle of Grünwald, the united armies of Poland and Lithuania decisively defeated the Teutonic Knights, and a period of prosperity followed. Royal charters confirmed the equality of Catholic and Orthodox feudal lords. The Lithuanian and Belarusian nobility, however, started converting to Catholicism and adopting Polish culture, and the Orthodox Belarusian peasants came to be ruled by a class that shared neither their language nor their religion. The native, self-

governing Orthodox Church came under pressure from the Polish authorities to unite with Rome. Moscow began to assert itself as the defender of Orthodoxy throughout Eastern Europe, particularly after the fall of Constantinople to the Turks in 1453.

The Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth

In 1569, by the Union of Lublin, the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and the Kingdom of Poland formed a federal state with a single Sejm (parliament)—the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth. This covered modern-day Poland, Lithuania, Belarus, Latvia, large parts of Ukraine and Estonia, and some parts of western Russia. Polish culture and language permeated Belarus, and Polish or Polonized nobles ruled the land. With the dying out of the Jagiellonian dynasty, the Polish monarchy became elective; central government grew weak, and the power of the nobility increased, leading to infighting and political instability.



Political conflict was fueled by religion. In the sixteenth century the Protestant Reformation introduced Lutheranism and Calvinism to Belarus. The Counter-Reformation spearheaded by the Jesuits brought fanatical persecution of all non-Catholics. In 1596 the Uniate Church was formed to reconcile the Orthodox and fend off Moscow. This was a union of the native Orthodox Church with the Catholic Church, by which the Orthodox broke their links with the Patriarch of Constantinople and acknowledged the supremacy of the Pope, accepting certain articles of Catholic doctrine in return for retaining their traditional rites and a measure of autonomy. In the event, many of the Orthodox faithful rejected this compromise and the native Orthodox Church continued to exist alongside the Uniate Church.



The Polish–Lithuanian state's ferocious oppression of the native Orthodox Church gave Moscow the opening it needed to further its imperial ambitions. From 1648 to 1654 there was a peasant uprising against Polish landowners, and many Belarusians fled to Ukraine to join the Russian-backed Cossack rebellion.

From 1654 to 1667, Russia invaded and occupied a large portion of Belarus, creating a demographic and economic crisis. Cities were destroyed and about half the population was killed, including 8

percent of the urban population. The Great Northern War of 1700–21, a struggle between Russia and Sweden for control of the Baltic, in which Poland–Lithuania was allied with Russia, was a further disaster for Belarus. Political anarchy and religious divisions within the country gave its powerful neighbors the opportunity they wanted.



Imperial Russia

In 1772, 1793, and 1795 the enfeebled Polish–Lithuanian state was partitioned by Russia, Prussia, and Austria, after which the whole of Belarus was incorporated into the Russian Empire. Minsk was designated the regional capital.

In 1794, the Belarusian-born nobleman Tadeusz Kosciuszko (who had trained in France and was a hero of the American Revolutionary War) led an uprising against the Russian occupation, which was soon suppressed. A monument stands to him in Lafayette Square, opposite the White House in Washington.



Napoleon's Grande Armée crossed the border of the Russian Empire in 1812. He was defeated and forced to retreat with terrible losses. A significant rearguard battle took place at the Berezina River in Belarus as the French army attempted to cross its bridges; the remains of French soldiers are still being unearthed today and given a Christian burial.

Apart from the destruction he wreaked, Napoleon's legacy was the dissemination of democratic ideas allied to nationalism. In 1830–31 a national-liberation uprising to restore Poland–Lithuania within the 1772 boundaries broke out. It failed to gain the support of the peasants in the countryside, however, and was decisively crushed. The political and economic power of the Polish-Catholic establishment was broken and the legal status of the Duchy of Lithuania was annulled. Few educated Belarusians now held positions of influence, while the Belarusian masses were generally regarded as provincial peasants.

Russification, Resistance, and the Emergence of a Modern Identity

As part of the crackdown, the Tsarist regime inaugurated an intensive program of de-Polonization and Russification. National cultures, including Belarusian, were repressed, those who had converted from Roman Catholicism were pressed to reconvert to Orthodoxy, and native Orthodox believers were forced to accept Russian Orthodox Christianity, which by now was effectively a tool of the state. The

name “Belarusia” (“White Russia”), which had been introduced to replace “Lithuania,” was quickly replaced with “Northwestern Territory,” and the use of the Belarusian language was banned in schools and publications.

In 1861, the reform-minded Tsar Alexander II abolished serfdom. The emancipated peasants, however, were given too little land for too high a price and subjected to oppressive taxes and corvée; the net result was the impoverishment of farmers, mass migration from the countryside to the cities and abroad, and the encouragement of national-liberal reformers and socialist revolutionaries alike. Economic and cultural discontent in former Poland–Lithuania found expression in a series of patriotic celebrations commemorating historic events from the Commonwealth’s past. In Belarus 379 peasant protests were recorded in 1861. In 1862, a group of young middle-class radicals led by Kastus Kalinowski produced a clandestine anti-Tsarist newspaper, *Muzyckaja Prawda* (“Peasants’ Truth”), which championed the peasants, the faithful of the Uniate Church (abolished since 1839), and all who cherished the Belarusian language.



In 1863 there was a pan-national insurrection in former Commonwealth lands against the Tsarist regime. This was swiftly and ruthlessly crushed, and Kalinowski, who had organized the uprising in Belarus and Lithuania, was hanged in Vilnius in 1864. His last letter “from beneath the gallows” has become a political credo of Belarusian nationalism.

Russification was now intensified. The Tsarist government flooded Belarus with teachers, priests, and landlords from Russia, and made the use of the Cyrillic alphabet mandatory for Belarusian.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, the Belarusian economy enjoyed significant growth as the Industrial Revolution spread to Eastern Europe. Industrialization and urbanization set the stage for the rise of Belarusian self-confidence. A number of authors started publishing in the Belarusian language. Educated Belarusians began to take state office. The Revolution of 1905 resulted in an elected parliament and land reforms, and a surge of national feeling, especially among workers and peasants, gave momentum to the development of a Belarusian literature and press.



Independence and Partition

During the First World War, when Belarus was occupied by Germany, Belarusian culture started to flourish. Schools with Belarusian language, previously banned, were allowed until 1919, when they were banned again by the Polish military administration. Belarus briefly proclaimed independence during the chaos of the Bolshevik revolution—the Belarus National Republic (BNR) was declared on March 25, 1918, in accordance with the terms of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk. When the Germans withdrew, however, competing national and foreign factions rushed to fill the vacuum. Polish forces invaded Belarus from the west, and Russians from the east. On January 1, 1919, the Soviet Socialist Republic of Byelorussia was declared in Smolensk. When the Red Army entered Minsk on January 19, 1919, the Rada (Council) of the Belarus National Republic went into exile.



At the end of the Russo–Polish War in 1921, Belarusian territories were divided between Poland and Soviet Russia. The exiled BNR abandoned preparations for a national uprising only when the League of Nations recognized the eastern borders of the Soviet Union on March 15, 1923.

Western Belarus and southern Lithuania were annexed by the Poles, only to be lost in 1939, when they were absorbed into the USSR as part of the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact. The Polish part of Belarus was subject to Polonization policies, while Soviet Belarus was one of the original republics that formed the USSR.

Stalin's Purges

At first, national culture and language enjoyed a revival in Soviet Belarus. This came to a tragic end in the 1930s during Stalin's Great Purge against intellectuals and political opponents. The Belarusian writing system was Russified in 1933, and the use of the Belarusian language was discouraged as evidence of an anti-Soviet attitude. Almost all prominent Belarusian intellectuals were executed in the purges. Overall more than 100,000 people were killed and thousands sent to labor camps in Siberia. In 1981 huge numbers of corpses were found at Kurapaty, a wooded area outside Minsk, believed to have been victims of the NKVD (the Soviet secret police). The site now has its own small memorial. Many continued to be persecuted after the war. Despite this, Stalin is still revered by older Belarusians, who refuse to believe that he personally ordered such crimes. On Stalin's death in 1953, people were

openly, never blaming him for what had occurred. Accordingly, little has been done to memorialize his victims, to avoid staining his memory.



The Great Patriotic War

On September 17, 1939, as a result of the secret protocol of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, the Soviet Union invaded Poland and annexed its eastern lands, including most of Polish-held Belarus. When Germany and its allies invaded the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941, the Soviet authorities evacuated about 20 percent of the population of Belarus and destroyed all the food supplies. The country suffered heavily during the fighting. Following bloody encirclement battles, all of Belarus was occupied by the Germans from the end of August 1941 until July 1944.

According to the Nazis' racial "purification" plans, 75 percent of the Belarusian population was to be eliminated. Some 2.2 million people (just over 25 percent of the population) perished during the war years. Almost the entire, very large, Jewish population was killed. More than 9,000 villages and one million buildings were destroyed. About 1.1 million Belarusians fought with the Red Army. A further 400,000 became partisans, conducting a nationwide guerrilla campaign against the German forces. Living in dugouts hidden deep in the forests and swamps, they operated across 60 percent of the country, disrupting German supply lines and communications, damaging railway tracks, bridges, and telegraph wires, attacking supply depots, fuel dumps, and transports, and ambushing German soldiers. Belarus became known as "the Republic of Partisans." Terrible memories remain close to the surface, particularly brutal are tales of villagers locked in their homes, then burned alive. Thousands met their end in this manner. The horror of war is part of the Belarusian psyche of today, and a subconscious fear of conflict remains, especially among the older generation. Whatever hardships they may endure, they console themselves that modern times are infinitely better than the past.



The Postwar Years

Eighty percent of Minsk was razed during the war, so Stalin had the opportunity to rebuild the frontline "hero city" as his architectural ideal. The building plan combined innovative ideas with classical architecture, and the surviving prewar buildings and parks were incorporated into the architectural ensemble. The city center was restored in grand neoclassical style, with wide avenues and majestic facades. The main thoroughfare was named Leninsky Avenue (now Nezavisimost' Avenue).

—“Independence”) and several imposing squares were built. The oldest part of Minsk is found around the Troitsky suburb, now restored with cobbled alleyways and colorful stucco town houses.



Postwar reconstruction turned Belarus into an industrially, scientifically, and militarily advanced Soviet Republic, enjoying one of the highest living standards within the USSR. This prosperity resulted in a huge immigrant population of Russians in Belarus. Russian became the official language of administration, and the peasant class, the traditional base of the Belarusian nation, ceased to exist.



Perestroika and Independence

From 1986 to 1988, Mikhail Gorbachev, the General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, launched the radical policies of *perestroika* (“restructuring”) and *glasnost* (“openness”). They were designed to revitalize the economy, the Communist party, and society. In the new climate, Belarusian intellectuals began to articulate nationalist aspirations; at the same time the Chernobyl disaster alienated increasing numbers of citizens, who realized that information had been knowingly withheld. Details were starting to emerge about the full extent of Stalin’s reign of terror. The Belarusian Popular Front (BPF)—a broad cultural movement and political party—was established in 1988 with the aim of attaining democracy and independence through national rebirth. It hoped to encourage reform by actively reducing ties with Russia. However, most people remained attached to Soviet ways and were politically apathetic.



In August 1991, as the Soviet Union broke up, Belarus declared its independence, along with Estonia, Latvia, and Ukraine. In December 1991, Belarus became a founding member of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), an alliance of former Soviet republics (see below, [this page](#)).

The early years of independence were marked by extreme hardship. The centrally controlled Soviet economic system, whereby Belarusian machinery was transported to ready markets throughout the USSR, had disappeared. Many factories now had no buyers for their goods, and the import of Belarusians had been used to receiving also dried up. Rationing and standing in line became part of everyday life.

THE POLITICAL SCENE

Lukashenko Comes to Power

Alexander Grigoryevich Lukashenko, a former collective farm manager, won 80 percent of the popular vote in July 1994, in the last democratic elections to be held to date. As president, he called for a crackdown on crime and corruption, a halt to privatization—including that of land—and renewed economic relations with Russia. By December, two openly critical newspapers had closed down.

Parliament resisted the president's efforts to strengthen his powers. The Constitutional Court overruled a number of presidential decrees, but Lukashenko responded by rewriting the constitution, dissolving parliament, and placing his own appointees on the Constitutional Court. A referendum was held in November 1996, which endorsed the radical new constitution; the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) declared it to be "neither free nor fair" and the Constitutional Court ruled it unconstitutional, but Lukashenko pronounced the results binding.

The new constitution gave the president extensive powers; the existing parliament was replaced by a National Assembly with much weaker powers. This consisted of a 110-seat Chamber of Representatives (the lower house) and a 64-seat Council of the Republic (the upper house). Members of the lower house were appointed directly by the president; the upper house consisted of a combination of presidential appointees and winners of the January 1997 elections. The new constitution prolonged Lukashenko's term in office for a further two years to 2001. Western governments refused to recognize the new parliament. Since 1996, many would say that Lukashenko has effectively ruled by decree.

No Apologies

On September 12, 1995, two Americans flying their balloon in an international race were shot down and killed by a Belarusian military helicopter after crossing into Belarusian airspace from Poland. In an official statement, the Belarusian government expressed its regret, but stopped short of an apology, saying that warnings had been given before the balloon was shot down. The race organizers stated that the Belarusian Interior Ministry had been notified of the event in May.

The Repression of Opposing Voices

The first parliamentary elections to be held since the controversial referendum of 1996 took place in 2000. Most opposition parties boycotted them. Presidential elections took place in 2001, with Lukashenko declaring victory over his two challengers. The OSCE concluded that these elections failed to meet recognized standards, that the state media were biased in favor of Lukashenko, and that opposition candidates had received very limited access to the media.

Parliamentary elections and a referendum held in 2004 to secure support for extending the presidential term were judged “neither free nor fair” by the EU; all the 110 seats contested were won by pro-government candidates. The UK’s Minister for Europe commented that “arbitrary use of state power and widespread detentions showed a disregard for the basic rights of freedom of assembly, association and expression, and raise doubts regarding the authorities’ willingness to tolerate political competition.” It was “an election characterized by intimidation of the electorate, harassment and disruption of the opposition.” The constitution was amended once again, removing the two-term presidential limit (Lukashenko was due to leave office in 2006). Opposition figures have declared themselves to be under intense pressure.

Numerous independent media outlets have been suspended or closed, and several journalists have disappeared in mysterious circumstances. While press freedom exists in theory, legislation states that the media cannot slander the president of Belarus or any other government officials, on pain of prosecution.

Black Humor

The head of the central election commission enters the president’s study and tells him that she has two pieces of news for him, good and bad. He asks for the good news first.

“You’ve been reelected president,” she declares.

“Okay, and what’s the bad news?”

“No one voted for you.”

Belarus’s presidential elections on March 19, 2006, were accompanied by what many have called wide-scale intimidation. OSCE observers judged it “severely flawed due to the arbitrary use of state power and restrictions on basic rights.” The opposition held a number of peaceful protests and set up a tent camp in October Square (emulating that of Ukraine’s Orange Revolution). On the evening of March 23, the authorities violently broke up this camp and sealed off the square to prevent further rallies. The demonstrators moved to a nearby park and Alexander Kozulin, a presidential candidate, was arrested after further police action. He was later sentenced to five and a half years’ imprisonment. Another leading candidate, Alexander Milinkevich, and three other opposition party leaders were arrested in late April and sentenced to fourteen/fifteen days for “participating in an unauthorized rally”—they had taken part in a demonstration on April 26 to mark the twentieth anniversary of the Chernobyl disaster.

On April 10, 2006, the EU imposed a travel ban on thirty-one individuals, including President

Lukashenko, whom they held to be responsible for electoral fraud and civil repression; this was followed by a freezing of personal assets. Four more were added to the list on October 23, 2006, for their prosecution of Kozulin and other opposition activists.

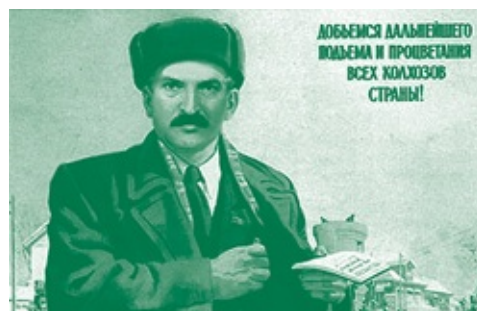
On January 14, 2007, local elections were held. The EU declared them unfair since the opposition was again prevented from campaigning, printing materials, or holding meetings. The Belarus Helsinki Committee reported irregularities and intimidation of opposition candidates and supporters, lack of media equality, and problems with voter lists and counting.

President Lukashenko has voiced his willingness to remain at his post for as long as he is needed. In the meantime, the arrests and detentions continue.

DOMESTIC POLICY

According to UN data, Belarus has one of the highest standards of living, education, and life expectancy within the CIS (men live to sixty-seven on average, women to seventy-seven). It ranked sixty-fourth out of 177 countries worldwide on the UN's Human Development Index in 2006 (compared to Russia in sixty-seventh place, and Ukraine in seventy-sixth). Incomes are low: in early 2008, the average monthly salary was the equivalent of US \$351, while purchasing power had halved in comparison with 2001. Many still cannot afford to buy their own homes, and the state has been trying to build more residential housing to ease the situation. Waiting lists for state-owned apartments remain long, obliging many young people to live with their parents for some years.

The state's "socially oriented policy" aims to raise living standards and support a sense of wellbeing. Accordingly, salaries have been steadily, some would say artificially, raised; the president has promised that the average salary will hit US \$500 per month within the next few years. Meanwhile, as we have seen, 2006 was declared the Year of the Mother, with a national campaign to encourage families to have more children. Large families now receive preferential housing terms and child benefits have been increased. Lukashenko called on all women to fulfill their duty by having at least three children, and family life was further supported by making 2007 the Year of the Child, and 2008 the Year of Health. Eighty percent of Belarusians are currently convinced that having a child is a necessity, according to a state survey.



Retirees receive special attention, with pensions rising significantly. Men retire at sixty, women at fifty-five. They form 26.4 percent of the population and are the backbone of the administration and social support.

THE ECONOMY

During Soviet times Belarus's industrial base ensured a relatively high standard of living for the population. With independence came economic decline. Industry remains largely under state control.

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