

= Belarus =

Belarus (/ b?l??ru?s / bel @-@ ? @-@ ROOSS ; Belarusian : ?????? ? ?? , tr . Bielarú? , IPA : [b??la?rus?] ; Russian : ??????? , tr . Byelarus ; IPA : [b??l??rus]) , officially the Republic of Belarus , formerly and sometimes known as Byelorussia is a landlocked country in Eastern Europe bordered by Russia to the northeast , Ukraine to the south , Poland to the west , and Lithuania and Latvia to the northwest . Its capital is Minsk ; other major cities include Brest , Hrodna (Grodno) , Homiel (Gomel) , Mahilio? (Mogilev) and Vitsebsk (Vitebsk) . Over 40 % of its 207 @,@ 600 square kilometres (80 @,@ 200 sq mi) is forested . Its strongest economic sectors are service industries and manufacturing . Until the 20th century , different states at various times controlled the lands of modern @-@ day Belarus , including the Principality of Polotsk (11th to 14th centuries) , the Grand Duchy of Lithuania , the Polish ? Lithuanian Commonwealth , and the Russian Empire .

In the aftermath of the 1917 Russian Revolution , Belarus declared independence as the Belarusian People 's Republic , which was conquered by Soviet Russia as the Socialist Soviet Republic of Byelorussia , which became a founding constituent republic of the Soviet Union in 1922 and was renamed as the Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic (Byelorussian SSR) . Belarus lost almost half of its territory to Poland after the Polish @-@ Soviet war of 1919 @-@ 1921 . Much of the borders of Belarus took their modern shape in 1939 when some lands of the Second Polish Republic were reintegrated into it after the Soviet invasion of Poland and were finalized after World War II . During WWII , military operations devastated Belarus , which lost about a third of its population and more than half of its economic resources . The republic was redeveloped in the post @-@ war years . In 1945 Belarus became a founding member of the United Nations , along with the Soviet Union and the Ukrainian SSR .

The parliament of the republic declared the sovereignty of Belarus on 27 July 1990 , and during the dissolution of the Soviet Union , Belarus declared independence on 25 August 1991 . Alexander Lukashenko has served as the country 's president since 1994 . Lukashenko continued a number of Soviet @-@ era policies , such as state ownership of large sections of the economy . Elections under Lukashenko 's rule have been widely criticized as unfair by the international community ; and according to many countries and organizations , political opposition has been violently suppressed . Belarus 's Democracy Index rating was the lowest in Europe until 2014 (when it was passed by Russia) , the country is labelled as " not free " by Freedom House , " repressed " in the Index of Economic Freedom , and is rated as by far the worst country for press freedom in Europe in the 2013 ? 14 Press Freedom Index published by Reporters Without Borders , which ranks Belarus 157th out of 180 nations .

In 2000 Belarus and Russia signed a treaty for greater cooperation , with some hints of forming a Union State . Over 70 % of Belarus 's population of 9 @.@ 49 million resides in urban areas . More than 80 % of the population is ethnic Belarusian , with sizable minorities of Russians , Poles and Ukrainians . Since a referendum in 1995 , the country has had two official languages : Belarusian and Russian . The Constitution of Belarus does not declare any official religion , although the primary religion in the country is Eastern Orthodox Christianity . The second most widespread religious group , Roman Catholicism , has a much smaller following ; nevertheless , Belarus celebrates both Orthodox and Catholic versions of Christmas and Easter as national holidays . Belarus is the only country in Europe which retains capital punishment in law and in practice .

= = Etymology = =

The name Belarus is closely related with the term Belaya Rus ' , i.e. , White Rus ' . There are several claims to the origin of the name White Rus ' . An ethno @-@ religious theory suggests that the name used to describe the part of old Ruthenian lands within the Grand Duchy of Lithuania that had been populated mostly by early Christianized Slavs , as opposed to Black Ruthenia , which was predominantly inhabited by pagan Balts .

An alternate explanation for the name comments on the white clothing worn by the local Slavic population . A third theory suggests that the old Rus ' lands that were not conquered by the Tatars (

i.e. , Polatsk , Vitsiebsk and Mahilyow) had been referred to as " white . " Other sources claim that , before 1267 , the land not conquered by the Mongols was considered " White Rus ' " .

The name Rus ' is often conflated with its Latin forms Russia and Ruthenia , thus Belarus is often referred to as White Russia or White Ruthenia . The name first appeared in German and Latin medieval literature ; the chronicles of Jan of Czerkows mention the imprisonment of Lithuanian grand duke Jogaila and his mother at " Albae Russiae , Poloczko dicto " in 1381 . In some languages , including German and Dutch , the country is generally called " White Russia " to this day (Weißrussland and Wit @-@ Rusland respectively) .

The Latin term " Alba Russia " was used again by Pope Pius VI to recognize the Society of Jesus there 1783 , exclaiming " Approbo Societatem Jesu in Alba Russia degentem , approbo , approbo . " The first known use of White Russia to refer to Belarus was in the late @-@ 16th century by Englishman Sir Jerome Horsey , who was known for his close contacts with the Russian Royal Court . During the 17th century , the Russian Tsars used " White Rus " to describe the lands added from the Grand Duchy of Lithuania .

The term Belorussia (Russian : ?????? ? ???? , the latter part similar but spelled and stressed differently from ????? ? ? , Russia) first rose in the days of the Russian Empire , and the Russian Tsar was usually styled " the Tsar of All the Russias " , as Russia or the Russian Empire was formed by three parts of Russia ? the Great , Little , and White . This asserted that the territories are all Russian and all the peoples are also Russian ; in the case of the Belarusians , they were variants of the Russian people .

After the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917 , the term " White Russia " caused some confusion as it was also the name of the military force that opposed the red Bolsheviks . During the period of the Byelorussian SSR , the term Byelorussia was embraced as part of a national consciousness . In western Belarus under Polish control , Byelorussia became commonly used in the regions of Bia?ystok and Grodno during the interwar period .

The term Byelorussia (its names in other languages such as English being based on the Russian form) was only used officially until 1991 , when the Supreme Soviet of the Byelorussian SSR decreed by law that the new independent republic should be called Republic of Belarus (???????????? ?????????? spelled in Russian) , as well its abridged form should be " Belarus " . The law decreed that all the forms of the new term should be transliterated into other languages from their Belarusian language forms . The use of Byelorussian SSR and any abbreviations thereof were allowed from 1991 ? 93 . Conservative forces in the newly independent Belarus did not support the name change and opposed its inclusion in the 1991 draft of the Constitution of Belarus .

Accordingly , the name Byelorussia was replaced by Belarus in English and to some extent in Russian (although the traditional name persists in that language as well) ; likewise , the adjective Belorussian or Byelorussian was replaced by Belarusian in English (though Russian has not developed a new adjective) . Belarusian is closer to the original Russian term of bielaruski . Belarusian intelligentsia in the Stalin era attempted to change the name from Byelorussia to a form of Krivia because of the supposed connection with Russia . Some nationalists object to the name for the same reason . Several local newspapers kept the old name of the country in Russian in their names , for example Komsomolskaya Pravda v Byelorussii , which is the localized publication of a popular Russian newspaper . Also , those who wish for Belarus to be reunited with Russia continue to use Belorussia . Officially , the full name of the country is " Republic of Belarus " (???????????? ?????????? , ???????????? ?????????? , Respublika Belarus listen) .

= = History = =

= = = Early history = = =

From 5000 to 2000 BC , Bandkeramik cultures predominated . In addition , remains from the Dnieper @-@ Donets culture were found in Belarus and parts of Ukraine . Cimmerians and other pastoralists roamed through the area by 1 @,@ 000 BC , and by 500 AD , Slavs had taken up

residence , which was circumscribed by the Scythians who roamed its outskirts . Invaders from Asia , among whom were the Huns and Avars , swept through c . 400 ? 600 AD , but were unable to dislodge the Slavic presence .

The region that is now Belarus was first settled by Baltic tribes in the 3rd century . Around the 5th century , the area was taken over by Slavic tribes . The takeover was partially due to the lack of military coordination of the Balts but the gradual assimilation of the Balts into Slavic culture was peaceful in nature .

= = = Middle Ages = = =

In the 9th century the territory of modern Belarus became part of Kievan Rus ' , a vast East Slavic state ruled by the Rurikid dynasty . Upon the death of Kievan Rus ' ruler Yaroslav I the Wise , the state split into independent principalities .

Many early Russian principalities were virtually razed or severely affected by a major Mongol invasion in the 13th century , but the lands of Belarus avoided the brunt of the invasion and were eventually absorbed by the Grand Duchy of Lithuania .

The Grand Duchy of Lithuania first incorporated Belarusian lands into its territory in 1250 , when it conquered the territories of Polotsk and Navahrudak .

Incorporation into The Grand Duchy of Lithuania resulted in an economic , political and ethno @-@ cultural unification of Belarusian lands . Of the principalities held by the Duchy , nine of them were settled by a population that would eventually become Belarusian people . During this time , the Duchy was involved in several military campaigns , including fighting on the side of Poland against the Teutonic Knights at the Battle of Grunwald in 1410 ; the joint victory allowed the Duchy to control the northwestern borderlands of Eastern Europe .

On 2 February 1386 , the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and the Kingdom of Poland were joined in a personal union through a marriage of their rulers . This union set in motion the developments that eventually resulted in the formation of the Polish ? Lithuanian Commonwealth , created in 1569 . In 1696 , Polish replaced Belarusian as the official language and Belarusian was outlawed .

The Muscovites , led by Ivan III of Moscow , began military campaigns in 1486 in an attempt to incorporate the lands of Kievan Rus ' , specifically the territories of Belarus , Russia and Ukraine .

= = = Within the Russian Empire = = =

The union between Poland and Lithuania ended in 1795 with the partitioning of Poland by Imperial Russia , Prussia , and Austria . During this time , the territories of Belarus were acquired by the Russian Empire under the reign of Catherine II and held until their occupation by the German Empire during World War I.

Although under Nicholas I and Alexander III the national cultures were repressed due to the policies of de @-@ Polonization and Russification , which included the return to Orthodoxy , the 19th century was signified by the rise of the modern Belarusian nation and self @-@ confidence .

In a Russification drive in the 1840s , Nicholas I prohibited the use of Belarusian language in public schools , campaigned against Belarusian publications and tried to pressure those who had converted to Catholicism under the Poles to reconvert to the Orthodox faith . In 1863 , economic and cultural pressure exploded into a revolt , led by Kalinowski . After the failed revolt , the Russian government reintroduced the use of Cyrillic to Belarusian in 1864 and no documents in Belarusian were permitted by Russian government until 1905 .

During the negotiations of the Treaty of Brest @-@ Litovsk , Belarus first declared independence under German occupation on 25 March 1918 , forming the Belarusian People 's Republic . Immediately afterwards , the Polish ? Soviet War ignited , and the territory of Belarus was divided between Poland and the Soviet Russia .

= = = Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic = = =

A part of Belarus under Russian rule emerged as the Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic (Byelorussian SSR) in 1919 . Soon thereafter it merged to form the Lithuanian @-@ Byelorussian SSR . The contested lands were divided between Poland and the Soviet Union after the war ended in 1921 , and the Byelorussian SSR became a founding member of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics in 1922 . The western part of modern Belarus remained part of Poland .

In the 1920s , agricultural reforms that culminated in the Belarusian phase of Soviet collectivization were set in motion . In the 1930s , the implementation of the Soviet five @-@ year plans for the national economy led to rapid industrialization .

In 1939 , Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union invaded and occupied Poland , marking the beginning of World War II . Much of northeastern Poland , which had been part of the country since the Peace of Riga two decades earlier , was annexed to the Byelorussian SSR , and now constitutes West Belarus . The Soviet @-@ controlled Byelorussian People 's Council officially took control of the territories , whose populations consisted of a mixture of Poles , Ukrainians , Belarusians and Jews , on 28 October 1939 in Bia?ystok . Nazi Germany invaded the Soviet Union in 1941 . The Brest Fortress , which had been annexed in 1939 , at this time was subjected to one of the most destructive onslaughts that happened during the war . Statistically , the Byelorussian SSR was the hardest @-@ hit Soviet republic in World War II ; it remained in Nazi hands until 1944 . During that time , Germany destroyed 209 out of 290 cities in the republic , 85 % of the republic 's industry , and more than one million buildings .

Casualties were estimated to be between 2 and 3 million (about a quarter to one @-@ third of the total population) , while the Jewish population of Belarus was devastated during the Holocaust and never recovered . The population of Belarus did not regain its pre @-@ war level until 1971 . It was also after this conflict that the final borders of Belarus were set by Stalin when parts of Belarusian territory were given to the recently annexed Lithuania .

After the war , Belarus was among the 51 founding countries of the United Nations Charter and as such it was allowed an additional vote at the UN , on top of the Soviet Union 's vote . Vigorous postwar reconstruction promptly followed the end of the war and the Byelorussian SSR became a major center of manufacturing in western USSR , creating jobs and attracting ethnic Russians . The borders of the Byelorussian SSR and Poland were redrawn and became known as the Curzon Line .

Joseph Stalin implemented a policy of Sovietization to isolate the Byelorussian SSR from Western influences . This policy involved sending Russians from various parts of the Soviet Union and placing them in key positions in the Byelorussian SSR government . The official use of the Belarusian language and other cultural aspects were limited by Moscow . After Stalin 's death in 1953 , Nikita Khrushchev continued his predecessor 's cultural hegemony program , stating , " The sooner we all start speaking Russian , the faster we shall build communism . "

In 1986 , the Byelorussian SSR was exposed to significant nuclear fallout from the explosion at the Chernobyl power plant in the neighboring Ukrainian SSR .

In June 1988 , the archaeologist and leader of the Christian Conservative Party of the BPF Zyanon Paznyak discovered mass graves of victims executed in 1937 ? 41 at Kurapaty , near Minsk . Some nationalists contend that this discovery is proof that the Soviet government was trying to erase the Belarusian people , causing Belarusian nationalists to seek independence .

= = = Independence = = =

In March 1990 , elections for seats in the Supreme Soviet of the Byelorussian SSR took place . Though the pro @-@ independence Belarusian Popular Front took only 10 % of the seats , the populace was content with the selection of the delegates . Belarus declared itself sovereign on 27 July 1990 by issuing the Declaration of State Sovereignty of the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic .

With the support of the Communist Party , the country 's name was changed to the Republic of Belarus on 25 August 1991 . Stanislav Shushkevich , the chairman of the Supreme Soviet of Belarus , met with Boris Yeltsin of Russia and Leonid Kravchuk of Ukraine on 8 December 1991 in

Belavezhszkaya Pushcha to formally declare the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the formation of the Commonwealth of Independent States .

A national constitution was adopted in March 1994 in which the functions of prime minister were given to the President of Belarus .

= = = Post @-@ independence = = =

Two @-@ round elections for the presidency on (24 June 1994 and 10 July 1994) catapulted the formerly unknown Alexander Lukashenko into national prominence . He garnered 45 % of the vote in the first round and 80 % in the second , defeating Vyacheslav Kebich who received 14 % of the vote . Lukashenko was re @-@ elected in 2001 , in 2006 , in 2010 and again in 2015 . Western governments , Amnesty International , and Human Rights Watch have criticized Lukashenko 's authoritarian style of government .

= = Geography and climate = =

Belarus lies between latitudes 51 ° and 57 ° N , and longitudes 23 ° and 33 ° E. Its extension from north to south is 560 km (350 mi) , from west to east is 650 km (400 mi) . It is landlocked , relatively flat , and contains large tracts of marshy land . About 40 % of Belarus is covered by forests .

Many streams and 11 @,@ 000 lakes are found in Belarus . Three major rivers run through the country : the Neman , the Pripyat , and the Dnieper . The Neman flows westward towards the Baltic sea and the Pripyat flows eastward to the Dnieper ; the Dnieper flows southward towards the Black Sea .

The highest point is Dzyarzhynskaya Hara (Dzyarzhynsk Hill) at 345 metres (1 @,@ 132 ft) , and the lowest point is on the Neman River at 90 m (295 ft) . The average elevation of Belarus is 160 m (525 ft) above sea level . The climate features mild to cold winters , with average January minimum temperatures ranges from ? 4 ° C (24 @.@ 8 ° F) in southwest (Brest) to ? 8 ° C (17 @.@ 6 ° F) in northeast (Vitebsk) , and cool and moist summers with an average temperature of 18 ° C (64 @.@ 4 ° F) . Belarus has an average annual rainfall of 550 to 700 mm (21 @.@ 7 to 27 @.@ 6 in) . The country is in the transitional zone between continental climates and maritime climates .

Natural resources include peat deposits , small quantities of oil and natural gas , granite , dolomite (limestone) , marl , chalk , sand , gravel , and clay . About 70 % of the radiation from neighboring Ukraine 's 1986 Chernobyl nuclear disaster entered Belarusian territory , and about a fifth of Belarusian land (principally farmland and forests in the southeastern regions) was affected by radiation fallout . The United Nations and other agencies have aimed to reduce the level of radiation in affected areas , especially through the use of caesium binders and rapeseed cultivation , which are meant to decrease soil levels of caesium @-@ 137 .

Belarus borders five countries : Latvia to the north , Lithuania to the northwest , Poland to the west , Russia to the north and the east , and Ukraine to the south . Treaties in 1995 and 1996 demarcated Belarus 's borders with Latvia and Lithuania , but Belarus failed to ratify a 1997 treaty establishing the Belarus @-@ Ukraine border . Belarus and Lithuania ratified final border demarcation documents in February 2007 .

= = Governance = =

Belarus is a presidential republic , governed by a president and the National Assembly . The term for each presidency is five years . Under the 1994 constitution , the president could serve for only two terms as president , but a change in the constitution in 2004 eliminated term limits . Alexander Lukashenko has been the president of Belarus since 1994 . In 1996 , Lukashenko called for a controversial vote to extend the presidential term from five to seven years , and as a result the election that was supposed to occur in 1999 was pushed back to 2001 . The referendum on the extension was denounced as a " fantastic " fake by the chief electoral officer , Viktor Hanchar , who

was removed from office during the campaign . The National Assembly is a bicameral parliament comprising the 110 @-@ member House of Representatives (the lower house) and the 64 @-@ member Council of the Republic (the upper house) .

The House of Representatives has the power to appoint the prime minister , make constitutional amendments , call for a vote of confidence on the prime minister , and make suggestions on foreign and domestic policy . The Council of the Republic has the power to select various government officials , conduct an impeachment trial of the president , and accept or reject the bills passed by the House of Representatives . Each chamber has the ability to veto any law passed by local officials if it is contrary to the constitution .

The government includes a Council of Ministers , headed by the prime minister and five deputy prime ministers . The members of this council need not be members of the legislature and are appointed by the president . The judiciary comprises the Supreme Court and specialized courts such as the Constitutional Court , which deals with specific issues related to constitutional and business law . The judges of national courts are appointed by the president and confirmed by the Council of the Republic . For criminal cases , the highest court of appeal is the Supreme Court . The Belarusian Constitution forbids the use of special extrajudicial courts .

In the Belarusian parliamentary election , 2012 , 105 of the 110 members elected to the House of Representatives were not affiliated with any political party . The Communist Party of Belarus won 3 seats , and the Agrarian Party and Republican Party of Labour and Justice , one each . Most non @-@ partisans represent a wide scope of social organizations such as workers ' collectives , public associations , and civil society organizations , similar to the composition of the Soviet legislature .

= = = Election controversies = = =

Neither the pro @-@ Lukashenko parties , such as the Belarusian Socialist Sporting Party and the Republican Party of Labour and Justice , nor the People 's Coalition 5 Plus opposition parties , such as the Belarusian People 's Front and the United Civil Party of Belarus , won any seats in the 2004 elections . Groups such as the Organization for Security and Co @-@ operation in Europe (OSCE) declared the election " un @-@ free " because of the opposition parties ' poor results and media bias in favor of the government .

In the 2006 presidential election , Lukashenko was opposed by Alaksandar Milinkievi? , who represented a coalition of opposition parties , and by Alaksandar Kazulin of the Social Democrats . Kazulin was detained and beaten by police during protests surrounding the All Belarusian People 's Assembly . Lukashenko won the election with 80 % of the vote ; the Russian Federation and the CIS deemed the vote open and fair while the OSCE and other organizations called the election unfair .

After the December completion of the 2010 presidential election , Lukashenko was elected to a fourth straight term with nearly 80 % of the vote in elections . The runner @-@ up opposition leader Andrei Sannikov received less than 3 % of the vote ; independent observers criticized the election as fraudulent . When opposition protesters took to the streets in Minsk , many people , including most rival presidential candidates , were beaten and arrested by the state militia . Many of the candidates , including Sannikov , were sentenced to prison or house arrest for terms typically over four years . Six months later amid an unprecedented economic crisis , activists utilized social networking to initiate a fresh round of protests characterized by wordless hand @-@ clapping .

= = = Corruption = = =

The judicial system in Belarus lacks independence and is subject to political interference . Corrupt practices such as bribery often take place during tender processes , and whistleblower protection and national ombudsman are lacking in Belarus 's anti @-@ corruption system . However , there is a political will to fight against corruption in the government , and the government has made some progress in combating corruption , such as minimizing tax regulations in order to improve transparency in the tax office .

= = = Human rights = = =

Lukashenko has described himself as having an "authoritarian ruling style". Western countries have described Belarus under Lukashenko as a dictatorship; the government has accused the same Western powers of trying to oust Lukashenko. The Council of Europe has barred Belarus from membership since 1997 for undemocratic voting and election irregularities in the November 1996 constitutional referendum and parliament by @-@ elections.

The Belarusian government is also criticized for human rights violations and its persecution of non @-@ governmental organisations, independent journalists, national minorities, and opposition politicians. In a testimony to the United States Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, former United States Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice labeled Belarus as one of the world's six "outposts of tyranny". In response, the Belarusian government called the assessment "quite far from reality". The Viasna Human Rights Centre lists 11 political prisoners currently detained in Belarus. Among them is the human rights activist Ales Bialiatski, Vice President of International Federation for Human Rights and head of Viasna.

Lukashenko announced a new law in 2014 that will prohibit kolkhoz workers (around 9 % of total work force) from leaving their jobs at will? a change of job and living location will require permission from governors. The law was compared with serfdom by Lukashenko himself. Similar regulations were introduced for the forestry industry in 2012.

= = = Foreign relations = = =

Belarus and Russia have been close trading partners and diplomatic allies since the breakup of the Soviet Union. Belarus is dependent on Russia for imports of raw materials and for its export market.

The union of Russia and Belarus, a supranational confederation, was established in a 1996-99 series of treaties that called for monetary union, equal rights, single citizenship, and a common foreign and defense policy. However, the future of the union has been placed in doubt because of Belarus's repeated delays of monetary union, the lack of a referendum date for the draft constitution, and a dispute over the petroleum trade.

On 11 December 2007, reports emerged that a framework for the new state was discussed between both countries. On 27 May 2008, Belarusian President Lukashenko said that he had named Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin the "prime minister" of the Russia @-@ Belarus alliance. The significance of this act was not immediately clear; some incorrectly speculated that Putin would become president of a unified state of Russia and Belarus after stepping down as Russian president in May 2008.

Belarus was a founding member of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS); however, recently other CIS members have questioned the effectiveness of the organization. Belarus has trade agreements with several European Union member states (despite other member states' travel ban on Lukashenko and top officials), including neighboring Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland. Travel bans imposed by the European Union have been lifted in the past in order to allow Lukashenko to attend diplomatic meetings and also to engage his government and opposition groups in dialogue.

Bilateral relations with the United States are strained because the U.S. Department of State supports various anti @-@ Lukashenko non @-@ governmental organizations (NGOs), and also because the Belarusian government has made it increasingly difficult for U.S.-based organizations to operate within the country. Diplomatic relations remained tense, and in 2004, the United States passed the Belarus Democracy Act, which authorized funding for anti @-@ government Belarusian NGOs, and prohibited loans to the Belarusian government, except for humanitarian purposes. Despite this political friction, the two countries do cooperate on intellectual property protection, prevention of human trafficking, technology crime, and disaster relief.

Sino @-@ Belarusian relations have improved, strengthened by the visit of President Lukashenko to China in October 2005. Belarus also has strong ties with Syria, considered a key partner in the

Middle East . In addition to the CIS , Belarus is a member of the Eurasian Economic Community , the Collective Security Treaty Organisation , the international Non-Aligned Movement since 1998 , the Organization on Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) , and the UN since its founding in 1945 . As an OSCE member state , Belarus 's international commitments are subject to monitoring under the mandate of the U.S. Helsinki Commission .

Belarus is included in the European Union 's European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) which aims at bringing the EU and its neighbours closer .

On 15 February 2016 the European Union announced the easing of sanctions against Belarus during a meeting by 28 EU foreign ministers at a regular session of the Council of the European Union .

== Military ==

Major General Andrei Ravkov heads the Ministry of Defense , and Alexander Lukashenko (as president) serves as Commander-in-Chief . The Armed Forces were formed in 1992 using parts of the former Soviet Armed Forces on the new republic 's territory . The transformation of the ex-Soviet forces into the Armed Forces of Belarus , which was completed in 1997 , reduced the number of its soldiers by 30,000 and restructured its leadership and military formations .

Most of Belarus 's service members are conscripts , who serve for 12 months if they have higher education or 18 months if they do not . Demographic decreases in the Belarusians of conscription age have increased the importance of contract soldiers , who numbered 12,000 in 2001 . In 2005 , about 1.4 % of Belarus 's gross domestic product was devoted to military expenditure .

Belarus has not expressed a desire to join NATO but has participated in the Individual Partnership Program since 1997 , and Belarus provides refueling and airspace support for the ISAF mission in Afghanistan . Belarus first began to cooperate with NATO upon signing documents to participate in their Partnership for Peace Program in 1995 . However , Belarus cannot join NATO because it is a member of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation . Tensions between NATO and Belarus peaked after the March 2006 presidential election in Belarus .

== Administrative divisions ==

Belarus is divided into six regions (Belarusian : *rehiyony* , Russian : *oblasti*) , which are named after the cities that serve as their administrative centers .

Each region has a provincial legislative authority , called a region council (Belarusian : *sejmik* , Russian : *oblastnoye soboraniye*) , which is elected by its residents , and a provincial executive authority called a region administration (Belarusian : *vykonnyy komitet* , Russian : *oblastnoye upravleniye*) , whose chairman is appointed by the president . Regions are further subdivided into raions , commonly translated as districts (Belarusian : *raiony* , Russian : *rayony*) .

Each raion has its own legislative authority , or raion council , (Belarusian : *sejmik* , Russian : *rayonnoye soboraniye*) elected by its residents , and an executive authority or raion administration appointed by higher executive powers . There are six regions , divided into 118 raions .

The city of Minsk is split into nine districts and enjoys special status as the nation 's capital . It is run by an executive committee and has been granted a charter of self-rule .

Regions (with administrative centers) :

Brest Region (Brest)

Homiel (Gomel)

Hrodna (Grodno)

Mahilio? (Mogilev)

Minsk Region (Minsk)

Vitebsk Region (Vitebsk)

Special administrative district :
Minsk City

= = Economy = =

Most of the Belarusian economy remains state @-@ controlled and has been described as " Soviet @-@ style . " In 2015 , 39 @.@ 3 % of Belarusians were employed by state @-@ controlled companies , 57 @.@ 2 % were employed by private companies (in which the government has a 21 @.@ 1 % stake) and 3 @.@ 5 % were employed by foreign companies . The country relies on Russia for various imports , including petroleum . Important agricultural products include potatoes and cattle byproducts , including meat . In 1994 , Belarus 's main exports included heavy machinery (especially tractors) , agricultural products , and energy products .

Historically , textiles and wood processing have constituted a large part of industrial activity . At the time of the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 , Belarus was one of the world 's most industrially developed states by percentage of GDP as well as the richest CIS member @-@ state . Economically , Belarus involved itself in the CIS , Eurasian Economic Community , and Union with Russia .

In the 1990s , however , industrial production plunged due to decreases in imports , investment , and demand for Belarusian products from its trading partners . GDP only began to rise in 1996 ; the country was the fastest @-@ recovering former Soviet republic in the terms of its economy . In 2006 , GDP amounted to US \$ 83 @.@ 1 billion in purchasing power parity (PPP) dollars (estimate) , or about \$ 8 @,@ 100 per capita . In 2005 , GDP increased by 9 @.@ 9 % ; the inflation rate averaged 9 @.@ 5 % .

In 2006 , Belarus 's largest trading partner was Russia , accounting for nearly half of total trade , with the European Union the next largest trading partner , with nearly a third of foreign trade . As of 2015 , 38 % of Belarusian exported goods go to Russia and 56 % of imported goods come from Russia .

Due to its failure to protect labor rights , including passing laws forbidding unemployment or working outside of state @-@ controlled sectors , Belarus lost its EU Generalized System of Preferences status on 21 June 2007 , which raised tariff rates to their prior most favored nation levels . Belarus applied to become a member of the World Trade Organization in 1993 .

The labor force consists of more than four million people , among whom women hold slightly more jobs than men . In 2005 , nearly a quarter of the population was employed by industrial factories . Employment is also high in agriculture , manufacturing sales , trading goods , and education . The unemployment rate , according to government statistics , was 1 @.@ 5 % in 2005 . There were 679 @,@ 000 unemployed Belarusians , two @-@ thirds of whom were women . The unemployment rate has been in decline since 2003 , and the overall rate of employment is the highest since statistics were first compiled in 1995 .

Until July 1st 2016 , the currency of Belarus was the Belarusian ruble (BYR) . The currency was introduced in May 1992 , replacing the Soviet ruble . The first coins of the Republic of Belarus were issued on 27 December 1996 . The ruble was reintroduced with new values in 2000 and has been in use ever since . As part of the Union of Russia and Belarus , both states have discussed using a single currency along the same lines as the Euro . This led to a proposal that the Belarusian ruble be discontinued in favor of the Russian ruble (RUB) , starting as early as 1 January 2008 . The National Bank of Belarus abandoned pegging the Belarusian ruble to the Russian ruble in August 2007 .

A new currency , the new Belarusian ruble (ISO 4217 code : BYN) was introduced in July 2016 , replacing the Belarusian ruble in a rate of 1 : 10 @,@ 000 (10 @,@ 000 old rubles = 1 new ruble) . From July 1 until December 31 , 2016 , the old and new currencies will be in parallel circulation and series 2000 notes and coins can be exchanged for series 2009 from January 1 , 2017 to 31 December 2021 . This redenomination can be considered an effort to fight the high inflation rate .

The banking system of Belarus consists of thirty state @-@ owned banks and one privatized bank . On 23 May 2011 , the Belarusian ruble depreciated 56 % against the U.S. dollar . The depreciation

was even steeper on the black market and financial collapse seemed imminent as citizens rushed to exchange their rubles for dollars , euros , durable goods , and canned goods . On 1 June 2011 , Belarus requested an economic rescue package from the International Monetary Fund .

= = Demographics = =

According to the National Statistical Committee , as of 1 October 2015 , the population is 9 , 494 , 200 people . Ethnic Belarusians constitute 83 @. @ 7 % of Belarus 's total population . The next largest ethnic groups are : Russians (8 @. @ 3 %) , Poles (3 @. @ 1 %) , and Ukrainians (1 @. @ 7 %) . Belarus has a population density of about 50 people per square kilometer (127 per sq mi) ; 70 % of its total population is concentrated in urban areas . Minsk , the nation 's capital and largest city , was home to 1 @, @ 937 @, @ 900 residents in 2015 . Gomel , with a population of 481 @, @ 000 , is the second @- @ largest city and serves as the capital of the Homiel Voblast . Other large cities are Mogilev (365 @, @ 100) , Vitebsk (342 @, @ 400) , Hrodna (314 @, @ 800) and Brest (298 @, @ 300) .

Like many other European countries , Belarus has a negative population growth rate and a negative natural growth rate . In 2007 , Belarus 's population declined by 0 @. @ 41 % and its fertility rate was 1 @. @ 22 , well below the replacement rate . Its net migration rate is + 0 @. @ 38 per 1 @, @ 000 , indicating that Belarus experiences slightly more immigration than emigration . As of 2006 , 69 @. @ 7 % of Belarus 's population is aged 14 to 64 ; 16 % is under 14 , and 14 @. @ 6 % is 65 or older . Its population is also aging ; the median age of 37 is estimated to rise to between 55 and 65 in 2050 . There are about 0 @. @ 87 males per female in Belarus . The average life expectancy is 68 @. @ 7 years (63 @. @ 0 years for males and 74 @. @ 9 years for females) . Over 99 % of Belarusians aged 15 and older are literate .

= = Languages = =

Belarus 's two official languages are Russian and Belarusian ; Russian is the main language , used by 72 % of the population , while Belarusian , the official first language , is spoken by 11 @. @ 9 % . Minorities also speak Polish , Ukrainian and Eastern Yiddish .

= = Religion = =

According to the government sources , as of November 2011 , 58 @. @ 9 % of all Belarusians adhere to some kind of religion ; out of those , Eastern Orthodoxy (Belarusian Exarchate of the Russian Orthodox Church) makes up about 82 % . Roman Catholicism is practiced mostly in the western regions , and there are also different denominations of Protestantism . Minorities also practice Greek Catholicism , Judaism , Islam and Neopaganism .

Belarus 's Catholic minority , which constitute about 9 % of the country 's population and is concentrated in the western part of the country , especially around Hrodna , is made up of a mixture of Belarusians and the country 's Polish and Lithuanian minorities . In a statement to the media regarding Belarusian @- @ Vatican ties , President Lukashenko stated that Orthodox and Catholic believers are the " two main confessors in our country " . The total Roman Catholic population has dropped to 12 % of religious believers , according to a 2011 report by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs .

Belarus was once a major center of European Jews , with 10 % of the population being Jewish . But since the mid @- @ 20th century , the number of Jews has been reduced by the Holocaust , deportation , and emigration , so that today it is a very small minority of less than one percent . The Lipka Tatars , numbering over 15 @, @ 000 , are predominantly Muslims . According to Article 16 of the Constitution , Belarus has no official religion . While the freedom of worship is granted in the same article , religious organizations deemed harmful to the government or social order can be prohibited .

= = Culture = =

= = = Arts and literature = = =

The Belarusian government sponsors annual cultural festivals such as the Bazaar in Vitebsk , which showcases Belarusian performers , artists , writers , musicians , and actors . Several state holidays , such as Independence Day and Victory Day , draw big crowds and often include displays such as fireworks and military parades , especially in Vitebsk and Minsk . The government 's Ministry of Culture finances events promoting Belarusian arts and culture both inside and outside the country .

Belarusian literature began with 11th- to 13th @-@ century religious scripture , such as the 12th @-@ century poetry of Cyril of Turaw .

By the 16th century , Polotsk resident Francysk Skaryna translated the Bible into Belarusian . It was published in Prague and Vilnius sometime between 1517 and 1525 , making it the first book printed in Belarus or anywhere in Eastern Europe . The modern era of Belarusian literature began in the late 19th century ; one prominent writer was Yanka Kupala . Many Belarusian writers of the time , such as U?adimir ?y?ka , Kazimir Svayak , Yakub Kolas , ?mitrok Biadula , and Maksim Haretski , wrote for Nasha Niva , a Belarusian @-@ language paper published that was previously published in Vilnius but now is published in Minsk .

After Belarus was incorporated into the Soviet Union , the Soviet government took control of the Republic 's cultural affairs . At first , a policy of " Belarusianization " was followed in the newly formed Byelorussian SSR . This policy was reversed in the 1930s , and the majority of prominent Belarusian intellectuals and nationalist advocates were either exiled or killed in Stalinist purges . The free development of literature occurred only in Polish @-@ held territory until Soviet occupation in 1939 . Several poets and authors went into exile after the Nazi occupation of Belarus and would not return until the 1960s .

The last major revival of Belarusian literature occurred in the 1960s with novels published by Vasil Byka? and Uladzimir Karatkievich . An influential author who devoted his work to awakening the awareness of the catastrophes the country has suffered , was Ales Adamovich . He was named by Svetlana Alexievich , the Belarusian winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature 2015 , as " her main teacher , who helped her to find a path of her own " .

Music in Belarus largely comprises a rich tradition of folk and religious music . The country 's folk music traditions can be traced back to the times of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania . In the 19th century , Polish composer Stanis?aw Moniuszko composed operas and chamber music pieces while living in Minsk . During his stay , he worked with Belarusian poet Vintsent Dunin @-@ Martsinkievich and created the opera Sialanka (Peasant Woman) . At the end of the 19th century , major Belarusian cities formed their own opera and ballet companies . The ballet Nightingale by M. Kroshner was composed during the Soviet era and became the first Belarusian ballet showcased at the National Academic Vialiki Ballet Theatre in Minsk .

After the Second World War , music focused on the hardships of the Belarusian people or on those who took up arms in defense of the homeland . During this period , Anatoly Bogatyrev , creator of the opera In Polesye Virgin Forest , served as the " tutor " of Belarusian composers . The National Academic Theatre of Ballet in Minsk was awarded the Benois de la Dance Prize in 1996 as the top ballet company in the world . Rock music has become increasingly popular in recent years , though the Belarusian government has attempted to limit the amount of foreign music aired on the radio in favor of traditional Belarusian music . Since 2004 , Belarus has been sending artists to the Eurovision Song Contest .

Marc Chagall was born in Liozna (near Vitebsk) in 1887 . He spent the World War I years in Soviet Belarus , becoming one of the country 's most distinguished artists and a member of the modernist avant @-@ garde and was a founder of the Vitebsk Arts College .

= = = Dress = = =

The traditional Belarusian dress originates from the Kievan Rus ' period . Due to the cool climate , clothes were designed to preserve body heat and were usually made from flax or wool . They were decorated with ornate patterns influenced by the neighboring cultures : Poles , Lithuanians , Latvians , Russians , and other European nations . Each region of Belarus has developed specific design patterns . One ornamental pattern common in early dresses currently decorates the hoist of the Belarusian national flag , adopted in a disputed referendum in 1995 .

= = = Cuisine = = =

Belarusian cuisine consists mainly of vegetables , meat (particularly pork) , and bread . Foods are usually either slowly cooked or stewed . Typically , Belarusians eat a light breakfast and two hearty meals , with dinner being the largest meal of the day . Wheat and rye breads are consumed in Belarus , but rye is more plentiful because conditions are too harsh for growing wheat . To show hospitality , a host traditionally presents an offering of bread and salt when greeting a guest or visitor .

= = = Sport = = =

Belarus has competed in the Olympic Games since the 1994 Winter Olympics . Its National Olympic Committee has been headed by President Lukashenko since 1997 .

Receiving heavy sponsorship from the government , ice hockey is the nation 's second most popular sport after football . The national football team have never qualified for a major tournament , however BATE Borisov have played in the Champions League . The national hockey team finished fourth in overall competition at the 2002 Salt Lake City Olympics , and its players have been present in the National Hockey League in North America . Darya Domracheva is a leading biathlete whose honors include three gold medals at the 2014 Winter Olympics .

Tennis player Victoria Azarenka became the first Belarusian to win a Grand Slam singles title at the Australian Open in 2012 . She also won the gold medal in mixed doubles at the 2012 Summer Olympics with Max Mirnyi , who holds ten Grand Slam titles in doubles .

Other notable Belarusian sportspeople include cyclist Vasil Kiryienka , who won the 2015 Road World Time Trial Championship , and middle distance runner Maryna Arzamasava , who won the gold medal in the 800m at the 2015 World Championships in Athletics .

= = = Telecommunications = = =

In 2008 , there were 3 @. @ 718 million phone landlines used in comparison to 8 @. @ 639 million cellular phones in Belarus . Most of the phone lines are operated by Beltelecom , a state @- @ owned company . About two @- @ thirds of all of the phone services are run on digital systems , and the mobile @- @ cellular teledensity is about 90 phones per 100 persons . There are approximately 113 @, @ 000 internet hosts in Belarus in 2009 to meet the needs of approximately 3 @. @ 107 million Internet users .

The largest media holding group in Belarus is the state @- @ owned National State Teleradiocompany . It operates several television and radio stations that broadcast content domestically and internationally , either through traditional signals or the Internet . The Television Broadcasting Network is one of the major independent television stations in Belarus , mostly showing regional programming . Several newspapers , printed either in Belarusian or Russian , provide general information or special interest content , such as business , politics or sports . In 1998 , there were fewer than 100 radio stations in Belarus : 28 AM , 37 FM and 11 shortwave stations .

All media companies are regulated by the Law on Press and Other Mass Media , passed on 13 January 1995 . This grants the freedom of press ; however , Article 5 proscribes slander against the President of Belarus or other officials outlined in the national constitution . The Belarusian Government has since been criticized for acting against media outlets . Newspapers such as Nasha

Niva and the Belaruskaya Delovaya Gazeta have been targeted for closure by the authorities after they published reports critical of President Lukashenko or other government officials . The OSCE and Freedom House have commented regarding the loss of press freedom in Belarus . In 2009 , Freedom House gave Belarus a score of 6 @. @ 75 (not free) when it came to dealing with press freedom . Another issue for the Belarusian press is the unresolved disappearance of several journalists .

= = = World Heritage Sites = = =

Belarus has four UNESCO @-@ designated World Heritage Sites : the Mir Castle Complex , the Nesvizh Castle , the Belovezhskaya Pushcha (shared with Poland) , and the Struve Geodetic Arc (shared with nine other countries) .