



The Nyoman River and the Old Bridge, Grodno  
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# BELARUS



Dancers and musicians from Belarus on stage  
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Map of Belarus  
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# Chapter 1 | Geography



Nesvizh Castle, Nesvizh  
Flickr/Alexxx Malev

## Introduction

Belarus is a mostly-flat country with much of its boundaries best described as more political than geographical. It is landlocked, with Latvia to the north, Russia to the east/northeast, Ukraine to the south, Poland to the west, and Lithuania to the northwest. The country's total area covers 207,595 sq km (80,153 sq mi), making it slightly smaller than the State of Kansas. In 2020, arable land available for agriculture in Belarus was only 27.9%—due in large part to ongoing contamination from the 1986 Chernobyl nuclear disaster in neighboring Ukraine.<sup>1</sup>

The country's natural resources include relatively small amounts of fossil fuels, some timber, and basic minerals. In 2020, fossil fuel production accounted for only 16% of Belarus's total primary energy supply (TPES).<sup>2</sup> With renewable energy production at just 6% of TPES, this makes the country a net energy importer, and heavily dependent upon neighboring Russia for its energy needs.

1 "Arable land (% of land area)—Belarus," The World Bank: Data, retrieved April 2023, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/AG.LND.ARBL.ZS?locations=BY>.

2 "Energy security: Belarus energy profile," *International Energy Agency*, retrieved April 2023, <https://www.iea.org/reports/belarus-energy-profile/energy-security>.

## Topographical Features

### ***Byelaruskaya Hrada (Belarusian Ridge)***

The Belarusian Ridge runs from the country's southwest border with Poland to its northeast border with Russia. Apart from some hilly territory in the north of the country, it is the country's only notable elevated terrain. However, its highest point is only a mere 346 m (1,135 ft), at the peak of Mount Dzyarzhynskaya.<sup>3</sup>

### ***Pushchas***

About a third of the country is covered by *pushchas*—large, unpopulated forests. Some of these areas, such as the Białowieża Forest near Poland, are designated as sanctuary areas for endangered animals. Despite heavy deforestation from the industrial age to the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, over the last three decades Belarus has managed to re-grow many forested areas. Between 1992 and 2020, the forested areas of the country grew from 38.8% to 43.2%, despite heavy dependence on the timber industry as a component of GDP.<sup>4</sup>

### ***Palyessye***

Another third of Belarus's land is occupied by the Palyessye region to the south—a plain filled with marshes and swamps. The region itself is comprised of territories held by Belarus, Russia, Ukraine, and Poland. Much of the land is now unusable for agricultural purposes due to the Chernobyl disaster.

## Bodies of Water

### ***Daugava River (Western Dvina River)***

The Daugava River begins in Russia, travels south and west through Belarus, then Latvia, and eventually empties into the Baltic Sea. Only a little more than a third of the river's catchment area is located within Belarus. From the medieval period to the present, the river has been an important economic engine for the region—initially as a trade route, and now as a source of hydroelectric power. However, like most of Belarus' resources, human pollution represents a significant danger, and environmental controls within the country are underdeveloped.<sup>5</sup>

### ***Nyoman River (Nemen River)***

The Nyoman River begins in central Belarus, flows north and west into Lithuania and, Like the Daugava, eventually empties into the Baltic Sea. Throughout the much of recorded history, the Nyoman served as a natural border between state entities which no longer exist. Today, the river is economically significant for its use in fishing, hydropower, transport, industry, irrigation, and tourism.<sup>6</sup> As with the Daugava, managing pollution from human activity in the river is an ongoing challenge.

3 For comparison, Mount Rainier in Washington State has an elevation of 4,394 m (14,417 ft), and Mount Shasta in California has an elevation of 4,321 m (14,179 ft).

4 "Forest area (% of land area)—Belarus," *The World Bank: Data*, retrieved April 2023, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/AG.LND.FRST.ZS?locations=BY>.

5 "Towards Water Security in Belarus: A Synthesis Report," *Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development* (Paris, OECD: 2020), 20.

6 "Elaboration of Priority Components of the Transboundary Neman/Nemunas River Basin Management Plan (Key Findings)," *United Nations Economic Commission for Europe* (Minsk, UNECE: 2018), 39.

## ***Dnieper River (Dnipro River)***

The Dnieper River originates in Russia, flows into Belarus, and moves south into Ukraine, emptying into the Black Sea. It feeds several hydroelectric dams throughout Belarus, and serves as the border between Belarus and Ukraine. Since the 2022 invasion of Ukraine by Russia, it has often been used as a boundary marker for control of certain territories.<sup>7</sup>

## ***Lakes***

Belarus has around 4,000 lakes, mostly owing to retreating glaciers at the end of the last ice age.<sup>8</sup> Lake Narach, the country's largest, is located in the northwest and covers almost 80 sq km (31 sq mi). The larger lakes are concentrated in the northern part of the country.

## **Climate**

The climate of Belarus is mostly uniform throughout the country—warm summers and cold winters. Summer temperatures reach average highs of 23° C (74° F), while winters reach average lows of -2° C (28° F). Average yearly rainfall for the country is around 600 mm (24 in), and the entire country enjoys higher-than-average humidity. Summer rain storms are frequent, and ongoing climate change has been steadily increasing the average volume of river water.<sup>9</sup> Because of the country's mostly-flat terrain, even its mountain zone does not experience significant changes in temperature, as it does not reach the necessary elevation.

## **Major Cities**

### ***Minsk***

Minsk is the capital of Belarus and the administrative center of the region, with the urban areas taking up 409 sq km (158 sq mi). With a 2019 population of nearly 2,000,000, it contains more people than the next four smaller cities combined. Minsk is located in central Belarus, and serves as the country's largest hub for transportation. There are nine administrative districts in Minsk, geographically laid out like spokes on a wheel, numbered clockwise around its center. Visitors should note its population density is around 4,900 people per sq km (about 12,600 per sq mi)—comparable to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

Minsk has a long history of finding itself in the middle of opposing forces. As such, the city has often had difficulty rebuilding after intense conflict. For example, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century alone, it was invaded by Russia's Red Army, then taken over by the Germans, recaptured by the Russians, and through the end of World War II remained a center of anti-Soviet German resistance. Its infrastructure (roads, administrative buildings, bridges, etc.) was almost completely destroyed. As part of a Soviet republic, its post-war recovery was slow, and the architecture from this time period remains as a reminder of its communist past. Despite its rough recovery, visitors to Minsk will experience modern (though not luxurious) amenities, such as public transport infrastructure—including a rapid transit metro.<sup>10</sup> Minsk was originally built on softly rolling hills, so walking and cycling are not arduous tasks.

7 See Dan Peleschuk, "Ukraine in 'final stage' of reclaiming west bank of Dnipro River," *Reuters* (Canary Wharf, London), November 11, 2022.

8 For comparison, slightly-larger Minnesota has 11,842 lakes of 10 acres or more.

9 "Towards Water Security in Belarus: A Synthesis Report," *Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development* (Paris, OECD: 2020), 19–20.

10 See <https://metropoliten.by/>.

## **Gomel**

Gomel (population 526,000) is Belarus's second-largest city, but only a third the size of Minsk, both in population and area. It is located in the southeast, on the bank of one of the Dnieper River's tributaries. Covering an area 140 sq km (54 sq mi) on flat terrain, the city easily accommodates walking and cycling. Public transport is available on busses and trolleys, and its train station marks the half-way point between Minsk and Kyiv, Ukraine.

As Gomel is built on the bank of a river, visitors enjoy access to beaches on the opposite bank. The city is home to multiple sports complexes, which support sports such as ice hockey and football (soccer). Like Minsk, the city's tumultuous experiences in the 20<sup>th</sup> century have left little historical architecture and sites preserved. It has been a sister city to Fort Meyers, Florida since 2016.<sup>11</sup>

## **Mogilev**

Mogilev is situated on the Dnieper River, and lies just 76 km (47 mi) from the Russian border. It is exceptional in Belarus in that it has some surviving architecture from the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, including its town hall, the convent of St. Nicholas, and St. Stanisław's Cathedral.<sup>12</sup> With a population of 375,000, it covers an area of 119 sq km (46 sq mi). It has become one of the country's major economic and industrial centers, likely resulting from less harsh treatment of its infrastructure during the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

## **Grodno**

Located in the west of Belarus, just 15 km (9.3 mi) from the Polish border, Grodno has a population of 374,000 people. As it lies so close to the border, it has a significant Polish population and is seen as a center of Polish culture in Belarus. Three rivers flow through the city: the Nyoman, the Lasosna, and the Haradničanka. Public transportation consists mostly of busses and trolleys, which are very inexpensive by American standards—a one-way trip costs about \$0.25.<sup>13</sup> The city is considered a cultural hub, with musical and theater performances, as well as cultural festivals. The city is even part of a special cultural tourism zone, which allows visa-free entry for up to 10 days for citizens of eligible countries (the United States is included).<sup>14</sup>

## **Vitebsk**

With a population of 366,000, Vitebsk occupies an area of 125 sq km (48 sq mi). It is home to the Annunciation church—constructed in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, destroyed by the Soviets in 1961, and rebuilt in the 1990s. Part of its original foundation can still be seen.<sup>15</sup> Vitebsk enjoys a thriving cultural scene, with other rebuilt buildings of historical significance, international music festivals, sports competitions, and museums which feature art and history. It is located in the northeast corner of the country, just 35 km (22 mi) from the Russian border.

11 "Partner Cities," *Gomel City Executive Committee*, <https://gomel.gov.by/en/content/economics/vneshneekonomicheskaya-deyatelnost/goroda-partnyery/>.

12 See <https://www.stnicholascenter.org/gazetteer/2593>.

13 "Transportation in Grodno," *Russian Language School in Grodno*, [https://rls.grsu.by/en/useful-information/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=38&catid=29&lang=en&Itemid=160](https://rls.grsu.by/en/useful-information/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=38&catid=29&lang=en&Itemid=160).

14 "List of States in Relation to Which Citizens Are Established With a Visa-Free Entry and Departure Procedure," *Grodno Visa Free*, <https://grodnovisafree.by/component/k2/item/7465-spisok-stran.html>.

15 See <https://santosepulcro.co.il/en/religious-objects/blagoveshchenskaya-tserkov-vitebsk/>.

## Environmental Issues

The most pressing environmental issue for Belarus is still the ongoing contamination from the 1986 Chernobyl nuclear disaster. About 7,000 sq km (2,700 mi) of the southeastern region is uninhabitable. This is a double-blow for Belarus, as not only is the land there unusable for agriculture or industry, it also involves containment and decontamination costs in the hundreds of billions of dollars. For a country which has not been able to rebuild itself to the same level of progress as several of its former Soviet peers, these costs have been extraordinarily difficult to bear. Coupled with the issues of air and water pollution due to underdeveloped environmental safeguards, the small nation is faced with significant environmental challenges.

The most recent (2010) national report produced by the government and available to the public online states that, “To date, the country formed a sufficiently developed legal framework in the field of environmental protection and rational use of natural resources.”<sup>16</sup> This suggests that the Belarusian government either may not be taking its environmental challenges as seriously as they should, or that they may be attempting to downplay these issues for an international audience.

## Natural Hazards

With changing climate conditions, flooding and wildfires are an increasing hazard in Belarus.<sup>17</sup> The nation also lies in an earthquake zone, and due to weak environmental controls, naturally available water risks contamination. Temperature is also a concern—in the summer months, increasing temperatures risk an increase in wildfires, while in the winter, already frigid temperatures increase the risk of exposure and hypothermia.

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16 “State of Environment in the Republic of Belarus,” *Ministry of Natural Resources and Environmental Protection of the Republic of Belarus*, Accessed April 2023, [https://minpriroda.gov.by/en/new\\_url\\_1244680181-en](https://minpriroda.gov.by/en/new_url_1244680181-en).

17 “Hazard Report: Belarus,” *Global Facility for Disaster Reduction and Recovery*, Accessed April 2023, <https://www.thinkhazard.org/en/report/26-belarus>.

# Belarus in Perspective

## Geography Assessment

Read the following statements and answer True or False

- |    |                                                                                                     |      |       |
|----|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------|-------|
| 1. | Most of the crops in Belarus are grown in the southern part of the country.                         | True | False |
| 2. | The Dnieper River eventually empties into the Baltic Sea.                                           | True | False |
| 3. | The mountain regions of Belarus have a similar temperature as the lowlands.                         | True | False |
| 4. | The major cities in Belarus have similar population sizes, and share a mostly uniform distribution. | True | False |
| 5. | Climate change presents significant and ongoing challenges for the people of Belarus.               | True | False |

# Belarus in Perspective

## Geography Assessment Answers

1. False:  
The southern part of the country includes large areas which are still suffering from contamination as a result of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster in Ukraine.
2. False:  
The Dnieper River empties into the Black Sea, about 1,200 km (750 mi) from the Baltic Sea.
3. True:  
Despite elevations in terrain, the mountain regions of Belarus are still quite low, and do not tend to impact the temperature as much as mountain zones in other countries with higher elevation.
4. False:  
The capital city of Minsk is significantly larger than the other major cities, with a population that exceeds the next four cities combined.
5. True:  
Climate change increases the difficulty of efforts to limit the effects of human contamination of water, air, and soil. It also creates more danger in risks of floods, wildfires, and exposure.

## Chapter 2 | History



Yakub Kolas Square, Minsk  
Wikimedia/Hanna Zelenko

### Introduction

The history of Belarus can be traced back to the 9th century, when the region's first political entity, the Principality of Polotsk (English: Polatsk), emerged under the Kievan Rus', a federation of Slavic tribes. With the introduction of Christianity, Polotsk developed a distinct cultural climate which aided in fostering a Belarusian identity. The Kievan Rus' fractured into separate principalities following a series of Mongol invasions in the 13th century, leading to the formation of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania (circa 1200–1795, one of the largest and most powerful states in Europe at the time). Belarus (in addition to present-day Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, and Ukraine) became an integral part of the Grand Duchy and played a crucial role in its political and economic development.<sup>1</sup>

The following century, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth was established, creating an alliance between Poland and Lithuania. Belarusian nobility was heavily assimilated into Polish culture during this period, and over the next hundred years, this development led to a more centralized and unified state. Also during this era, Belarus experienced significant cultural and economic development, along with an expansion of the Eastern Orthodox Christian faith among commoners. Because the Polish (and Belarusian) elite tended to favor Catholicism while

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<sup>1</sup> S. C. Rowell, *Lithuania Ascending: A Pagan Empire within East-Central Europe, 1295–1345* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

commoners remained mostly within Eastern Orthodoxy, the Commonwealth developed a reputation for religious tolerance, attracting other religious minorities, including Jews.

Preceding the Enlightenment by a full two centuries, the 15th and 16th centuries marked a golden age for Belarus, during which the arts, architecture, and literature flourished.<sup>2</sup> Belarusian developed as an official and distinct literary language during this period as well, which contributed to the growth of a unique Belarusian cultural identity. Formal education was further enriched by the establishment of the Jesuit Academy in Polotsk, which became a center for higher learning and intellectual pursuits in the region. However, the era was not without its challenges. The period also saw the rise of social tension and conflict between different ethnic and religious groups in the region. Additionally, the gradual consolidation and centralization of power within the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth led to the gradual loss of Belarusian autonomy, as the local nobility gradually lost their traditional influence over the central government. As the power of the regional aristocracies waned, the advancements in society laid the foundation for the nation's future growth.

## The 17th to 19th Centuries

By the mid-17th century, a series of wars and conflicts significantly weakened the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. While most of the aristocracy had adopted Catholicism, commoners had largely remained Eastern Orthodox, which led to uprisings in calling for religious freedoms.<sup>3</sup> In addition to this conflict, wars with neighboring Russia, Sweden, Transylvania, and Brandenburg also broke out. These events led to the eventual partition of the Commonwealth in the late 18th century, with Belarus divided between the Russian Empire and the Kingdom of Prussia—the majority of its territory falling under Russian control.

The 19th century was marked by a growing national identity among Belarusians, spurred on by the influence of the European Enlightenment.<sup>4</sup> Intellectuals and cultural figures, such as Francysk Skaryna, Yakub Kolas, and Yanka Kupala, played a crucial role in promoting the Belarusian language and culture during this time. The spread of formal education and the growth of the national movement further contributed to the dissemination of ideas among the Belarusian population. However, Belarus once again found itself in the center of conflict, perhaps most notably against Napoleon's occupation of the region. Belarusian resistance was paramount in his defeat, but the nation found itself again part of Imperial Russia in the aftermath. Subsequent resistance to Russian occupation proved fruitless, and in the lead up to the First World War these conditions made Belarus a high-priority target for Russia's enemies.

## The Soviet Era

World War I had a profound impact on Belarus, as the country became a major battleground between the Central Powers and the Russian Empire. Under German occupation, schools were permitted to teach the Belarusian language. But as the Germans withdrew, Soviet forces began their own occupation. The Treaty of Brest-Litovsk in 1918 had resulted in the temporary creation of the Belarusian People's Republic, a short-lived attempt at independence that ultimately failed due to ongoing military conflicts in the region.<sup>5</sup> But in 1919 the establishment of the Soviet regime in Belarus began with the formation of the Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic (BSSR). The BSSR was initially a

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2 Jūratė Kiaupienė, *Between Rome and Byzantium: The Golden Age of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania's Political Culture* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2020).

3 Serhii Plokhy, *The Origins of the Slavic Nations: Premodern Identities in Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

4 Andrew Savchenko, *Belarus—A Perpetual Borderland* (Leden: Brill Publishers, 2009).

5 David Marples, *Belarus: A Denationalized Nation* (Milton Park: Routledge, 1999).

part of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic but became a separate republic within the Soviet Union in 1922. During the Soviet era, Belarus underwent significant industrialization and urbanization, while its agricultural sector was collectivized.

The 1930s were marked by the Great Purge, which greatly affected the political and intellectual elites of Belarus. Thousands of people were arrested, executed, or sent to labor camps, resulting in a significant loss of the country's intellectual capital. The Belarusian culture and language were also suppressed again during this period, as the Soviet government promoted Russification policies.

Belarus was one of the countries affected most when the world plunged into war for a second time. During World War II, the Belarusian people suffered greatly under Nazi Germany's occupation (1941–1944), which resulted in the destruction of many cities and the death of a significant portion of the population, including over 800,000 Jews who were victims of the Holocaust.<sup>6</sup> This number reflects approximately 90% of the Jews living in Belarus at the time, and the Jewish population has not recovered since, with Jews numbering less than 14,000 at the most recent census (2019). Post-war reconstruction efforts were focused on rebuilding the country's infrastructure and industry, leading to Belarus becoming one of the most industrialized republics within the Soviet Union.

The 1960s and 1970s saw a period of relative stability in Belarus, characterized by economic growth and improvements in living standards. However, the country also experienced a decline in its national identity, as the Belarusian language and culture continued to be marginalized in favor of Russian influences. The Chernobyl nuclear disaster in 1986 had a profound impact on the region, leading to significant environmental and health issues that persist to this day.

## The Post-Soviet Era

The late 1980s and early 1990s represented a shift in national identity, and with the weakening of the Soviet Union came a renewed push for independence in Belarus. The country declared its sovereignty in July 1990, and then its independence on August 25, 1991. The dissolution of the Soviet Union in December 1991 marked the beginning of a new chapter in Belarusian history. The early years of independence were marked by significant economic difficulties, as the country struggled to transition from a centrally-planned economy to a free-market one.<sup>7</sup> Additionally, the government faced the challenge of creating a new national identity and promoting the Belarusian language and culture after centuries of Russification. Despite these challenges, Belarus managed to maintain relative political stability during the 1990s, avoiding the violent conflicts that plagued several other post-Soviet states.

The process of democratization in Belarus has been slow and uneven. The initial years of independence included the establishment of a multiparty system and the adoption of a new constitution in 1994. However, the election of Alexander Lukashenko as president in 1994 marked a turning point in the country's political trajectory. Lukashenko's rise to power has been characterized by a gradual consolidation of power and the erosion of democratic institutions.

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6 Waitman Wade Beorn, *Marching into Darkness: The Wehrmacht and the Holocaust in Belarus* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014).

7 For contrast, see the Czech Republic's post-Soviet economic planning and trajectory. See also Andrew Savchenko, *Rationality, Nationalism, and Post-Communist Market Transformation: A Comparative Analysis of Belarus, Poland, and the Baltic States* (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2000).

## Lukashenko Regime

Under Alexander Lukashenko's leadership, Belarus has experienced a gradual decline of democratic institutions, suppression of political opposition, and curtailment of civil liberties.<sup>8</sup> The country has been internationally criticized for its human rights abuses, including the persecution of journalists, civil society activists, and opposition figures.<sup>9</sup> International watchdog organizations have also disputed the results of elections after 1994, seeing them as illegitimate.<sup>9</sup> The economic policies of Lukashenko's government have been characterized by a mix of state control and market-oriented reforms. Although some progress has been made in the privatization of state-owned enterprises and the liberalization of the economy, the state continues to dominate key sectors, especially the energy sector, where Belarus remains heavily reliant on Russia for its needs. The lack of economic diversification and overdependence on Russia has contributed to economic stagnation, resulting in a growing sense of disillusionment and frustration among the Belarusian population. Protests have often been met with state brutality, prompting international outcry.<sup>10</sup>

During the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, Lukashenko allowed Russian troops to not only pass through Belarus, but to use it as a staging ground for launching attacks on Ukraine.<sup>11</sup> Four months after the initial invasion, Russia announced it would be supplying Belarus with nuclear-capable missile systems.<sup>12</sup> As Lukashenko had previously signed the Budapest Memorandum in 1994, committing the country to denuclearization and non-proliferation, these missile systems revealed how drastically Belarus' relations with its neighbors had changed. Lukashenko criticized Poland and Lithuania for their "aggressive" and "confrontational" policies in response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. This marked a clear difference between the response of Belarus' neighbors and its own congeniality with Russia's tactics.<sup>13</sup>

The future of Belarus under Lukashenko's regime remains uncertain, as the country faces ongoing political, economic, and social challenges. Reports of the leader's ongoing illness, as well as his absence from several important state functions in 2023, has led to speculation that a political change may be eminent.<sup>14</sup> The persistence of the protest movement and international pressure on the government may eventually lead to political change as well, although the nature and extent of such change are difficult to predict. The country's complex history and geopolitical position will continue to shape its development in the years to come.

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8 For further reading on Belarus' political trajectory after declaring independence, see Andrew Wilson, *Belarus: The Last European Dictatorship* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021).

9 See Oleg Manaev, Natalie Manayeva, and Dzimistry Yuran, "More State Than Nation: Lukashenko's Belarus," *Journal of International Affairs* 65, no. 1 (2011): 93–113, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24388184>.

10 "UN human rights experts: Belarus must stop torturing protesters and prevent enforced disappearances," *United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner*, September 1, 2020, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2020/09/un-human-rights-experts-belarus-must-stop-torturing-protesters-and-prevent?LangID=E&NewsID=26199>.

11 Fatma Khaled, "Putin Ally Lukashenko Faces Revolt From Officers Against Ukraine War: Report," *Newsweek*, July 10, 2022, <https://www.newsweek.com/putin-ally-lukashenko-faces-revolt-officers-against-ukraine-war-1723224>.

12 "Russia promises Belarus Iskander-M nuclear-capable missiles," *BBC News*, June 26, 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-61938111>.

13 "Putin promises Belarus nuclear-capable missiles to counter 'aggressive' West," *Reuters*, June 25, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russia-will-supply-belarus-with-iskander-m-missile-systems-putin-2022-06-25/>.

14 "Belarus president Lukashenko misses another event prompting speculation of illness," *The Guardian*, May 14, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/may/15/alexander-lukashenko-belarus-president-sick-illness-speculation>.

# Belarus in Perspective

## History Assessment

Read the following statements and answer True or False

- |    |                                                                                      |      |       |
|----|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------|-------|
| 1. | The history of Belarus can be traced back to the 13th century.                       | True | False |
| 2. | The mid-17th century was marked largely by peace with Belarus's neighbors.           | True | False |
| 3. | As a Soviet republic, Belarus was turned into an industrial hub.                     | True | False |
| 4. | Belarusian independence brought significant economic gains.                          | True | False |
| 5. | International criticism of Belarus includes its track record regarding human rights. | True | False |

# Belarus in Perspective

## History Assessment Answers

1. False:  
The region's first political entity, the Principality of Polotsk, emerged in the 9th century.
2. False:  
Numerous conflicts arose during this period, which led to wars with Russia, Sweden, Transylvania, and Brandenburg.
3. True:  
Soviet efforts toward Belarus included heavy industry and urbanization measures.
4. False:  
Belarus's independence was fraught with economic difficulties in its transition from communism to free-market ideals.
5. True:  
Numerous condemnations and sanctions have been leveled at Belarus for its failure to protect its people from police and military actions during protests.

## Chapter 3 | Economy



Sunset in Minsk  
Wikimedia/Homoatrox

### Introduction

After the fall of the Soviet Union, Belarus' economy focused mainly on heavy machine manufacturing and electronics for automation. During communism, the country had produced significant exports relative to other Soviet Republics, and attempted to use this infrastructure to pivot to a free-market economy.<sup>1</sup> The transition was unsteady, and Belarus has had substantial difficulty in making the transition. Heavy dependency on Russia has tied volatility in the Russian market to its own economy, and this has led to no shortage of problems. The Belarusian financial crisis of 2011 further complicated matters, due to Belarus' economic isolation from the EU and North America.<sup>2</sup> Belarus is considered underdeveloped by western standards—due mostly to policy decisions rather than a lack of resources. In 2022, it had a Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of just over USD 80 billion, slightly more than the state of North Dakota.<sup>3</sup>

1 See Viachaslau Yarashevich, "Political Economy of Modern Belarus: Going Against Mainstream?" *Europe-Asia Studies* 66, no. 10 (December 2014): 1703–1734.

2 Will Englund, "In Belarus, currency crisis pushes economy from troubled to dire," *The Washington Post* (Washington, D.C.), April 9, 2011, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/in-belarus-currency-crisis-pushes-economy-from-troubled-to-dire/2011/04/07/AF3nqa8C\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/in-belarus-currency-crisis-pushes-economy-from-troubled-to-dire/2011/04/07/AF3nqa8C_story.html).

3 Data taken from "World Economic Outlook database: October 2022," *International Monetary Fund*, <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/WEO/weo-database/2022/October>.

## Agriculture

Agriculture accounted for approximately 7% of GDP in Belarus in 2021, including government subsidies, fertilizers, and equipment.<sup>4</sup> The country's fertile soil is ideal for cultivating crops, and the agricultural sector is dominated by large-scale state-owned and private farming enterprises. Belarus is a leading producer of dairy and meat products in Europe. This sector satisfies domestic demand and generates substantial exports as well, particularly to Russia and other nearby countries.

Crop production is another facet of Belarusian agriculture. The country is a significant producer of potatoes, as well as cereals, such as barley and rye. Flax is also a major crop, and is used in the domestic textile industry. The agricultural sector, though productive, faces challenges. For instance, large-scale agricultural enterprises require modernization to enhance efficiency and productivity. Additionally, the sector is susceptible to global price fluctuations and climate change impacts, such as flooding and weather events which hinder harvests. Lastly, a large portion of the country is untenable for agriculture due to ongoing contamination from the nuclear fallout at Chernobyl.<sup>5</sup> Hence, ongoing efforts to upgrade technology and diversify agricultural products are critical.

## Industry

Belarus' industrial sector contributed about 32% to the GDP in 2021. The country's industrial sector is extensive, featuring several industries, including machinery, petrochemicals, textiles, food processing, and more. This strong industrial base has its roots in the Soviet era, during which Belarus was a significant manufacturing hub. The machinery and equipment sector dominates, producing a wide array of items from metal-cutting machines, tractors, and trucks to motorcycles and consumer appliances. Minsk Tractor Works (MTZ), a major employer in the country, is known worldwide for its high-quality tractors.<sup>6</sup>

The petrochemical industry is also essential, producing fertilizers, synthetic fibers, and other chemical products. Moreover, the country's textile industry, once famous for its quality linen, has adapted to modern times, now producing synthetic textiles for domestic consumption as well as export. However, the industrial sector faces challenges. Its reliance on Russia for energy supplies and raw materials renders it vulnerable to political and economic dynamics in Russia.<sup>7</sup> Further, the industry needs substantial modernization and increased competitiveness to remain viable.

## Tourism and Service Sectors

The services sector, including tourism, is the backbone of the economy in Belarus, and constituted around 48% of the GDP in 2021. Tourism in Belarus is largely fueled by its rich cultural heritage and scenic landscapes. From impressive Soviet-era architecture in Minsk to the majestic Mir Castle, a UNESCO World Heritage site, Belarus offers numerous attractions to international visitors. In recent years, the Belarusian government has taken several

4 Aaron O'Neill, "Distribution of gross domestic product (GDP) across economic sectors in Belarus 2021," *Statista*, May 12, 2023.

5 Kim Hjelmgard, "In secretive Belarus, Chernobyl's impact is breathtakingly grim," *USA Today* (McLean, VA), April 18, 2016, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2016/04/17/belarus-border-town-chernobyl-30th-anniversary/82888796/>.

6 See <https://www.belarus-tractor.com/en/company/>.

7 Piper Coes, "Examining Belarus' Growing Reliance on Russia," *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, October 8, 2021, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2021/10/examining-belarus-growing-reliance-on-russia/>.

initiatives to boost tourism. For example, they have introduced a five-day visa-free entry scheme for tourists from 80 countries to encourage short visits.<sup>8</sup>

The broader services sector includes retail, finance, information technology, real estate, and professional services. The IT services sector has been particularly vibrant, with the Belarus Hi-Technology Park in Minsk emerging as a hub for innovative tech companies.<sup>9</sup> This park has generated thousands of jobs and attracted foreign investment. Despite the progress, the services sector, particularly tourism, is vulnerable to geopolitical tensions and global economic trends. The COVID-19 pandemic severely impacted tourism, highlighting the need for strategies to manage such risks effectively.

## Energy and Natural Resources

Belarus's energy and natural resources sector makes a relatively negligible 1.5% contribution of to the GDP. Given its near-total dependence upon Russia, The International Energy Agency has categorized Belarus as one of the countries in the world least able to meet its own energy needs.<sup>10</sup> Nonetheless, energy and natural resources still play a crucial role in the country's economy. Belarus' natural resources include wood, peat, potash, and minor reserves of oil and natural gas. Peat, a significant domestic resource, is primarily used in heat and power plants. The country is also one of the world's leading producers of potash fertilizers, exploiting its vast potash reserves, which are the third-largest globally. However, the oil and gas reserves are limited, necessitating large-scale imports.

A defining characteristic of the Belarusian energy sector is its heavy reliance on imported energy, primarily from Russia, as noted earlier. Since Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine (a neighbor of both Russia and Belarus), reliance on Russia for energy has presented significant challenges in terms of fluctuating prices and geopolitical instability. To mitigate this, Belarus has sought to diversify its energy sources. The most notable step in this regard is the construction of the Astravets Nuclear Power Plant, which began operations in 2020.<sup>11</sup> The plant significantly enhances Belarus's energy security and reduces its dependence on foreign energy supplies.

## Trade

Trade plays a pivotal role in Belarus's economy, and the country was a net importer in 2021.<sup>12</sup> The country exports a diverse range of goods, including machinery and equipment, mineral products, chemicals, metals, textiles, and agricultural products. Russia remains Belarus's primary trade partner, followed by Ukraine and EU countries. The strong trade ties with Russia are facilitated by the Union State agreement, which seeks to establish an integrated economy between the two countries. However, trade relations have been strained in recent years due to disagreements over energy prices and economic policies, as well as sanctions imposed on Russia by the EU, the US, and other countries in response to its invasion of Ukraine.

8 "List of States in Relation to Which Citizens Are Established With a Visa-Free Entry and Departure Procedure," *Grodno Visa Free*, <https://grodnovisafree.by/component/k2/item/7465-spisok-stran.html>.

9 See <https://www.park.by/en/http/about/>.

10 "Belarus Energy Profile," *International Energy Agency*, April 2020, page 4, available at <https://www.iea.org/reports/belarus-energy-profile>.

11 "Nuclear Power in Belarus," *World Nuclear Association*, May 2023, <https://world-nuclear.org/information-library/country-profiles/countries-a-f/belarus.aspx>.

12 "Belarus: Trade Statistics," *globalEDGE (Michigan State University)*, accessed May 2023, <https://globaleedge.msu.edu/countries/belarus/tradestats>.

In order to diversify its trade partners and reduce its dependence on Russian market, Belarus has made concerted efforts to improve trade ties with the European Union and Asian countries, including China. The Belt and Road Initiative, proposed by China, presents significant opportunities in this regard. However, the recent invasion of Ukraine by Russia has made these efforts more challenging. Belarus' access to global markets has been significantly reduced, and the country is still dependent on imported energy from a nation which, as of 2023, was still committing vast resources to military actions in Ukraine. These challenges underscore the critical need for trade diversification and economic reforms.

## Banking and Finance

The banking and finance sector in Belarus contributed around 3.5% to the GDP in 2021. The sector has historically been dominated by state-owned banks, with the National Bank of Belarus (NBB) serving as the central bank. The NBB's primary responsibilities include maintaining price stability, ensuring the smooth functioning of the domestic banking system, and managing the country's foreign exchange reserves.<sup>13</sup> State-owned banks have been crucial in providing financing to state enterprises and supporting government-led economic programs. However, these banks have faced challenges related to non-performing loans and low profitability. In response, the Belarusian government has initiated banking sector reforms aimed at improving banking supervision, implementing risk-based audits, and encouraging competition.

The penetration of foreign banks into the Belarusian financial sector has been increasing, which has brought more competitive practices to the sector. Despite the internationalization of the sector, visitors to Belarus will not only need valid identity and residential documents to open a bank account, but also certified translations of those documents into either Russian or Belarusian.<sup>14</sup>

## Standard of Living

The standard of living in Belarus is influenced by a range of factors, including income, employment, education, health, and environmental quality. The country's GDP per capita stands at approximately USD 6,500 annually as of 2023, which is significantly lower than the average for European countries. However, it has been steadily improving over the years, reflecting the country's economic growth and development efforts. Belarus' social equity is commendable, as well, as it has one of the smallest wealth gaps globally. The government has maintained a broad social safety net, providing subsidies for housing, utilities, and basic commodities, which ensure lower levels of absolute poverty. However, the cost of living in Belarus has been on the rise due to inflation, affecting households' purchasing power. There are also regional disparities, with a more pronounced increase in urban area living costs as compared to rural areas. Health and education are also key components of the standard of living, as Belarus has a well-developed education system (with a literacy rate near 100%) and a healthcare system that provides universal coverage.<sup>15</sup> Challenges still persist in these sectors, however, and there remains a need to modernize underlying infrastructure.

<sup>13</sup> See <https://www.nbrb.by/enl/today/about/general>.

<sup>14</sup> For example, see <https://belarusbank.by/en/individuals/10941>.

<sup>15</sup> Data taken from "International Data and Economic Analysis: Belarus," *United States Agency for International Development*, accessed May 2023, <https://idea.usaid.gov/cd/belarus/education#tab-literacy>.

## Employment Trends

Employment trends in Belarus reveal a shifting economic landscape. The unemployment rate was around 4.7% as of 2021, which is relatively low by global standards. This is largely due to the significant role of state-controlled enterprises in the economy, which are major employers. However, underemployment and temporary employment have been growing, indicating structural issues in the labor market.<sup>16</sup> The transition from a largely state-controlled economy to a more market-oriented one has led to job losses in some sectors and job creation in others.

Agriculture, once a significant employer, has seen a decline in its workforce due to industrialization and urbanization trends. Conversely, the services sector, particularly IT and retail, has seen an increase in employment. The government's focus on digitalization and its support to the IT sector has resulted in the creation of numerous high-paying jobs, attracting young and educated Belarusians.<sup>17</sup> Labor migration, especially since the invasion of Ukraine by Russia, is also a significant trend in Belarus, with a notable number of Belarusians seeking work abroad, particularly in Russia and EU countries.<sup>18</sup> This trend is driven by higher wages abroad and the demand for skilled labor in these countries. Overall, the employment trends in Belarus mirror the country's economic transition and accompanying challenges. The government's policy decisions in the coming years will significantly impact these trends and, by extension, the livelihoods of Belarusian workers.

## Future Outlook

The economy of Belarus is likely at an inflection point due to the highly dynamic nature of geopolitical events in the region. A sluggish transition from communism to free-market policies, an executive with increasingly questionable legitimacy, and the support by the executive of Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine have all coalesced to create a highly dynamic political environment. President Lukashenko's slight acquiescence regarding EU pressures indicates that both Europe and the people of Belarus would prefer more integration with the West.<sup>19</sup> However, Lukashenko's accessions to Russia in light of its invasion of Ukraine has only increased the fervor with which his opponents have insisted his policies are not in the best interest of Belarus. A victory for Russia would further destabilize eastern Europe, dashing Belarusian hopes for a more diverse economy and further integration with Europe. But a Russian defeat would also cause economic problems for Belarus, given its near-total dependence on the Russian energy sector. Without a change in political leadership in Belarus, a positive economic outlook is doubtful at best.

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- 16 Amanda Erickson, "Belarus wanted to tax its unemployed 'parasites.' Then the protests started," *The Washington Post* (Washington, D.C.), March 10, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2017/03/10/belarus-wanted-to-tax-its-unemployed-as-parasites-then-the-protests-started/>.
- 17 Olga Razumovskaya, "Belarus Is Emerging as the Silicon Valley of Eastern Europe," *The Wall Street Journal* (New York, NY), December 6, 2016, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/belarus-is-emerging-as-the-silicon-valley-of-eastern-europe-1481032802>.
- 18 Andrew Wilson and Tadeusz Giczan, "Belarus's Digital Brain Drain—Another Casualty of Russia's Invasion of Ukraine: Part Two," *Center for European Policy Analysis*, March 24, 2023, <https://cepa.org/article/belarus-digital-brain-drain-another-casualty-of-russias-invasion-of-ukraine-part-two/>.
- 19 Josep Borrell, "Belarusians courageously demand democratic change. The EU must stand by them," *European External Action Service (European Union)*, September 22, 2020, [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/belarusians-courageously-demand-democratic-change-eu-must-stand-them\\_en](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/belarusians-courageously-demand-democratic-change-eu-must-stand-them_en).

# Belarus in Perspective

## Economy Assessment

Read the following statements and answer True or False

- |    |                                                                                  |      |       |
|----|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------|-------|
| 1. | Agriculture accounts for the majority of Belarus's GDP.                          | True | False |
| 2. | Agricultural crops are grown in every area of Belarus.                           | True | False |
| 3. | The tourism and service sectors account for the largest share of GDP in Belarus. | True | False |
| 4. | Belarus was a net exporter of commodities in 2021.                               | True | False |
| 5. | Belarus boasts a literacy rate of nearly 100%.                                   | True | False |

# Belarus in Perspective

## Economy Assessment Answers

1. False:  
Agriculture accounts for only around 7% of total GDP.
2. False:  
The exclusion zone from the Chernobyl nuclear disaster makes agriculture impossible in the region.
3. True:  
At 48% of GDP, tourism and service includes efforts to transform Belarus into an IT hub for Eastern Europe.
4. False:  
Belarus was a slight net importer in 2021, due mostly to its energy dependency on Russia.
5. True:  
Education is a high priority for Belarus.

## Chapter 4 | Society



Children playing a traditional game  
Wikimedia/Mikhail Kapycha

### Ethnic Groups and Languages

As of the 2019 census, 85% of the people in Belarus are ethnically Belarusian.<sup>1</sup> The remaining 15% of the population is made up of a variety of ethnic groups, including Russians (8%), Poles (3%), Ukrainians (1.7%), and smaller ethnic communities, such as Jews, Tatars, and Roma (approximately 2%), who also contribute to the country's cultural diversity. Before World War II, Belarus was a major center for Jews, with the Jewish population accounting for 10% of the nation's people. But after the horrors of the holocaust, even more than 75 years after the war, the Jewish population of Belarus accounts for less than 1% of its people.

The country's ethnic diversity is also reflected in its languages. The official languages of Belarus are Belarusian and Russian, both East Slavic languages. Belarusian, the national language, is closely related to Russian and Ukrainian, sharing a common Slavic linguistic heritage. However, Russian is more commonly spoken in everyday life, for about 70% of the country—a legacy of the Soviet era when Russian was promoted as the language of interethnic communication. Despite this, there has been a resurgence in the use of Belarusian, particularly among the younger generations, as well as in rural areas. This linguistic revival is often seen as a symbol of national identity and cultural pride. Prospective visitors should be aware that Education First (an international education company

<sup>1</sup> Data taken from "National composition of the population of the Republic of Belarus," *National Statistical Committee of the Republic of Belarus*, October 2, 2020, [https://www.belstat.gov.by/ofitsialnaya-statistika/solialnaya-sfera/naselenie-i-migratsiya/naselenie/statisticheskie-izdaniya/index\\_18090/](https://www.belstat.gov.by/ofitsialnaya-statistika/solialnaya-sfera/naselenie-i-migratsiya/naselenie/statisticheskie-izdaniya/index_18090/).

that specializes in language training) ranks Belarus 39th (Moderate Proficiency) in its English Proficiency Index—between Cuba and Russia.<sup>2</sup> One should not expect older citizens or those in rural areas to speak English fluently.

## Religion

Religion plays a significant role in Belarusian society, shaping many aspects of social life, traditions, and cultural identity. The dominant religion is Eastern Orthodox Christianity, which is practiced by more than 50% of the population.<sup>3</sup> The Belarusian Orthodox Church, an exarchate of the Russian Orthodox Church, has a profound influence on Belarusian society. Its teachings and rituals are deeply embedded in many aspects of Belarusian culture, from holidays and family ceremonies to art and architecture. Orthodox churches, with their distinctive onion domes and ornate interiors, are a common sight in Belarusian cities and towns. They are not only places of worship but also important cultural and architectural landmarks. Religious holidays, such as Christmas and Easter, are celebrated with traditional rituals and ceremonies, often involving the entire community.

The second-largest group, which accounts for around 30% of the population, consists of those without religious affiliation. This includes atheists, agnostics, and those who simply claim no affiliation. Roman Catholicism is the second most common religion, with around 6% of the population identifying as Catholic. The majority of Belarusian Catholics are members of the Polish minority, which is concentrated in the western regions of the country. There are also communities of Protestants, Jews, Muslims, and people who practice traditional beliefs. This religious pluralism, as well as tolerance for those opting out of religion, has been a key policy for the government of Belarus, which it claims works “to protect the different Belarus religious groups and Belarus churches, and to guard against the influence of religious sects.”<sup>4</sup>

## Cuisine

Belarusian cuisine is similar to other eastern European cuisines, reflecting the country’s agricultural heritage and the influences of its neighbors. Staples include potatoes, meat, mushrooms, berries, and dairy products. Belarus is often called “the country of potatoes” for its wide variety of potato dishes.<sup>5</sup> Traditional dishes include *draniki* (potato pancakes), *borscht* (a beetroot soup common in many eastern European countries), and *kalduny* (meat-stuffed potato dumplings). Many Russian and Ukrainian dishes can be found in restaurants, reflecting the republic’s soviet heritage. Food plays a central role in Belarusian social life and rituals. Meals are often communal affairs, with families and friends gathering around the table to share food and conversation. Traditional Belarusian cuisine is also an important part of holidays and celebrations. For example, during Christmas, it is customary to prepare *kutia*, a sweet grain pudding, while special Christmas carols called *koliadki* are sung.

## Traditional Dress

Traditional Belarusian dress is characterized by its simplicity, functionality, and beauty. It typically consists of an embroidered linen shirt (*vyshyvanka*) and trousers for men, and a linen shirt and long skirt for women. The

2 “Belarus,” *Education First English Proficiency Index*, accessed May 2023, <https://www.ef.com/wwen/epi/regions/europe/belarus/>.

3 “2022 Report on International Religious Freedom: Belarus,” *US Department of State*, accessed May 2023, <https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-report-on-international-religious-freedom/belarus/#:~:text=According%20to%20a%202016%20survey,percent%20is%20%E2%80%9Cuncertain.%E2%80%9D%20Smaller.>

4 “Religion in Belarus,” *Belarus.by: Official Website of the Republic of Belarus*, accessed May 2023, <https://www.belarus.by/en/about-belarus/religion.>

5 See Anna Zadora, “Daily identity practices: Belarus and potato eaters,” *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 52, no. 2 (June 2019): 177–185.

clothes are often decorated with intricate geometric patterns and symbols which have been passed down through generations. The embroidery is not merely decorative; each pattern and symbol has a specific meaning, often related to protection, fertility, or prosperity.<sup>6</sup> Traditional dress is an important part of Belarusian cultural identity. It is worn on special occasions, such as weddings and festivals, and is a symbol of national pride. Despite the influence of Western fashion, there has been a resurgence of interest in traditional Belarusian clothing, particularly among younger people. This revival of traditional dress is likely part of a broader trend of rediscovering and preserving Belarusian cultural heritage.

## Gender Issues

Belarusian society, like many others, grapples with gender issues. Historically, Belarusian society has been patriarchal, with men typically seen as the breadwinners, while women were expected to focus on home and family. However, this situation has been gradually changing. Women in Belarus are increasingly participating in the workforce, politics, and social life, although they still face challenges such as wage inequality and underrepresentation in leadership positions. The government has implemented policies to promote gender equality, such as laws against domestic violence and sexual harassment, and initiatives to promote women's participation in politics and the workforce.<sup>7</sup> However, these efforts have been met with mixed success, and gender inequality remains a significant issue.

Non-governmental organizations play a crucial role in promoting gender equality and women's rights.<sup>8</sup> They provide support services for women, conduct awareness campaigns, and advocate for policy changes. Moreover, societal attitudes towards gender roles are slowly evolving, particularly among the younger generation. There is growing recognition of the importance of gender equality for social development and progress. Finally, there is a significant difference in life expectancy between men and women in Belarus: women have an average life expectancy of 79 years, while men live an average of 69 years.<sup>9</sup> One contributing factor to this discrepancy may be that alcohol and tobacco use in men is much higher than in women due to perceived gender norms.<sup>10</sup> Nearly 50% of adult men in Belarus smoke daily, for example, while fewer than 10% of women do. Similar discrepancies exist for alcohol use.

## The Arts

The arts hold a cherished place in Belarusian society, encompassing music, theater, literature, film, popular culture, architecture, and folk traditions. They serve as a mirror reflecting the country's history, traditions, and contemporary issues.

6 For example, see "Belarusian embroidery: history, symbols, embroidery methods and ornament," *POSHYK.info*, accessed May 2023, <https://poshyk.info/en/beloruskaia-vishivka/>.

7 Alex Kremer, "Has Belarus really succeeded in pursuing gender equality?" *World Bank*, August 7, 2018, <https://blogs.worldbank.org/europeandcentralasia/has-belarus-really-succeeded-pursuing-gender-equality>.

8 For example, see "The policy of gender equality in Belarus," *United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization*, accessed May 2023, <https://en.unesco.org/creativity/policy-monitoring-platform/policy-gender-equality-belarus>.

9 Aaron O'Neill, "Life expectancy at birth in Belarus 2021, by gender," *Statista*, accessed May 2023, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/970420/life-expectancy-at-birth-in-belarus-by-gender/#:~:text=This%20statistic%20shows%20the%20average.about%2067.3%20years%20on%20average>.

10 For example, see "10 Facts About Life Expectancy in Belarus," *The Borgen Project*, accessed May 2023, <https://borgenproject.org/10-facts-about-life-expectancy-in-belarus/>.

## Music

Belarusian music is a blend of traditional folk music and modern genres. Folk music, with its distinctive instruments like the *duda* (bagpipe) and zither, is an integral part of cultural celebrations. Folk songs often tell stories of love, war, and everyday life, preserving the country's oral history. In recent years, Belarusian pop, rock, and electronic music have gained popularity, with several artists achieving international recognition. Events such as Basóvišča, an annual alternative and rock music festival, showcase the diversity and creativity of contemporary Belarusian music.<sup>11</sup> The festival is held in Poland, but managed by the Belarusian Association of Students.

## Theater

Theater in Belarus has a long and rich history, serving both as a platform for social commentary and artistic expression. Classic and contemporary plays are performed in theaters across the country, and there has been a resurgence of interest in theater among the younger generation. As evidence of its popularity, The Belarus Free Theatre, an underground theater group, has gained international acclaim for its bold performances addressing social and political issues.<sup>12</sup> The group is banned by the government for its political commentary critical of the current regime, and meets for rehearsals and performances in secret locations.

## Literature

Belarusian literature spans a wide range of genres, from epic poems to modern novels. Notable Belarusian authors include Svetlana Alexievich, a Nobel laureate in Literature, whose works often explore the experiences of ordinary people in historical events. Her book “Voices from Chernobyl” provides a haunting account of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster, told through the stories of survivors.<sup>13</sup>

## Film

The Belarusian film industry, though small, has produced several notable films. These films often explore social issues and historical events, providing a unique Belarusian perspective. The Minsk International Film Festival “Listapad” is an important event in the Belarusian cultural calendar, showcasing the best of Belarusian and international cinema.<sup>14</sup>

## Popular Culture

Belarusian popular culture is a mix of local and foreign influences. Geography plays an important role, with Slavic and Russian influences obvious in the cultural landscape.<sup>15</sup> Television, music, and internet culture play a significant role in shaping contemporary Belarusian society. Social media, in particular, has become a platform for creative expression and social commentary, particularly among younger Belarusians.

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11 See Kuba Łoginow, “The Basóvišča phenomenon: A rock festival in Poland helped change Belarus,” *Dennik*, July 27, 2021, <https://dennik.sk/2481654/fenomen-basovisca-rockovy-festival-v-polsku-pomahal-zmenit-bielorusko/>.

12 See <https://belarusfreetheatre.com/>.

13 Svetlana Alexievich, *Voices From Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster* (London: Dalkey Archive Press, 2005).

14 See <http://listapad.com/en/>.

15 Ryszard Radzik and Jeryna Słomczynska, “Belarus Between the East and the West: The Soviet-Russian Option Versus the Nationalist Option in Belarusian Society,” *International Journal of Sociology* 31, no. 3 (Fall 2001): 11–45.

## Architecture

Belarusian architecture is diverse, reflecting the country's history. It ranges from medieval castles and Orthodox churches to Soviet-era buildings and modern skyscrapers. The Mir Castle Complex, the Nesvizh Castle, and the Struve Geodetic Arc are all UNESCO World Heritage Sites, and examples of the country's architectural heritage.<sup>16</sup> Because Belarusian infrastructure was largely spared from damage during World War II (unlike neighboring Czechoslovakia), much of its historic architecture still stands today, and is often used as locations for popular films and television programs.

## Folk Traditions

Folk traditions are an integral part of Belarusian culture. They include traditional dances, songs, crafts, and rituals, many of which are still practiced today, particularly in rural areas. The Kupala Night, a traditional pagan festival celebrating the summer solstice, is one of the most important events in the Belarusian cultural calendar, featuring bonfires, folk music, and traditional games.<sup>17</sup>

## Sports and Recreation

Sports are an important part of Belarusian society. Popular sports include football, and ice hockey. Belarus has a strong tradition in various Olympic sports and has achieved success on the international stage. The nation competed as part of the Soviet Olympic Squad from 1952–1990, then as part of a Unified Team of former Soviet republics at the 1992 games, and finally as an independent nation in the 1994 Olympic games in Lillehammer, Norway—winning two silver medals. The country has produced several Olympic champions, in events such as weightlifting, gymnastics, and biathlon.<sup>18</sup>

Recreation in Belarus often involves enjoying the country's natural beauty. With its vast forests, numerous lakes and rivers, and national parks, outdoor activities such as hiking, fishing, and camping are popular. Belovezhskaya Pushcha National Park, home to the European bison, is a popular destination for nature lovers.<sup>19</sup>

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16 "Belarus," *United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization World Heritage Convention*, accessed May 2023, <https://whc.unesco.org/en/statesparties/by>.

17 Maryna Tryfanenkava, "The Current Status of Belarusian Calendar-Ritual Tradition," *Folklorica: Journal of the Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Folklore Association* 6, no. 2 (2001): 44–45.

18 See "Sports Heroes," *President of the Republic of Belarus*, accessed May 2023, <https://president.gov.by/en/belarus/social/sport/sports-heroes#:~:text=Belarus%20started%20competing%20in%20the,37%20silvers%2C%20and%2048%20bronzes..>

19 See "Belovezhskaya Pushcha National Park," *Belarus.by: Official Website of the Republic of Belarus*, accessed May 2023, <https://www.belarus.by/en/travel/belarus-life/belovezhskaya-pushcha>.

# Belarus in Perspective

## Society Assessment

Read the following statements and answer True or False

- |    |                                                                                 |      |       |
|----|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------|-------|
| 1. | Belarus has a diverse population with many ethnic backgrounds.                  | True | False |
| 2. | Catholics are the largest religious group in Belarus.                           | True | False |
| 3. | Potatoes are a popular ingredient in Belarusian cuisine.                        | True | False |
| 4. | Belarusian traditional dress is plain and with little in the way of decoration. | True | False |
| 5. | Belarus has multiple UNESCO World Heritage Sites.                               | True | False |

# Belarus in Perspective

## Society Assessment Answers

1. False:  
Belarus is mostly homogenous with around 85% of the population are ethnic Belarusians.
2. False:  
More than 50% of the population practices Eastern Orthodox Christianity. The next-largest group (30%) is composed of those without religious affiliation. Catholics make up a mere 6%.
3. True:  
Belarus has a wide variety of potato dishes, and is sometimes referred to as “the country of potatoes.”
4. False:  
Belarusian traditional embroidery practices use intricate geometric patterns, and traditional dress is generally worn for celebrations.
5. True:  
Belarus has three architectural and one natural UNESCO World Heritage Sites.

## Chapter 5 | Security



Special-Purpose Brigade during the protests, 2020  
Wikimedia/Homoatrox

### Introduction

Belarus occupies an interesting space in the geopolitics of the region. On one hand, it is a former Soviet republic which has maintained close ties to the Russian Federation following the dissolution of the Soviet Union. On the other hand, it has (at least superficially) sought more integration with Europe and (more materially) the economic opportunities therein. Following its participation in the Russian invasion of Ukraine by allowing its sovereign land to be used by Russia for troop movements and larger military staging events, Belarus is perhaps now in its most precarious position of the past 30 years. Coupled with its own internal issues, the future of Belarusian security is exceedingly difficult to forecast.

### Military

The Belarusian Armed Forces play a critical role in the country's security framework. Comprised of the Ground Forces and the Air Force and Air Defense Forces, the military is tasked with defending the country's sovereignty and territorial integrity. With help from its close ally Russia, the Belarusian military has undergone significant modernization efforts in recent years. A 2017 estimate included 47,950 total active military personnel.<sup>1</sup> Belarus'

<sup>1</sup> "The Military Balance: The Annual Assessment of Global Military Capabilities and Defence Economics," *The International Institute for Strategic Studies* (2022): 164, <https://www.iwp.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/The-Military-Balance-2022.pdf>.

military doctrine is defensive in nature, emphasizing the protection of its territory in the face of external threats. However, the country's strategic location has often placed it in the center of regional security dynamics. Its close military cooperation with Russia, including joint military exercises and Russia's use of Belarusian territory for military installations, has raised concerns among NATO members, particularly those in Eastern Europe. These concerns proved legitimate after the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine through Belarus.

The Belarusian military also plays a role in internal security, particularly in the context of political unrest. The military has been accused of human rights abuses during domestic security operations, and the government's militarized response to political dissent has received heavy international scrutiny.<sup>2</sup> The Belarusian military's capabilities have been enhanced through the acquisition of modern weaponry, much of it from Russia.<sup>3</sup> This includes advanced aircraft, missile systems, and armored vehicles. The country also maintains a robust defense industry, producing a range of military equipment for domestic use and export. However, the military faces several challenges. These include the need to modernize its aging Soviet-era equipment, the potential for social unrest in the event of a political crisis, and the risk of becoming overly reliant on Russia for military support. As support for President Lukashenko diminishes, the odds of a political crisis increase, while Russia's staggering losses in its campaign against Ukraine also reduce the probability that it could be an effective ally.

## Police

The Ministry of Internal Affairs oversees the Belarusian police force, which is responsible for maintaining public order, preventing and investigating crimes, and ensuring the security of citizens.<sup>4</sup> The Ministry's public-facing website also lists a litany of other internal security groups—including the General Directorate of Ideological Work (similar to the US Army's Training and Doctrine Command). The police force has been a central actor in the government's response to political protests, particularly in the wake of Belarus' disputed 2020 presidential election. The police's handling of protests has drawn international criticism, with allegations of excessive use of force, arbitrary arrests, and the mistreatment of detainees. These actions have raised concerns about the rule of law and respect for human rights in Belarus, further complicating the country's relations with the West.

The Belarusian police force is also involved in counter-terrorism operations and efforts to combat organized crime. It works closely with other security agencies, both domestically and internationally, to address these threats. However, the police force faces several challenges. These include allegations of corruption, a lack of transparency and accountability, and the need to balance its law enforcement duties with respect for civil liberties.<sup>5</sup>

## Foreign Relations

Belarus' foreign relations are shaped by its strategic location and its historical, cultural, and political ties. Its most significant relationship is with Russia, its eastern neighbor and key ally. The two countries have a formal union treaty and cooperate closely in areas such as defense, security, and energy. However, this relationship has also been

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2 "UN human rights experts: Belarus must stop torturing protesters and prevent enforced disappearances," *United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner*, September 1, 2020, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2020/09/un-human-rights-experts-belarus-must-stop-torturing-protesters-and-prevent?LangID=E&NewsID=26199>.

3 "Russia promises Belarus Iskander-M nuclear-capable missiles," *BBC News*, June 26, 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-61938111>.

4 See <https://www.mvd.gov.by/en>.

5 Anastasiia Kruope, "Police Abuse Continues in Belarus: Detainees Report Beatings, Inhuman Treatment, and Threats of Sexual Abuse," *Human Rights Watch*, September 21, 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/09/21/police-abuse-continues-belarus>.

marked by tensions, with periodic disputes over issues such as energy prices and the terms of their integration.<sup>6</sup> Relations with the European Union and the United States have been more challenging. While there have been periods of engagement and attempts at rapprochement, these have often been overshadowed by disagreements over human rights, democracy, and governance issues. The EU and the US have imposed sanctions on Belarus in response to its handling of the 2020 presidential election and the subsequent crackdown on protesters.

Belarus also maintains relations with other countries and regions, including China, which has become an increasingly important partner in recent years.<sup>7</sup> Its foreign policy is perhaps best described as a balancing act, seeking to maintain its close ties with Russia while also engaging with other global actors. Belarus' foreign relations are further complicated by its geopolitical position. As a landlocked country located between Russia and NATO member states, Belarus is often caught in the middle of larger geopolitical dynamics. This has implications for its security, as tensions between Russia and the West risk spilling over into Belarus, especially after Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

## US-Belarus Relations

The relationship between the United States and Belarus has been marked by periods of tension and limited engagement. The US has consistently expressed concern over human rights violations in Belarus, particularly regarding political freedoms, civil liberties, and the administration of elections. Belarus' disputed 2020 presidential election and its subsequent crackdown on protesters led to a significant deterioration in US-Belarus relations. The US has imposed several rounds of sanctions on Belarusian officials, including President Alexander Lukashenko, in response to human rights abuses and the undermining of democratic processes. These measures have included travel bans and asset freezes, as well as restrictions on US aid to the Belarusian government.<sup>8</sup>

Despite these tensions, there have been attempts at dialogue and engagement. Prior to the 2020 election, there were signs of a potential thaw in relations, with the exchange of ambassadors for the first time since 2008.<sup>9</sup> However, these efforts have been overshadowed by Belarus' recent involvement in Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The US has previously expressed concern over Belarus' close military and security ties with Russia, viewing them as a potential threat to regional stability. Despite the US urging Belarus to uphold its commitment to sovereignty and independence, and to play a constructive role in regional security, Belarus' current involvement in the invasion of Ukraine has made near-future progress in this regard difficult at best.

## Issues Affecting Security

Several issues pose challenges to Belarus' security. One of the most pressing is the political instability following the 2020 presidential election. The widespread protests and the government's harsh response to them have created a volatile situation, with potential implications for domestic stability and international relations. The political crisis has exposed deep-seated grievances within Belarusian society, including frustration with economic stagnation,

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6 Piper Coes, "Examining Belarus' Growing Reliance on Russia," *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, October 8, 2021, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2021/10/examining-belarus-growing-reliance-on-russia/>.

7 Yan Li and Enfu Cheng, "Market Socialism in Belarus: An Alternative to China's Socialist Market Economy," *World Review of Political Economy* 11, no. 4 (December 2020): 428–454.

8 See "Belarus Sanctions," *US Department of State*, accessed May 2023, <https://www.state.gov/belarus-sanctions/>.

9 "US Relations with Belarus: Bilateral Relations Fact Sheet," *Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs (US Department of State)*, August 30, 2021, <https://www.state.gov/u-s-relations-with-belarus/#:~:text=In%202019%2C%20the%20United%20States,Senate%20on%20December%2015%2C%202020..>

corruption, and the lack of political freedoms.<sup>10</sup> These issues, if left unaddressed, could fuel further unrest and instability. Given rumors in 2023 of President Lukashenko's poor health, his administration may face renewed pressure from both his political opponents and the Belarusian people.

Another major security issue is Belarus' economic vulnerability. The country's economy is heavily dependent on Russia, particularly for energy supplies and financial support. This reliance leaves Belarus vulnerable to outside influence and limits its foreign policy options. Economic challenges, such as high inflation and unemployment, could also contribute to social unrest and instability. Cybersecurity is another area of concern. Like many countries, Belarus faces threats from cybercrime, cyber espionage, and cyberattacks on critical infrastructure. The country has taken steps to strengthen its cybersecurity capabilities, but challenges remain. These include the need to update outdated IT systems, improve the skills of cyber security professionals, and raise public awareness about cyber threats. In early 2022, a group of Belarusian hackers breached the Belarusian Railways computer systems.<sup>11</sup> President Lukashenko later ordered the country to enhance its cybersecurity, but also claimed no new resources were required to do so, calling into question how seriously he takes the issue.<sup>12</sup>

## Food and Water Security

Belarus is largely self-sufficient in terms of food production, with a well-developed agricultural sector. Despite its small size, it also has a small population. The country produces a variety of crops, including potatoes, grains, and vegetables, as well as meat and dairy products. However, agricultural production is vulnerable to environmental factors, such as weather conditions and climate change.<sup>13</sup> The government has implemented measures to improve agricultural productivity and sustainability, including modernization of agricultural machinery, promotion of organic farming, and research and development of agricultural technologies. However, there remains the need to improve soil fertility, reduce the environmental impact of farming, and adapt to climate change. Water security is a less pressing issue, as Belarus has abundant freshwater resources. However, water pollution is a concern, particularly from industrial and agricultural activities.<sup>14</sup> The government has implemented measures to protect water resources and improve water management, but challenges remain. These include the need to upgrade aging water infrastructure, reduce water waste, and improve the quality of drinking water.

10 Tatyana Zenkovich, "Belarus protests: beleaguered economy underpins anger at Lukashenko government," *The Conversation*, August 26, 2020, <https://theconversation.com/belarus-protests-beleaguered-economy-underpins-anger-at-lukashenko-government-145063>.

11 Andy Greenberg, "Why the Belarus Railways Hack Marks a First for Ransomware," *Wired*, January 25, 2022, <https://www.wired.com/story/belarus-railways-ransomware-hack-cyber-partisans/>.

12 "Belarus strengthens its cyber security," *The Minsk Times*, November 2, 2022, <https://www.sb.by/en/belarus-strengthens-its-cyber-security.html>.

13 See "Belarus," *EU4Climate (European Union/United Nations Development Programme)*, accessed May 2023, <https://eu4climate.eu/belarus/>.

14 Irina Oleinik, "Getting Clean Water in Belarus," *The World Bank*, February 4, 2013, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2013/02/04/getting-clean-water-in-belarus>.

## Outlook

Belarus faces both internal and external security concerns. From an international perspective, it is difficult to conceive that Belarus will not face further consequences for the country's participation in allowing Russia to use its territory as a staging area and route for invading Ukraine. Even a Russian victory saddles them with a depleted ally, and little room chance of further integration with Europe. At the same time, internal opposition has grown against Lukashenko's administration. Despite heavy-handed tactics at the hands of both the military and police forces, protests against the administration have not waned. If rumors of Lukashenko's poor health prove true, a change in leadership is likely, and policies regarding Belarus' stance toward Russia and the rest of Europe may change quickly and drastically.

# Belarus in Perspective

## Security Assessment

Read the following statements and answer True or False

- |    |                                                                                                                            |      |       |
|----|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------|-------|
| 1. | The Belarusian military is only used in foreign engagements.                                                               | True | False |
| 2. | Belarusian police have been praised by the international community for their even-handedness towards political protestors. | True | False |
| 3. | Belarus has been sanctioned by the United States.                                                                          | True | False |
| 4. | Due to its partnerships with Russia, Belarus has mainly kept China at a distance.                                          | True | False |
| 5. | Belarus faces growing internal instability.                                                                                | True | False |

# Belarus in Perspective

## Security Assessment Answers

1. False:  
The military has been highly criticized for its internal suppression of political protests.
2. False:  
The Belarusian police force has been observed using excessive force, arbitrarily arresting opposition figures, and has been accused of mistreating detainees.
3. True:  
Sanctions had recently been applied due to the treatment of protestors in the 2020 election, and are in further consideration due to Belarus allowing Russia to pass through on its invasion of Ukraine.
4. False:  
China has become an important geopolitical and trading partner to Belarus.
5. True:  
After protests of the legitimacy of the 2020 election, the Lukashenko administration was criticized for human rights abuses toward protestors.

# Belarus in Perspective

## Further Readings and Resources

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Snyder, Timothy. *The Reconstruction of Nations: Poland, Ukraine, Lithuania, Belarus, 1569–1999*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004.

Wilson, Andrew. *Belarus: The Last European Dictatorship*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012.

# Belarus in Perspective

## Final Assessment

“To receive a certificate of completion for this course, please complete the final assessment on the DLIFLC website.”