The Republic of Belarus, formerly the Belorussian Soviet Socialist Republic, is situated between Ukraine, to the south, the Russian Federation to the east, Poland to the west, and Lithuania and Latvia to the north.

Belarussians, like Russians and Ukrainians, trace their ancestry to Kievan Rus. Later, Belarusian territories were dominated by Lithuania and Poland. With the Polish partitions between 1772 and 1795 much of contemporary Belarus was incorporated into the Russian Empire. Following the collapse of the empire, an independent Belarus was established (1918), only to be abolished by the Soviets (1919). Under the Treaty of Riga, Western Belarus was ceded to Poland in 1921 but reclaimed 1939. In 1922 the remaining lands joined the Soviet Union as the Belorussian Soviet Socialist Republic.

During perestroika the Belarusian Popular Front adopted an inclusive, civic definition of Belarusian nationhood. Citizenship was granted to all permanent residents, irrespective of ethnicity. The country declared its sovereignty in July 1990. The new Belarusian passport, unlike its Soviet predecessor, has no place for ethnic identification. The Law on Languages (January 1990) established Belarusian as the official state language, but allowed a transition period for its introduction of ten years. The introduction of Belarusian as the official state language does not, however, appear to have resulted in a widespread increase in its usage vis-à-vis Russian.

A powerful movement to reunite Belarus with the Russian Federation emerged, led by President Alyaksandr Lukashenka. On the initiative of the Russian-speaking Lukashenka, a referendum on integration with Russia was held in May 1995. Of those participating, 83.3 per cent voted in favour of closer ties with Russia and for a proposal to make Russian the state language.

But criticism from regional and international players led to renewed discussions over the government’s plans for closer relations with Russia. In April 1996 Belarus and Russia concluded a treaty designed to bring about the integration of the two countries – but even before it was signed the agreement gave rise to mass demonstrations, both in support and in opposition to it. While opposition to the agreement was led by a revived Belarusian nationalist
movement, demonstrations were not directed against Russians or other minorities living within Belarus, rather against the increasingly authoritarian President Lukashenka and the threat of a loss of independence.

In 2004, plans were made to introduce the Russian ruble as the country’s currency and to synchronize pension, healthcare and income tax rights of its citizens with those of Russia. However, again these proposals failed to materialize amid debates over the extent to which Moscow should finance Belarus’s growing budget deficit. Overall it appears that the rationale for closer Russian-Belarusian ties is more about the political leadership’s need to build allegiances in the international arena, solid support for union within Russian and Belarusian societies.

In June 2002 the National Assembly adopted a law on religion enshrining the Russian Orthodox Church’s preeminent role in Belarus, amid allegations of pressure exerted on deputies to approve the law. The law prohibits religions which have not been present in Belarus, for less than two decades, from publishing literature or establishing their own missions.

Main languages: Belarusian, Russian

Main religions: Christianity (Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic and Uniate)

The main minority groups, as recorded in the 1999 census, include Russians 1,142,000 (11.4%), Poles 396,000 (3.9%), and Ukrainians 237,000 (2.4%), Jews 28,000 (0.2%).

In 2001 President Lukashenka was elected for a second term; in October 2004 a referendum was held on lifting the limits on presidential terms in office, thereby allowing him to run for a third successive term. The referendum was widely condemned as unfair by international organizations, and the official result recorded a 79 per cent vote in favour of lifting the limits to presidential terms in office. Simultaneous parliamentary elections saw no opposition candidates elected to the lower house, thereby eliminating the already marginal presence of the opposition in the Belarusian National Assembly.

The consolidation of President Lukashenka’s power was accompanied by a crackdown on civil society, with the reported closure of 56 non-governmental organizations in 2003–4 and a reported denial of registration to 90 per cent of newly formed organizations over the same period. In 2003 a ‘new state ideology’ was proclaimed at the same time as the European Humanities University was closed down. Independent media face severe constraints in Belarus, including physical intimidation and beating. In October 2004 leading independent journalist Veranika Charkasava was murdered. Foreign journalists and civic activists are routinely denied entry into Belarus or deported. Belarus retains the death penalty for ten peacetime and 12 wartime crimes, although no reliable statistics on the numbers of death sentences handed down or executions have been released by the Belarusian government.
On 19 March 2006 presidential elections were held in Belarus amid intense international speculation that the Lukashenka regime might be toppled by a popular, peaceful revolution. The pre-election period and Election Day itself were characterized by multiple human rights violations, including arbitrary detentions, closure of independent media and the harassment and arrest of opposition activists. In the run-up to the election the National Assembly approved legislation curtailing fundamental freedoms of assembly, association and expression, and opposition candidates were subjected to arbitrary arrest and imprisonment. Violent clashes with opposition protesters ensued after the election, allegedly featuring undue use of force by law enforcement personnel. Predictably Lukashenka was re-elected with a crushing majority of 83 per cent according to official returns.

In addition to tight control of the economy and the ‘power ministries’, President Lukashenka’s power is predicated on policies of state paternalism and income redistribution, retaining the political loyalty of rural and elderly constituencies. The potential for opposition has also been offset by relative economic growth, due mainly to economic upturns in Belarus’s neighbours Russia and Poland. Another factor contributing to Lukashenka’s hold on power is the absence of significant interethnic conflict in the country. The weakly developed sense of a separate Belarusian identity has ensured that ethno-nationalism, and counter-nationalisms among minorities, have played little part in Belarusian politics. The government’s desire to remain on good terms with Belarus’s neighbours, especially Russia and Ukraine, has encouraged the development of a liberal minority’s regime; relations with Poland worsened significantly in 2005 (see below). Nonetheless, the political paradigm of nationhood espoused in Belarus is not inclusive of Roma, who face si

**Minority based and advocacy organisations**

**General**

Belarusian Association of Political Repression Victims  
Tel: +375 17 269 0386  
Email: bngovpr@yahoo.com  

Belarusian League for Human Rights  
Tel/fax +375 17 231 7550  
E-mail: evgeny@novikove.minsk.by

Belarusian Helsinki Committee  
Tel. +375 17 222 4801  
Email: bhc@user.unibel.by  
Website: [http://www.belhelcom.org](http://www.belhelcom.org)

International Organization for Migration  
Tel: +375 17 288 2742  
Website: [http://www.iom.int/jahia/Jahia/cache/offonce/pid/809](http://www.iom.int/jahia/Jahia/cache/offonce/pid/809)
Jews

American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee
[This organization is active in Minsk and 14 other cities in Belarus]
Email: fsu@jdc.org
Website: http://www.jdc.org/p_fsu_bel_current.html

National Conference on Soviet Jewry
[Washington D.C., United States]
Tel: +1 202 898 2500;
Email: ncsj@ncsj.org
Website: http://www.ncsj.org

Sources and further reading

General


Russians
Minorities at Risk assessment for Russians in Belarus:
http://www.cidcm.umd.edu/inscr/mar/assessment.asp?groupId=37001

Poles


Ukrainians


The Ukrainian Weekly [online newspaper covering Ukrainian issues worldwide]:
http://www.ukrweekly.com

Jews


Jews in Belarus [a select bibliography of works in the British Library]:
http://www.bl.uk/collections/easteuropean/jewsbel.html

NCSJ country page for Belarus: http://www.ncsj.org/Belarus.shtml

UCSJ Belarus news: http://www.fsumonitor.com/indices/Belarus.shtml

http://www.fsumonitor.com/stories/asem1bel.shtml