

Belarus Overview

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Environment

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.

Peoples

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%).

History

Belarusians, 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.

Governance

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

Current state of minorities and indigenous peoples

As noted above, russification has attained levels probably higher in Belarus than any other post-Soviet republic. Although the 1999 census suggests that 78 per cent of the republic's population considers Belarusian to be its native language, most analysts agree this represents a symbolic attachment to the mother tongue rather than practical adherence to the language. In practice Russian has all but replaced Belarusian in public life and the media. Yet developments in 2005 indicated some polarization around the language issue. In June Germany's international broadcaster Deutsche Welle announced plans to launch a Russian-language information programme for broadcasting to Belarus. The Belarusian Language Society criticized Deutsche Welle for promoting the russophone orientation in Belarus with a corresponding 'imperial' outlook reflecting Russian, rather than Belarusian, national interests. Language activists in Belarus promote the use of the Belarusian language as symbolizing Belarus's European identity as opposed to membership of Russia or a Russian-dominated Eurasian space. Undoubtedly, however, the pre-eminence of Russian in public life facilitates the inclusion of minorities without knowledge of Belarusian.

Relations between the Belarusian government and the country's Polish minority deteriorated sharply in 2005. Poland's positioning of itself as the principal regional opponent to the Lukashenka regime and tensions accompanying the run-up to the 2006 presidential election saw the Belarusian authorities cracking down on Polish community leaders in the Union of Belarusian Poles (UPB). Temporarily at least this resulted in a severe straining of relations between the authorities and the Polish community leadership, although according to some analysts the larger population of Belarus's Poles remained unaffected by the conflict and, indeed, unchanged in their loyalty to the Lukashenka administration. Tensions between the authorities and community leaders, however, led to the replacement of the UPB leadership with Lukashenka loyalists; restrictions were also imposed, at least temporarily, on Polish language newspaper publishing and the deployment of Polish language teachers from Poland.

The government of Belarus as well as general society engages in significant discrimination against Roma, who number almost 70,000. An unemployment rate of 93 per cent and low levels of education characterize the Roma community. Negative stereotyping results in discrimination against Roma in the workplace and in securing employment. The police harass Romani women selling produce or telling fortunes in the marketplace, and state media and government officials portray Roma negatively. The Ministry of Internal Affairs' Department of Drug Trafficking has asserted that at least 50 per cent of all Roma are drug dealers.

Roma children speak primarily Romani and Belarusian, which poses enormous problems in the Belarusian school system where the language of instruction is Russian. Parents often withhold their

children from kindergarten in an effort to avoid assimilation. As a result, Romani children are linguistically behind in the all-Russian classrooms, and teachers and fellow students often assume they are lazy or mentally incompetent. While Roma are able to receive higher education in the few private educational institutions, they are often denied access to higher education in state-run universities. The Roma Lawyers' Group has petitioned the government to permit the establishment of a public Roma school in Minsk, where there are schools for Jews, Lithuanians and Poles.