

Russians

Profile

The leading position of Russians in Belarus is reinforced by a prevailing view of history among Russians that identifies Belarusians as a subdivision of the Russian people. Russian organizations in Belarus have therefore emphasized the ‘unity of the East Slav peoples’.

Despite this unusual relationship to the ‘titular nation’ of the republic in which they live, the number of Russians in Belarus fell by some 15 per cent between 1989 and 1999 from 1,342,100 to 1,141,700.

Historical context

Given the aim of integration with the Russian Federation, the Belarusian government has been extremely sensitive to the situation of Russians. The only issue to stir up tension in the republic was that of the status of the Russian language. The May 1995 referendum and April 1996 treaty on integration with Russia calmed anxiety on this issue.

Current issues

The large number of Russians in Belarus and the prominent place accorded to the Russian language (Russian dominates official business) means that minority status holds few problems for Russians. Furthermore Russian nationalists in Russia, a key source of criticism of post-Soviet successor states’ policies towards Russian minorities, are generally favourably disposed towards the regime of President Lukashenka. However, in 2004 allegations were made in a letter addressed to a website based in St Petersburg of enforced ‘Belarusification’ of ethnic Russians’ names in Belarus. According to these allegations ethnic Russians in Belarus are unique among the country’s minorities in having to convert their names to Belarusian equivalents in official identity documents, a contradiction of the Belarusian Constitution. These allegations notwithstanding, Russians in Belarus face very few problems of discrimination or exclusion.