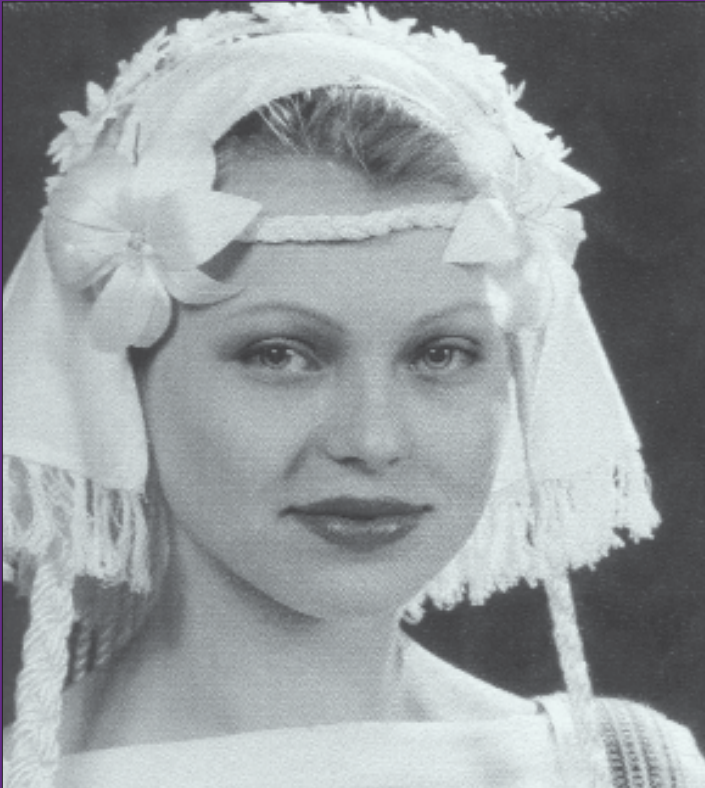
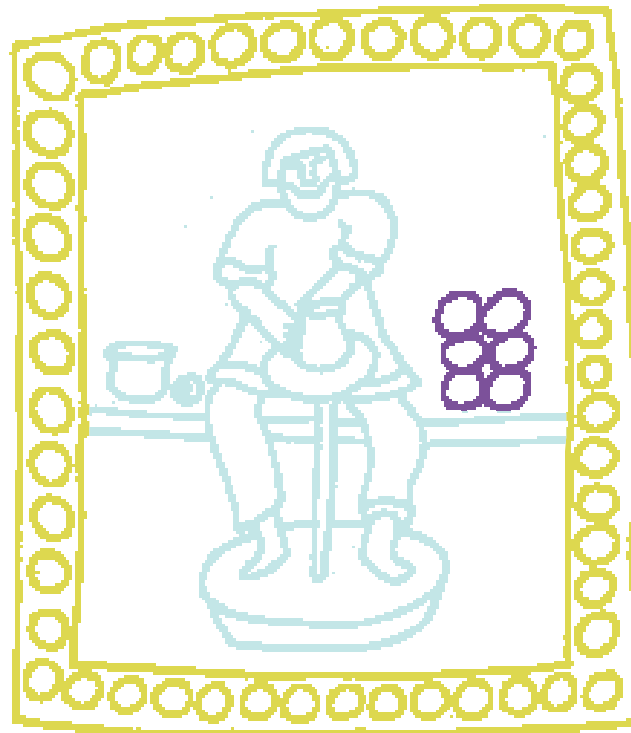


Belarus



A CULTURAL PROFILE





Belarus



TABLE OF CONTENTS

Belarus to Canada	2
Landscape and Climate	3
A Look at the Past	4
Family Life	5
The World of Work	6
Sports and Recreation	7
Looking at Health Care	8
Communicating with Belarusians	9
Eating the Belarusian Way	10
Learning in Belarus	11
Spirituality	12
Holidays	13
Arts and Literature	14
If You Want to Learn More	15



Writer

Jackie Rothstein

Printer

University of Toronto Press

Photo Credits

Eugenia Nikiforova

This project was funded by Ontario Administration of Settlement and Immigration (OASIS), Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC). Articles may be reprinted unless otherwise indicated. Opinions expressed in this publication are not necessarily CIC's.

In preparing this profile, AMNI has made every effort to use

This cultural profile is designed primarily for volunteers working in organized HOST Programs, which match newcomers with volunteers who offer friendship, orientation to the community and an opportunity to practise English or French, if needed.

BELARUS TO CANADA

Did you know?

Belarus is the country's name in the Belarusian language. During the Soviet era, the area was known as Byelorussia, which is the same word, but in the Russian language.



Every year, thousands of people from all over the world come to Canada to start a new life. They come with many different skills and the hope of contributing to a new society. This booklet has been written to help Canadians welcome newcomers from Belarus. Perhaps you are hosting a Belarusian family as part of the HOST Program, learning about Belarusian newcomers in school or working with Belarusians who have settled in Canada recently.

Belarusians have been emigrating to Canada for many years. Recently, economic and political instability in Belarus has led to increased

Did you know?

When Belarus first became independent in 1991, it adopted a new red and white flag. In 1995, it reverted to the flag of the former Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic following a referendum called by the President, Alyksandr Lukashenka.

emigration. Many Belarusians who come to Canada are highly educated and skilled. When they arrive, they sometimes have difficulty finding work, learning the language, or receiving recognition for their professional qualifications.

Like all new immigrants, Belarusians will find much in Canada that is new and strange. They come from a country emerging from decades of Communist rule. They have lived through difficult economic times. You can better help them to adjust if you know enough about their country to appreciate the differences between Belarus and Canada. Having a sense of their culture and customs will give you some insight into the lives of your new friends.

Did you know?

The literal translation of Belarus is "White Russia," after the ancient term "Belaya Rus." The "white" may refer to the beauty of the birch forests or to the snow that blankets the earth every year. Another explanation is that in ancient times the word "white" meant free, in the sense of free from conquering invaders.

Although this cultural profile provides insight into some customs, it does not cover all facets of life. The customs described may not apply in equal measure to all newcomers from Belarus.

<i>Official name:</i>	<i>Belarus</i>
<i>Capital:</i>	<i>Minsk</i>
<i>Type of government:</i>	<i>Presidential Republic</i>
<i>Population:</i>	<i>10.3 million</i>
<i>Area:</i>	<i>207,600 sq. km</i>
<i>Major ethnic groups:</i>	<i>Belarusian, Russian</i>
<i>Languages:</i>	<i>Belarusian, Russian</i>
<i>Religions:</i>	<i>Eastern Orthodox Christianity, Roman Catholicism</i>
<i>Unit of currency:</i>	<i>Ruble</i>
<i>National flag:</i>	<i>Top two-thirds red, bottom third green, with a vertical white band on the hoist side bearing a pattern of red diamonds.</i>
<i>Date of independence:</i>	<i>July 27, 1991</i>





LANDSCAPE AND CLIMATE

Did you know?

The Belovezhskaya Forest Nature Reserve is home to the European bison (or wisent), a relative of the American buffalo. This creature is often depicted in prehistoric wall paintings found all over Europe. It survives only in the reserve.

Belarus is an Eastern European country of lakes and rivers, vast birch forests, golden cornfields and fields of flax that are bright blue in summer. The country is bordered by Russia to the north and east, Ukraine to the south, Poland to the west and Lithuania and Latvia to the northwest. The country is divided into six *oblasts* or regions: Minsk, Gomel, Brest, Vitebsk, Grodno and Moghilev.

Belarus is almost completely flat. The highest hill, Mount Dzyarzhynskaya, is only 346 metres high. Thick forests cover a third of the land. Belarus was once completely covered in forest, but over the centuries the woodlands have been cleared for farming. There are more than 10,000 lakes. Lake Naroch and Lake Osveyskoye are two of the largest. The major rivers are the Dniepr, the Neman, the Dvina, and the Pripyat. Most villages and towns are located along the rivers.

At 1,300 square kilometres, Belovezhskaya Forest Nature

Reserve on the border with Poland is the largest primeval forest in Europe. Many of its oak, beech, maple and pine trees are 360 to 600 years old and more than 50 metres tall. The forest was protected for centuries because it was the private hunting ground of European kings and Soviet dignitaries.

In the southern part of the country are the Pripyat Marshes. They are flat with sandy soil and shallow rivers that flood easily. Over the years the marshes have been drained to grow flax, potatoes and rye. They are also an abundant source of peat, which can be burned for fuel.

Winters are cold in Belarus, and average temperatures in January range from -4°C in the southwest to -8°C in northeast. Snow covers the ground from November to March. Most rain occurs in June and August. Average temperatures in July are about 17 to 19°C ,



although they have been known to rise to 30°C .

The environment was disastrously affected by the nuclear explosion at Chernobyl in 1986. Chernobyl is in Ukraine but close to the border of Belarus, and 70% of the contaminants landed in Belarusian territory because of the direction of the winds. Pollution of the air, soil and water has made many thousands of acres uninhabitable.



A LOOK AT THE PAST

The territory known today as Belarus was settled by Slavic tribes in the 6th to 8th centuries A.D. The Slavs established principalities, including Polotsk, which encompassed more than half of present-day Belarus. In the mid-9th century, Kievan Rus, a kingdom to the south, seized control of the principalities. But Kievan Rus's power ended when the kingdom was invaded by the Mongols in the 14th century. Belarus became part of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania.

In 1569, the Grand Duchy formed an alliance with Poland against Russia. Over the next two centuries, Belarus was at the centre of constant battles between the Poles and the Russians. By the end of the 18th century, the Russian empire occupied all of present-day Belarus. The Russians outlawed the use of Belarusian and made Russian the official language. Belarusian lands were given to Russians and the Belarusians worked as serfs on the land.

Although serfdom was abolished in 1861, only a small portion of the land was handed over to the peasants. Two years later, Kastus Kalinouski, a Belarusian, led a rebellion against the Russians. He was executed in 1864, but the desire for freedom did not die with him. In 1919, after the First World War and the Russian Revolution, Belarus declared its independence. However, following a war between Russia and Poland, much of western Belarus was awarded to Poland by the treaty of Riga in 1921. The rest of Belarus fell under Russian control. In 1922, it



became the Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic of the Soviet Union.

In the 1930s, under Soviet leader Joseph Stalin, huge collective farms were established. Those who opposed Stalin's regime were executed or sent to labour camps. One million Belarusians are estimated to have died during the Stalinist era. During the Second World War, the country was occupied by Nazi troops. More than 2.5 million Belarusians, including most of the Jewish population, were killed during the occupation. Three-quarters of all housing and almost all industrial buildings were destroyed.

When the war was over, rebuilding began. Belarus became one of the more prosperous republics in the Soviet Union. After the Soviet Union dissolved, Belarus declared its independence on July 27, 1991. On August 25, 1991, the Communist Party issued a declaration of full independence. Russia, Belarus and

Ukraine formed the Commonwealth of Independent States to coordinate economic activities, defence and foreign relations.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union's economy, Belarus has faced many difficulties. Many Belarusians want to

Did you know?

The period from the 16th to the 18th century is considered the golden age of Belarusian culture.

reunite with Russia. In November 1996, President Alyksandr Lukashenka forced through a referendum abolishing the legitimately elected parliament and effectively establishing one-man rule.





Did you know?

*Traditionally, the grandmother of a newborn was taken around to friends to spread news of the child's christening. Men fired their guns into the air. At the family home, the grandmother would serve guests **babina kasha**, a traditional porridge.*

FAMILY LIFE

Belarus was traditionally an agricultural economy. Today, however, about 70% of the population lives in cities. Families in urban areas usually live in large, multi-storey housing developments. Most housing is owned by the government and rents are low. Some people have built their own homes, sometimes with government subsidies. In the country, families live in small villages around collective farms, although they may keep a few animals and grow their own vegetables. Newer houses are usually made with bricks, but there are still many traditional one-storey wooden houses with shingle or thatched roofs.



Small families are the norm and connections between the generations are strong. Some married couples live with their parents while they wait for their own apartments. Grandparents often live with their children and help to take care of their grandchildren.

Weddings are important celebrations. Many take two days: one for the official wedding at the registry office and another for a religious service and party. Guests at the reception like to chant "Gozko!" (Bitter!) after a drink, to prompt the groom to kiss the bride. A kiss is supposed to make a drink sweeter.



Under Communism, it was customary for both parents in the family to work. Recently, with



the scarcity of jobs in Belarus's troubled economy, some men have been encouraging women to stay at home. This situation worries women's groups, who feel a new system of inequality is developing. Many people in Belarus are also concerned about the country's falling birth rate. The divorce rate is rising, partly because of the stress caused by economic hardship. Because custody of the children is usually awarded to the mother, there has been an increase in the number of households headed by single mothers.

Storytelling is an integral part of Belarusian culture. Belarusians know many *kaski*, or fairy tales. These stories are told to children to teach them moral values. Some popular characters, common to many Slavic countries, are *Koschey Besmyarotny*, an immortal, *Zmei Garynych*, a three-headed dragon, and *Baba Yaga*, a witch.

Did you know?

Following the nuclear explosion at Chernobyl, many people had to be evacuated from contaminated areas. This has caused housing shortages in the uncontaminated areas.

THE WORLD OF WORK

Did you know?

Belarus is the third largest producer of tractors in the world.

The chief natural resource of Belarus is lumber from the abundant forests in the region. Wood is used to make furniture and charcoal. Peat, the other major resource, is used as fuel in power stations and in household fireplaces and stoves.

The countryside is still dominated by the collective farm system instituted in Stalin's time. Farms are large and state-owned, and many families work on them. The farms produce potatoes, buckwheat, rye, sugar beets, flax and dairy products. Individual families cultivate small plots of land to grow vegetables or raise a few pigs, chickens and cows for their own use. Because of fallout from the Chernobyl disaster, thousands of acres in the fertile regions of the south cannot be



used for agriculture. Nevertheless, Belarus continues to be a major producer of food.

Did you know?

Although some industries have been privatized, about 60% of Belarus's workforce of more than 5 million is still employed in state-controlled industries.

During the Soviet regime, Belarus became industrialized. Factories for heavy machinery such as trucks and machine tools were built in the 1970s. In the 1980s, factories for assembling motorcycles, electronics and computers were established. Belarus was also an important part of the defence system of the Soviet Union. Armaments factories were built and the forests provided shelter for nuclear weapons installations. Today, Belarus's industries include chemical processing, food processing, shoe manufacturing, furniture, textiles, and wood and timber processing. Pipelines run through Belarus, transporting oil from Russia to the refineries in the north.

The dissolution of the Soviet Union increased the price of raw materials and reduced the traditional market for goods. Belarus is sometimes unable to afford the raw materials needed to keep its industries going. These problems have caused job shortages, food rationing and line-ups for subsidized food.

Before the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the prices of goods were tightly regulated. Now price fixing has been eliminated. However, food prices are lower in Belarus than in other regions, and many people buy food in Belarus to sell in Russia. Russians also come to Belarus simply to buy food.





SPORTS AND RECREATION

Did you know?

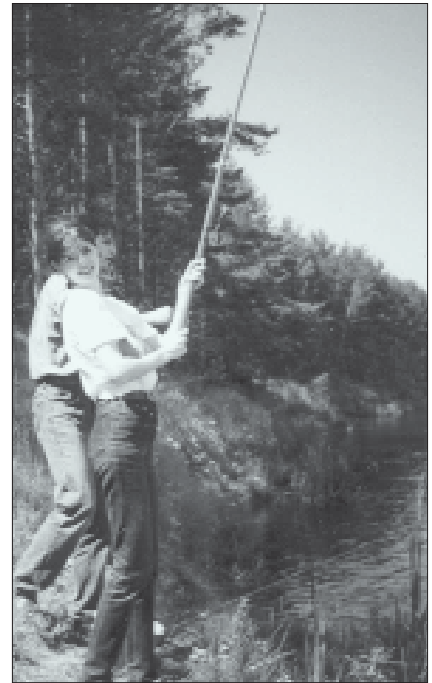
A number of Belarusians play on the international tennis circuit. Vladimir Voltchkov won the 1996 Junior Wimbledon. Natasha Zvereva has won several doubles titles with various partners.

Soccer is very popular in Belarus. The country's most successful soccer team is Dinamo Minsk. It plays in a large modern stadium and often hosts international matches. During the off-season, the stadium is used as a marketplace.

Belarus has many traditional Russian country homes, or *dachas*. For many families, *dachas* are both a tradition and

a necessity. Because of food shortages, people use their country properties to grow fresh vegetables. Many large *dachas* that were used by high-ranking Soviet officials have been transformed into vacation resorts or spas. People also go to the forest reserves to camp or hunt. Fishing is another popular activity; the lakes and rivers provide an ample supply of fish such as carp and pike.

With five months of snow a year, cross-country skiing is a popular activity. In summer, the country's many lakes provide beaches for swimming, sunbathing and picnics. The communal bathhouse, or *banya*, is a distinct feature of rural Belarusian life. Traditionally made of wood, it stands in the open near a lake or river. Inside is a wood-heated stove. People throw water scented with mint leaves or beer onto the hot stove to create a fragrant, steam-filled atmosphere. To encourage perspiration, people



slap themselves with birch leaves tied together in a bundle. Afterwards bathers jump in the river or roll in the snow.

Belarusian athletes have excelled in Olympic sports, especially gymnastics. Vitaly Shcherbo, one of the world's best gymnasts, is Belarusian. He is a six-time Olympic gold medallist and the winner of 14 world championship medals. Gymnasts Nelli Kim and Olga Korbut are also from Belarus. Korbut won three gold medals and one silver at the Olympics in 1972 and 1976 (where she competed for the USSR). The two strongest men in the world, weightlifters Alexander Kurlovich and Leonid Taranenko, are Belarusian.

Cards and dominoes are favourite pastimes. People often gather in parks for games of chess and checkers. Belarusian children, like children everywhere, amuse themselves playing hide-and-seek,





LOOKING AT HEALTH CARE



hopsotch, king of the hill and tag. Health care improved in Belarus after the Second World War. But since independence, a lack of medical equipment and funding has created a system that fails to meet many basic health needs of the Belarusian people.

Belarus's health care system has also been overburdened because of the health problems resulting from the explosion at Chernobyl in 1986. The government has only limited funds to help residents in the affected zones who need medical care and uncontaminated food. Organizations from around the world have donated medical equipment and medicine, and have established medical centres to monitor health in the region.

The Chernobyl disaster has also affected the health of Belarusians who live outside the contaminated areas. In the years



following the explosion, when the general population had not yet been informed of the extent of the disaster, farming in contaminated

Did you know?

Some Belarusians treat colds by drinking vodka spiked with salt and pepper, or milk with an egg yolk and honey.

areas continued. Radiation was transferred from the soil to plants. Crops that contained unsafe levels of radiation were sold all over the country. Miscarriages and the deaths of newborns have increased since Chernobyl. The rate of thyroid cancer among children has also increased. Nevertheless, some people have refused to leave the contaminated area, and others, who were relocated to other areas, have returned because they couldn't find jobs elsewhere.

Alcoholism is a serious problem in Belarus. A bottle of vodka is cheaper than a bottle of beer. People sometimes pay for goods and services with bottles of vodka. The government cannot afford to sponsor preventive health programs at present.

Many Belarusians still use traditional healing methods, such as infusions made by boiling locally grown plants. For colds, some Belarusians eat raspberry jam or drink tea made from raspberry leaves.





COMMUNICATING WITH BELARUSIANS



Belarusian is an East Slavic language. Like Russian, the Belarusian language uses the Cyrillic alphabet. The Cyrillic alphabet originated in the 9th century, when Saints Cyril and Methodius adapted the Greek alphabet to allow the Slavic languages to be written down.

Belarusian has drawn on the languages of its many conquerors. Many Belarusian words are derived from Russian words, but have slightly different spellings and pronunciation. The language has also been influenced by Polish and Ukrainian. Belarusian and Ukrainian both have a vowel that is pronounced “ee.” No such sound exists in Russian.

The Belarusian language was the state language of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania in the 16th century. In 1569, Belarus became part of Poland. Following the inclusion of Poland in the territory of the Russian empire in the late 18th century, Russian became the official language in Belarus. Belarusian publications were banned and

Belarusian schools were closed. Belarusian became the language of illiterate peasants. All education and advancement required a knowledge of Russian.

After 1917, in the early years of Soviet rule, Belarusian was reintroduced. Belarusian schools reopened and teaching and publishing in Belarusian began again. But by the late 1920s, the language declined again. Russian became the language of commerce, education and government. Because Russian is very close to Belarusian, it was easy for people to learn it.

Did you know?

*Because of the use of both Russian and Belarusian, a hybrid language has developed called **trasyanka**. Russian is primarily spoken in cities, while in rural areas the dominant language is Belarusian. But a person might greet a friend in Belarusian and then continue the conversation in Russian.*

1990. Street names were changed and Belarusian again became the language of instruction in schools.

President Alyksandr Lukashenka has reinstated Russian and there are now two official languages. Russian is still the most widely spoken language. People’s stand on the issue of language usually reflects their stand on the future of the country. Those who favour Belarusian as the national language are generally those who favour independence. Those who speak only Russian are generally those who favour reintegration with Russia.



Many people see the Belarusian language as essential to Belarusian culture. In the late 1980s, a group of intellectuals wrote to Russian president Mikhail Gorbachev asking for Belarusian to be reinstated. It was declared the official language in Belarus in

Did you know?

Belarusian Bibles were some of the first books to be printed in Eastern Europe. In the 16th century, Frances Skaryna of Polotsk translated the Bible into Belarusian, making Belarus the third nation after Germany and Czechoslovakia to have a printed Bible in its own language.

English	Belarusian
Yes	Da
No	Nyet
Please	Pozhalusta
Thank you	Dzyakouyou
Hi	Zdorou
How are you?	Yak spravy?
Goodbye	Da pabachennya
Take care	Byvayte zdorovy
Cheers	Na zdorovy

EATING THE BELARUSIAN WAY

Did you know?

Presenting bread and salt to a visitor is a traditional form of hospitality in Belarus.

Belarusian staples include bread, potatoes, cabbage and pork. Patties and pies are also very common. Food used to be cooked over a hot clay stove, so many traditional dishes are slowly baked or stewed.

Belarusians traditionally eat a light breakfast and two fairly hearty meals. Breakfast might consist of a sandwich and coffee. Lunch, at three in the afternoon, is usually soup, salad and a main course. Supper, around eight in the evening, is a larger meal.

Pork is the most popular meat in Belarus, although beefsteak is also common. A traditional dish is *kotleta po krestyansky*, pork cutlets served in mushroom sauce. *Machanka* is a sauce served with various meat



and pancake dishes. Freshwater fish such as perch and crayfish are plentiful and served in many restaurants. A common soup in Belarus is *shchi*. Made from sauerkraut, potatoes and fried onions, it is usually served with sour cream.

Belarusians enjoy *kalachi*, a small loaf of white bread made in the shape of a padlock. However, most people eat rye bread, because rye is more plentiful in Belarus than wheat. The country's short wet summers make it difficult to grow wheat, and most wheat is imported.

Potatoes grow throughout the country. Belarusians eat them in a variety of ways. They may be baked in the embers of a fire, then sprinkled with salt and eaten with butter. They may be grated and made into dumplings, which are stuffed with mushrooms or vegetables and baked in the oven. They may be formed into pancakes called *dranniki*, which are fried with mushrooms and served with sour cream.

Mushrooms are often ingredients in stuffings, sauces or fillings. Popular dishes include *hrybi u smyatane* (mushrooms with sour cream) and *hrybnoy sup* (mushroom soup).

Most households preserve and pickle fruits and vegetables for the winter months when there is a shortage of fresh produce.

Byarozovysok, or birch juice, is a popular drink. It tastes like a non-alcoholic ice wine. Other common drinks are *kvass*, which is made from malt, flour, sugar, mint and fruit, and *compot*, which is made from boiling dried fruit with sugar.

Mushroom Salad

40 g dried mushrooms
200 g beef liver
2 salted cucumbers, sliced
3 onions
150 ml mayonnaise
3 tbsp vegetable oil
Pepper and salt to taste

Wash dried mushrooms 3 or 4 times, soak them in cold water for 2 to 3 hours to swell, then wash them again. Strain the water that the mushrooms have been soaking in, then boil the mushrooms in it. Boil beef liver, cool it and cut it into very small pieces. Fry an onion in oil. Add the onion, liver, slices of salted cucumbers, and half the mayonnaise to the boiled, chopped mushrooms. Season with salt and pepper. Before serving, pour the rest of the mayonnaise on top.





LEARNING IN BELARUS

Did you know?

Belarus has long been known as a centre of advanced science and engineering. An early Soviet astronaut was Belarusian Piotr Klimuk.

Under Soviet rule, Belarus had a very high literacy rate, but most education was in the Russian language. In 1990, Belarusian was reinstated as the official language, and it is again being used as the language of instruction in schools. As well as Russian and Belarusian, many children also learn English, German or French.

The costs of education, including texts, are paid for by the state. Pre-school education is subsidized and about 60% of children attend.



Education is compulsory from the ages of 6 to 16. At the end of grades 9 and 11, students must take an examination in order to continue with their education.

Did you know?

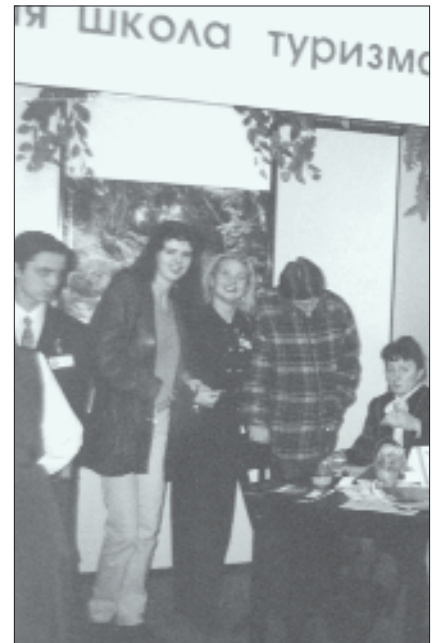
Belarus takes sports training very seriously. There are 482 schools that provide intensive training in sports throughout the country. Of these, about 120 are dedicated to Olympic sports. There are also eight colleges dedicated to Olympic sports.

At age 15, students can continue with general studies or transfer to a vocational or specialist school. Specialist schools are devoted to music, foreign languages, mathematics, science or sports. Vocational schools train teachers, machinists and computer technicians.

There are 33 postsecondary institutions in Belarus, including the Belarusian State University, Homel State University, Hrodna State University, the Belarusian

Agricultural Academy and the Belarusian Academy of Sciences. After university, many Belarusians go on to do postgraduate work and advanced training.

Young people between 18 and 27 must serve two years in the Belarusian army unless they are enrolled in university. If they graduate from university before the age of 27, they must still complete their two years.



SPIRITUALITY

During the Soviet era, all religious observance in Belarus was suppressed, but never completely outlawed. Churches, synagogues and mosques continued to perform services and observe major festivals in a subdued way. Children could not be legally baptized, but parents would go to the countryside to have the ceremony performed there. Since independence, however, religion is experiencing a revival. Many people are rediscovering their religious roots and celebrating festivals. Many ancient churches are being restored and reopened.

Most Belarusians are Eastern Orthodox Christians. A significant minority is Catholic. The remaining few are Protestants, Jews, Muslims or Uniates.

Orthodox Christianity was introduced to Belarus more than 1,000 years ago by Prince Vladimir, ruler of the empire of Kievan Rus. He made Byzantine (now known as Orthodox)

Did you know?

Saint Efrasinnia of Polotsk (1110-73) was a young princess who became a nun. She transcribed books, initiated the building of churches and monasteries, and founded schools, libraries and orphanages. The first Belarusian saint, she is revered today by both Orthodox Christians and Catholics. A 15th-century cathedral built in her honour stands in the city of Polotsk.



Christianity the state religion. The primary difference between the Orthodox Church and Catholicism is that Orthodox Christianity traditionally accepted leadership from Constantinople rather than Rome. But there are also differences in beliefs and rituals. Unlike the Catholic Church, the Eastern faith baptizes and confirms infants at the same time so that young children can take part in communion. Catholic children are baptized in infancy but do not receive communion until they are about seven years old. Also, Orthodox priests and deacons may be married, unlike their Catholic counterparts.

The struggle between Eastern Orthodoxy and Catholicism in Belarus reflects the competing claims on the land made by Russia and Poland respectively. The Uniate Church was formed in 1595 in an attempt to resolve the conflict between the Eastern Orthodox and Catholic churches. Its rituals and rites are those of the Orthodox Church, but the Pope in Rome

is recognized as the head of the church. Since 1990, attempts have been made to re-establish this church, which has many branches outside Belarus.

Jewish communities have existed in Belarus since the 14th century. The Russian empire required Jews to live in designated areas, one of which was Belarus. Most Jews lived in urban centres. In some towns they made up half the population. By 1914, Jews made up 10% of the population. Because of the genocide of the Second World War and postwar emigration, Jews now represent only 1% of the population. However, the Jewish community is also experiencing a revival. Belarus has a *yeshiva* (an advanced Jewish educational institution) and many Jewish schools are being opened.

There is a small number of Muslims in Belarus. Most are Tatars, people from central Asia who settled in Belarus in the 11th century.





Did you know?

Painting eggs is an Easter tradition in Eastern Europe. In Belarus people dye a single hen's egg red by boiling it with red onion. People also bake a special round cake and take the cake and egg to church where they are blessed.

HOLIDAYS

Easter is the most important religious holiday in the Orthodox Church. It falls two weeks later than the Easter Day celebrated by Roman Catholics. The 40 days before Easter is a time of fasting called Lent. Celebrations for Easter begin the week before Easter Sunday with a service of forgiveness. On Good Friday, there is a procession of the *Epitaphion*, a shroud on which is painted a picture of Christ's body being taken down from the Cross. On the Saturday night, the congregation forms a procession that symbolizes the search for the body of Christ. The procession leaves the church in darkness but when it returns and the resurrection is announced, everyone lights candles. On Easter Day, there are many processions with candles to commemorate the resurrection.

Did you know?

Paparat is a fern that grows in the forests of Belarus and rarely flowers. On Kupalle it is said that if you find a blossoming paparat you will find happiness. It is also said that evil spirits follow people in the forest to keep them from finding the magic plant.

Many festivals that originated in pre-Christian times are still celebrated in Belarus. The festival of Kupalle held in July celebrates nature and summertime. People return to their home villages to celebrate in fields and forests with picnics and bonfires. Traditional songs are sung and people dance in circles around bonfires. Sometimes a man and woman will hold hands and jump over the bonfire as a symbol of spiritual cleansing.

The festival of Kaliady celebrates the winter solstice, the shortest day of the year. It takes place on December 21. Children dress up in traditional clothes and wear masks depicting animals. They proceed in groups from house to house, singing and dancing. At each house they show off the masks and receive food and drink in return.

Another ancient tradition is the annual tidying of the graves of parents and grandparents. Orthodox Christians celebrate this festival around April 23 and call it the Easter of the Dead, or *Radounitsa*. Some families leave painted Easter eggs at the graves to show that the departed are still

January 1	New Year's Day
January 7	Orthodox Christmas
March 8	Women's Day
March 15	Constitution Day
March/April	Catholic and Orthodox Easter
May 1	Labour Day (May Day)
May 9	Victory Day
July 27	Independence Day
November 2	Remembrance Day
December 25	Catholic Christmas

part of the family. Catholics honour the dead on All Souls Day, or *Dzyady*, on November 2.

A few of the holidays celebrated in the former Soviet Union are still observed. Attendance at the May Day parades honouring workers used to be compulsory, but now most people celebrate the holiday quietly staying at home or visiting their families. February 23, which was once Soviet Army Day, is now Men's Day, but it is not an official holiday. On this day men receive presents much as they do in North America on Father's Day.



ARTS AND LITERATURE

Did you know?

Yiddish literature prospered in Belarus. It is the birthplace of many famous Jewish figures in the North American arts community, including songwriter Irving Berlin, who immigrated with his family to New York in the late 19th century.



One of the most ancient art forms in Belarus is the religious icon, an elaborately painted likeness of Jesus or one of the saints. Icons decorate churches instead of statues, which are not allowed in Eastern Orthodox churches. Icons are also used as centrepieces for home altars. Over the centuries, images from Belarusian folk art and mythology have been added to these icons.

Belarusians are also known for their woodcarving of figures with painted faces, as well as boxes and household implements. Brightly coloured ceramic ornaments in the shapes of animals and birds are also popular. Belarusian embroidery



is distinctive. It is used to decorate the linen shirts and blouses that are the national and regional dress. In some regions, only red and white threads are used; other regions use many colours.

Belarus has a strong tradition of folk music. Typical instruments include balalaikas (triangular-shaped stringed instruments), accordions, lyres and pipes. Folk music and dancing are an important part of ceremonies such as engagements and marriages. People also enjoy comic songs as well as ballads about past heroes. In the last ten days in November there is a festival of folk and classical music and dance.

Poetry and theatre have long been important in Belarusian life. There is an annual poetry day in June. Belarus also maintains an ancient tradition of travelling theatres, called *skomorochy*, in the countryside.

Yakub Kolas, poet and novelist, and Yanka Kupala, poet and playwright, are considered distinctively Belarusian writers. Both Kolas and Kupala were part of a

group of writers who contributed to the influential Belarusian newspaper *Nacha Niva* (Our Field) between 1906 and 1915. The writers in the *Nacha Niva* circle wrote about the harsh life of peasants and recalled the distant past when Belarusians were masters of their own destiny.

Natalia Arseneva is considered one of Belarus's best 20th-century writers. *Beneath the Blue Sky* is one of her most well-known works. Vasil Bykau is the country's best-known contemporary writer and an outspoken critic of government. He has been referred to as the "conscience of the nation." Several of his novels, such as *Sign of Misfortune* and *The Ordeal*, describe the sufferings of Belarusians during the Second World War.

Did you know?

Probably the most famous Belarusian outside the country is artist Marc Chagall. He was born in Vitebsk, north of Minsk, and lived there until his early adulthood. Many of his paintings draw on images from his home life in Vitebsk.





IF YOU WANT TO LEARN MORE

GOSNELL, Kelvin. *The Former Soviet States: Belarus, Ukraine and Moldova*. Millbrook Press, 1992.

This book describes the history of Belarus and the problems facing the country since independence.

LEVY, Patricia. *Belarus*. Marshall Cavendish, 1998.

Part of the Cultures of the World Series, this book for children is full of colourful pictures of life in Belarus.

MARSDEN, Philip. *The Bronski House*. Flamingo (an imprint of HarperCollins), 1996.

The author accompanied Polish poet Zofia Ilinska to the Belarusian village where she had spent her childhood. This novelistic account gives a sense of the rhythm of life in Eastern Europe in the late 19th and early 20th centuries and the impact of the Russian Revolution and two world wars on the area.

ZAPRUDNIK, Jan. *Belarus: At a Crossroads in History*. Westview Press, 1993.

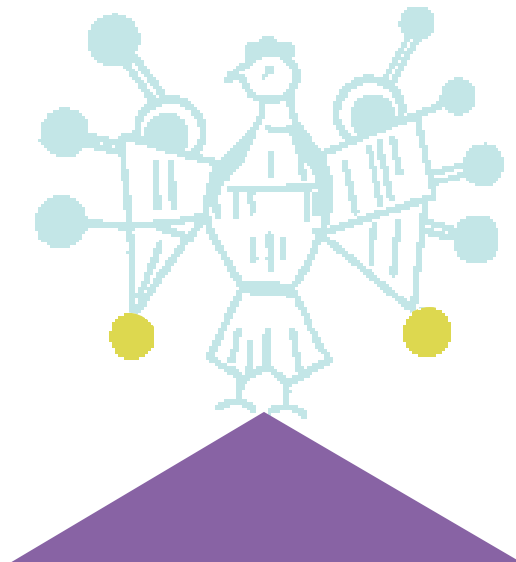
An in-depth historical and social commentary by a historian and native Belarusian. It details the complex past of the country and analyses the challenges now facing the republic.

Web Sites

<http://www.belarus.net>

<http://www.belarustourist.minsk.by>

<http://www.lonelyplanet.com/dest/eur/bela.htm>





Project Director
Usha George

Co-Directors
Wes Shera,
Esme Fuller-Thomson,
Ka Tat Tsang

Editor
Philippa Campsie

Project Coordinator
Leny Prabhu

Project Team
Rupa Amolik, Julita Javier,
David Shewchuk, Tom Weir

Community Consultants
Anton Adashkevich,
Olga Gorodetsky,
Maryia Kazlova,
Trayan Kouioumjou,
Janna Kozoub, Konstantin Kurteev,
Anatoli Roussiaev, Alexander Zevin

User Group
Rita Bagai, Eileen Garber,
Yohannes Gebresellasie,
Cecelia Lee, Peigi Roackwell,
Benjamin Schlesinger

