

B E L A R U S

SECTION A

Capital

Minsk 1,679,500 (1997 est.)

Area

207,600 sq km (80,200 sq mi)

Form of government

Republic

GDP—per capita

Purchasing power parity—\$5,300 (1999 est.)

Population

10,401,784 (July 1999 est.)

Ethnic composition

Belarusian	77.9%
Russian	13.2%
Polish	4.1%
Ukrainian	2.9%
Other	1.9%

Official language

Belarusian and Russian are both recognized as official state languages

Minority languages

Polish, Ukrainian

Legislation dealing with the use of languages

Constitution of Belarus, adopted on March 15, 1994

The Law “On National Minorities in the Republic of Belarus” (N 1926-XII of 11 November 11, 1992) is based on the Constitution of the Republic of Belarus. It also draws inspiration from the Declaration of Supreme Council of the Republic of Belarus on state sovereignty of the Republic of Belarus, and general principles of international law in the field of human rights and national minorities. The Law creates a legal basis for international relations and guarantees free development of national minorities in the Republic of Belarus. It promotes harmonization of international relations in the Republic of Belarus, maintenance and development of the cultures of national minorities and protection of their legal rights and interests.

The Law About Languages in the Belorussian SSR, January 1990

Background notes

Following the defeat of Russia in the Russo-Japanese War and the Revolution of 1905, strikes and peasant disorders erupted throughout the Russian Empire. Russian authorities were forced to relax their repressive policies on non-Russian ethnic groups, prompting a national and cultural flowering in Belarus. The ban on the Belarusian language (and other non-Russian languages) was lifted, although there were still restrictions on its use; education was expanded, and peasants began to attend school for the first time. Belarusian writers published classics of modern Belarusian literature. In the early 1920s, Belarusian language and culture flourished, and the language was promoted as the official medium of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) in Belarusian and the Government as well as of scholarly, scientific, and educational establishments. Most primary and secondary schools switched to instruction in the Belarusian language, and institutions of higher education gradually made the switch as well. The Belarusian State University was founded in 1921 and the Institute of Belarusian Culture was founded in 1922. The interests of other minorities in the Republic were taken into account in a July 1924 decree that confirmed equal rights for the four principal languages of the republic: Belarusian, Polish, Russian and Yiddish.

The Belorussian SSR was one of four founding Republics of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR, or Soviet Union), established on December 30, 1922. During the Stalin era Belorussia used to be “protected” against possible Western influences through a program of intensive Russification, thus creating a *cordon sanitaire* for Russia along the Polish border. Consequently, most key positions in Minsk, as well as in the western provincial cities of Hrodna (Grodno, in Russian) and Brest, were filled by Russians sent from elsewhere in the Soviet Union. The Belorussian language was unofficially banned from official use, educational and cultural institutions, and the mass media, and Belorussian national culture was suppressed by Moscow. This so-called cultural cleansing intensified greatly after 1959, when Nikita S. Khrushchev, the CPSU leader at the time, pronounced in Minsk, “the sooner we all start speaking Russian, the faster we shall build communism.”

Supreme Soviet of Belorussian SSR declared independence on August 25, 1991 and changed name of country to Republic of Belarus.

On January 26, 1990, the Supreme Soviet voted to make Belarusian the official language of the State, effective September 1, 1990. The law included provisions for protecting the languages of minorities and allowed up to ten years to make the transition from Russian to Belarusian.

Since late 1992, there has been a growing demand that the Russian language be given the same official status as Belarusian. The results of a four-question referendum of May 1995 put an end to any uncertainty; the populace voted for Russian having the same status as Belarusian.

A new Belarusian Constitution was submitted to the Supreme Soviet in three different versions before it was finally adopted on March 28, 1994, and went into effect on March 30, 1994. The new basic law declares the Republic of Belarus a democracy that operates on the basis of a diversity of political institutions, ideologies, and opinions, with all religions and creeds equal before the law. The official language is Belarusian, although Russian is retained as the language of interethnic communication. Belarus is declared a nuclear-free, neutral state. An element in this strategy may be the April 26, 1986, nuclear power plant accident.

SECTION B

Where does one observe language to be a problem in the country?

According to the news article "The Belarusian language today", the regime ruling Belarus is very clear in its language policy, and Russian is without a doubt the predominant language, particularly for the government (including in the courtrooms), commerce, and for publications, including newspapers. More and more official proceedings take place only in Russian.

According to the 1999 census, about 38% of Belarusian residents speak Belarusian in their every day lives, and 82% consider Belarusian their mother tongue. It is an overtly political, authoritarian decision by the regime ruling Belarus to replace Belarusian with Russian.

The same article states that a Belarusian who does not want trouble with the authorities speaks only Russian, and especially so in public.

To what extent are minority groups in this country disadvantaged by their language?

LITHUANIA

During an early February 1995 summit, Belarusian President Lukashyenko and Lithuanian President Algirdas Brazauskas signed a friendship and cooperation treaty that included resolution of all outstanding border issues.

No problems were reported in connection with the minorities living in the other country.

POLAND

In 1994 approximately 300,000 ethnic Belarusians lived in Poland, and 418,000 ethnic Poles lived in Belarus. In neither country were there any obstacles to the ethnic minority's participation in political life. In Belarus most ethnic Poles supported the drive for Belarusian independence and were not seen as a threat to Belarus; the government raised no obstacles to the Poles' acquisition of Belarusian citizenship.

The use of language in everyday life e.g. education, broadcasting and other

SCHOOLS

During the communist era, education was mainly conducted in the Russian language; by 1987 there were no Belarusian-language schools in any of the republic's urban areas. When Belarusian was adopted as the country's official language in 1990, children were to be taught in Belarusian as early as primary school; Russian language, history, and literature were to be replaced with Belarusian language, history, and literature. However, Russian remained the main language of instruction in both secondary schools and institutions of higher education. Many people still wanted their children to be educated in the Russian language rather than in Belarusian, and some government officials agreed to give interviews only in Russian. According to data assembled in 1992 by the Sociology Center of the Belarusian State University, some 60% of those polled preferred to use Russian in their daily life, 75% favored bilingualism in state institutions, and only 17% favored having the government declare Belarusian the sole official language of the country. One Western source reported that in the early 1990s, only 11% of the population, most of who lived in the countryside, was fluent in Belarusian.

MEDIA

In late 1992, Belarus had 586 officially approved periodicals: 140 in Belarusian, 159 in Russian, and 241 in both Belarusian and Russian. Other publications combined Russian with another language or were published in English, Polish, or Ukrainian. The only daily newspaper published completely in Belarusian was "Zvyazda" (Star). Other dailies included "Sovetskaya Belorussiya" (Soviet Belorussia) and "Vechernyy Minsk" (Evening Minsk), published in Russian, and "Narodnaya hazyeta" (People's Newspaper), published in both Belarusian and Russian.

APPENDIX A

MAP OF BELARUS



APPENDIX B

BELARUS - CONSTITUTION

(Adopted on March 1, 1994 / Status on March 1, 1994)

Article 17

1. The official language of the Republic of Belarus shall be Belarusian.
2. The Republic of Belarus shall safeguard the right to use the Russian language freely as a language of inter-ethnic communication.

Article 50

3. Everyone shall have the right to use his native language and to choose the language of communication. In accordance with law, the state shall guarantee the freedom to choose the language of education and teaching.

Note: The complete text of the Constitution and further information on the constitutional background of Belarus are provided by the International Constitutional Law Project at the University of Wuerzburg.

THE LAW OF THE REPUBLIC OF BELARUS; (ON NATIONAL MINORITIES)

(N 1926-XII of November 11, 1992)

The Law "On National Minorities in the Republic of Belarus" is based on the Constitution of the Republic of Belarus, Declaration of Supreme Council of the Republic of Belarus on state sovereignty of the Republic of Belarus, principles of international law in the field of human rights and national minorities. The Law creates a legal basis for international relations and guarantees free development of national minorities in the Republic of Belarus. It shall promote harmonization of international relations in the Republic of Belarus, maintenance and development of cultures of national minorities and protection of their legal rights and interests.

Article 1

Any citizen of the Republic of Belarus may belong to any national minority by his (her) personal free choice. No unfavorable circumstances shall arise as a result of this freedom.

Article 2

Citizens of the Republic of Belarus attributing themselves to national minorities, shall respect Constitution of the Republic of Belarus, its laws,

and promote maintenance of state sovereignty and territorial integrity of the republic, as well as respect traditions, language and culture of citizens of all nationalities living in the republic.

Article 3

Any direct or indirect restriction of rights and freedoms of citizens of the Republic of Belarus due to their national minority, as well as all attempts of assimilation against their will, shall be prohibited.

Article 4

Nobody under any circumstances, orally or in writing, may require a citizen of the Republic of Belarus to indicate his (her) nationality.

Nobody shall have a right to force a citizen of the Republic of Belarus to prove his (her) nationality or refuse from it.

Article 5

Respecting human rights, the Republic of Belarus guarantees to its citizens who attribute themselves to national minorities, equal political, economic and social rights and freedoms, including:

- a) right to state assistance in the development of national culture and education;
- b) right to study and use native language;
- c) right to print and distribute information in native language;
- d) right to cultural relations with compatriots outside the Republic of Belarus;
- e) right to any religion, national and ritual ceremonies in native language;
- f) right to keep national traditions and habits and development of professional and amateur skills;
- g) right to establishment of national cultural associations (societies);
- h) right to be elected into government bodies of the Republic of Belarus on the basis of universal, equal and direct elections;
- i) right to occupy any positions in state bodies of power and administration of the Republic of Belarus.

Article 6

Deliberative bodies of representatives of national minorities may be founded and function on voluntary basis within the structure of Councils of

Deputies. The procedure of founding such bodies shall be determined by respective Councils of Deputies.

Article 7

In accord with the legislation, the Republic of Belarus shall promote material conditions for the development of education and culture of national minorities through state subsidies and allocations.

Article 8

National cultural societies (associations) of national minorities may perform economic activity in accord with the legislation of the Republic of Belarus.

Article 9

Social and cultural associations of national minorities may establish their own cultural and educational institutions using their own funds. Training of specialists for satisfaction of cultural interests of national minorities shall be carried out in accord with the possibilities of educational institutions of the republic and on the basis of contracts concluded with national/cultural associations.

Article 10

Old relics and monuments of national minorities in the territory of the Republic of Belarus shall be a part of Belarusian culture and safeguarded by the state in compliance with the legislation of the Republic of Belarus.

Article 11

Any activity of national associations (groups) restricting human rights, promoting national, religious and racial animosity, or threatening Constitution and sovereignty of the Republic of Belarus, or groups being involved with any other country's political organization, shall be prohibited.

Article 12

Citizens of the Republic of Belarus of all nationalities shall be protected by the State under equal conditions.

Any actions directed at discrimination by nationality, or restriction of rights of national minorities, or rousing of national hatred, shall be prosecuted by the law.

Note: Unofficial translation

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