

# BELARUS COUNTRY PROFILE

The present borders of Belarus were established during the turmoil of World War II.

The former Soviet republic was occupied by the Nazis between 1941 and 1944, when it lost 2.2 million people, including most of its large Jewish population. There are about 400,000 ethnic Poles living in the west of the country.

## Overview

It has been ruled with an increasingly iron fist since 1994 by President Alexander Lukashenko. Opposition figures are subjected to harsh penalties for organising protests.

In early 2005, Belarus was listed by the US as Europe's only remaining "outpost of tyranny". Since late 2008, there have been signs of a slight easing of tensions with the West - a development viewed with some concern by Russia.

The country became independent in 1991, following the collapse of the Soviet Union.

More than a decade later, the sense of national identity is weak, international isolation continues and the nature of political links with Russia remains a key issue.

In the Soviet post-war years, Belarus became one of the most prosperous parts of the USSR, but with independence came economic decline. President Lukashenko has steadfastly opposed the privatisation of state enterprises. Private business is virtually non-existent. Foreign investors stay away.

For much of his career, Mr Lukashenko has sought to develop closer ties with Russia. On the political front, there was talk of union but little tangible evidence of real progress, and certainly not toward the union of equals envisaged by President Lukashenko.

Belarus remains heavily dependent on Russia to meet its own energy needs and a considerable proportion of Russian oil and gas exports to Europe pass through it. Russia's role as a major energy supplier to the rest of Europe and Belarus's position as a key transit country have come under the spotlight several times since 2006, when tensions first arose between Moscow and Minsk over the price of Russian gas and Belarus's privileged access to duty-free oil.



## AT-A-GLANCE

**Politics:** President Lukashenko is seen as "Europe's last dictator". He's been in power since 1994

**Economy:** Soviet-style economy is considered to have been subsidised by cheap Russian gas

**International:** A key oil and gas pipeline from Russia to Europe runs through Belarus

## Facts

Population:	9.6 million (UN, 2009)
Capital:	Minsk
Area:	207,595 sq km (80,153 sq miles)
Major language:	Russian, Belarussian (both official)
Major religion:	Christianity
Life expectancy:	63 years (men), 75 years (women) (UN)
Monetary unit:	1 Belarussian rouble = 100 kopeks
Main exports:	Machinery, chemical and petroleum products
GNI per capita:	US \$5,380 (World Bank, 2008)
Internet domain:	.by
International dialling code:	+375

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## Leaders

President: Alexander Lukashenko

Alexander Lukashenko, often referred to as Europe's last dictator, was declared to have won a third term as president at elections in March 2006 following a vote which Western observers said was fundamentally flawed.

They reported widespread harassment of opposition supporters and overwhelming media bias. Official results indicated that Mr Lukashenko had won over 80% of the vote.



The EU and US condemned the election while Russian President Vladimir Putin sent congratulations. The EU also banned the president and a number of ministers and officials from entering member countries. Mr Lukashenko's assets in the EU and US are frozen.

A former state farm director, Mr Lukashenko was first elected president in 1994, following his energetic performance as chairman of the parliamentary anti-corruption committee.

A 1996 referendum gave the president greatly increased powers at the expense of parliament and extended his term by two years. He won a further five years in office in 2001 presidential elections condemned as undemocratic by Western observers. Another referendum in October 2004 supported lifting the two-term limit on Mr Lukashenko's rule, allowing him to stand again in 2006.

Over the years, several opposition politicians who might have provided leadership have disappeared or been imprisoned. Insulting the president, even in jest, carries a prison sentence.

The president remains defiant in the face of Western pressure for change. He has dismissed all possibility of revolutions such as those, which brought an end to old-style regimes in Georgia and neighbouring Ukraine.

The government maintained its stranglehold on politics in the 2008 parliamentary elections, winning all seats.

But the release in late 2008 of several opposition activists prompted a slight loosening of EU and US sanctions, and tentative talk of a thaw in relations with the West.

He is keen on sport with a particular interest in ice hockey. He was born in 1954.

## Media

The Belarussian authorities have been heavily criticised by human rights and media organisations for suppressing freedom of speech, muzzling the independent press and denying the opposition access to state-owned media. Reporters Without Borders (RSF) ranked Belarus 154th out of 173 countries in its 2008 press freedom index.

A media law, passed in June-July 2008, raised concerns at home and abroad. New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) condemned the law as "severely restrictive", citing restrictions on foreign funding for the media, accreditation rules for journalists, and government efforts to "censor the web".

TV is the main source of news. The four national channels are state-controlled; their main competitors for news coverage are Russian TV networks.

Government-controlled newspapers enjoy considerable subsidies and financial privileges, while much of the opposition print media has faced increased charges and been forced to change name, close down, or publish abroad.

But some private publications survived. They include the business daily BDG Delovaya Gazeta and the embattled opposition paper Narodnaya Volya.

Foreign media outlets target Belarus. They include the Polish-funded, Belarussian-language satellite TV station Belsat. The channel has yet to attract the mass audience that would make it an influential media source.

The internet is the medium least controlled by the authorities, and the web is used by the opposition to make its voice heard. There were around 2.8 million internet users by December 2008 (InternetWorldStats). In 2009 RSF said officials had "drawn information from the Chinese model" in tackling online dissent.

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## The press

Sovetskaya Belorussiya - Russian-language, main government daily

Respublika - Council of Ministers daily

Narodnaya Hazeta - National Assembly daily

Zvyazda - Belarussian-language daily, sponsored by National Assembly and Council of Ministers

BDG Delovaya Gazeta - private, business daily

Narodnaya Volya - private, opposition daily; banned from state-controlled distribution, printed in Russia

BelGazeta - private weekly

## Television

Belarussian TV - state-run, operates the First National Channel, entertainment network Lad (Harmony), satellite station Belarus-TV

Nationwide TV (ONT) - a joint venture with Russia's Channel One; state holds a majority stake

STV (Stolichnoye Televideniye) - state-run, Minsk local broadcaster

Belsat - based in Poland, targeting Belarus via satellite and internet

## Radio

Belarussian Radio - state-run, operates three national networks and an external service

Radio Baltic Waves - EU-backed, based in Lithuania

Radio Racja - based in Poland

## News agencies/internet

Belta - state-owned, English-language pages

Belapan - private, English-language pages

Belarusnews.de - private, news service based in Germany

Nashe Mneniye - online weekly

Charter 97 - opposition-leaning site, English-language pages

# BELARUS COUNTRY PROFILE

## A chronology of key events:

**1918** - Towards the end of World War I, Belarus proclaims its independence as the Belarussian National Republic. But, with the end of the war, these aspirations are short-lived. The Red Army invades.

**1919** - The Belarussian Soviet Socialist Republic is proclaimed.

**1921** - The Treaty of Riga divides Belarus between Poland and Soviet Russia.

**1922** - The Belarussian SSR becomes founding member of the USSR.

### Stalin's purges

**1930s** - Belarus suffers from the purges against intellectuals and political opponents ordered by Stalin. More than one-hundred thousand people are executed in Belarus, thousands more sent to labour camps in Siberia.

**1941** - Nazi Germany invades during the course of World War II. More than one million people are killed during the occupation, including many Jews. The capital, Minsk, is severely damaged.

**1944** - The Soviet Red Army drives the Germans out of Belarus.

**1945** - At the end of the war, much of western Belarus - previously belonging to Poland - is amalgamated into the Soviet Republic.

**1960s** - A policy of 'Russification' is pushed through.

**1986** - Belarus is heavily affected by the fall-out from the nuclear explosion at Chernobyl in neighbouring Ukraine. Hundreds of thousands of people receive high radiation doses. Around 20% of agricultural land is contaminated and rendered unusable.

**1988** - Belarussian Popular Front formed as part of nationalist revival prompted by Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev's policy of 'openness'. Details emerge of the full extent of the executions during the Stalin period.

**1990** - Belarussian becomes the official state language.

**1991** - Belarus declares its independence as the Soviet Union breaks up. Minsk becomes the headquarters of the successor to the Soviet Union, the Commonwealth of Independent States.

### Lukashenko era

**1994** - Alexander Lukashenko becomes president. He introduces policies designed to strengthen ties with Russia.

**1995** - Friendship and cooperation pact signed with Russia. National referenda result in a new flag almost identical to that of the former Soviet republic, and the restoration of Russian as an official language. The president's powers are also widened. There are protests on the streets, but these are broken up.

**1996** - An agreement on economic union is signed with Russia. Lukashenko increases his powers again, extending his term in office.

**1997** - Protesters against Lukashenko sign a pro-democracy manifesto 'Charter '97'. Belarus' observer status in the Council of Europe is suspended. Belarus and Russia ratify their union treaty.

**1998** - The Belarus rouble sees its value halved. Food rationing is imposed. Belarus signs an accord with Russia, which would see their currencies and tax systems merge.

**2000 October** - Parliamentary elections are criticised by election observers who say they are not free and fair. Turnout in some constituencies is so low that a re-run will be necessary.

**2000 November** - President Lukashenko and Russia's President Putin agree on the introduction of a single currency by 2008.

**2001 March** - Parliamentary elections are re-run in thirteen constituencies where voter turnout in October 2000 was too low. Belarus officials declare the votes valid. Thousands demonstrate in Minsk against Lukashenko.

### Re-election

**2001 September** - Lukashenko re-elected to serve second term. Opposition and Western observers say elections were unfair and undemocratic.

**2002 August** - Lukashenko rejects Russian proposals for new form of union under Russian constitution with single government and single parliament.

**2002 November** - US, 14 EU states impose travel ban on Lukashenko and several government ministers over poor human rights record and after OSCE officials are told to leave.

**2003 April** - US, EU lift travel ban on president and ministers after OSCE readmitted. But they remain critical of country's human rights record.

**2004 April** - Council of Europe condemns human rights abuses after report accuses authorities of blocking investigation into the fate of four men with opposition links who disappeared in Minsk in 1999 and 2000. EU imposes travel restrictions on number of senior officials.

**2004 October** - Referendum backs change allowing president to serve more than previous limit of two terms. Opposition parties fail to win a single seat in parliamentary elections held at same time. Western observers say vote is neither free nor fair.

Street protests ensue. Demonstrators clash with police and dozens are arrested.

**2004 November** - EU extends travel restrictions on senior officials. US imposes sanctions.

**2004 December** - Opposition politician Mikhail Marinich jailed for allegedly stealing office equipment. He declares the charge to be politically motivated.

**2005 August** - Diplomatic row with Poland over treatment of ethnic Poles accused of stirring up unrest in a bid to overthrow President Lukashenko.

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## **Poll protests**

**2005** December - As March elections approach, parliament approves bill setting out tough penalties for those found guilty of inciting demonstrations or distributing information regarded as harmful to national interests.

**2006** February/March - Dozens arrested at opposition demonstrations in Minsk as election date draws near.

**2006** March - President Lukashenko declared winner by landslide in elections condemned as unfair by Western observers. Opposition arrests reported as protesters in capital demand fresh vote.

**2006** April - EU imposes visa ban on President Lukashenko and numerous ministers and officials.

Defeated presidential election candidate Alexander Milinkevich jailed for 15 days after attending rally to mark anniversary of Chernobyl disaster in neighbouring Ukraine.

**2006** July - Defeated presidential election candidate Alexander Kozulin convicted of hooliganism and incitement to mass disorder. He is jailed for five and a half years.

**2006** November - Youth opposition activist Dmitriy Dashkevich jailed for 18 months for membership of an unregistered organization.

## **Gas and oil row**

**2006** December - After tense negotiations during which Moscow threatened to cut supplies, a new gas deal is signed with Russia which more than doubles the price and phases in further increases over four years.

**2007** January - Russia cuts the supply along an oil export pipeline to Europe amid a row with Belarus over taxation and allegations of siphoning. The dispute ends after Russia agrees to cut the oil duty it will charge Belarus.

**2007** March - Police clash with protesters in Minsk as thousands of opposition supporters hold rally calling for an end to President Lukashenko's rule.

## **Human rights concerns**

**2007** May - Belarus fails in its bid to win a seat on the UN Human Rights Council, a result hailed by rights groups as lending credibility to the council.

**2007** August - Russia says it will almost halve gas supplies to Belarus over unpaid debt.

**2007** October - President Lukashenko says that Belarus will have to build a nuclear power station in order to meet its energy needs.

**2007** December - President Lukashenko says he is ready to host Russian missiles if the US sets up bases in Poland and the Czech Republic.

**2008** March - US Ambassador Karen Stewart leaves country indefinitely after Belarus asks her to leave. Belarus withdrew its own ambassador from Washington the previous week in a row over US sanctions. US denies Belarussian accusations that US diplomats recruited citizens as spies.

**2008** April - Belarus refuses to release former presidential candidate Alexander Kozulin, imprisoned on charges of organising protests against the 2006 election. The US and European Union have made release of political prisoners a condition for improving relations.

**2008** May - Belarus expels 11 US diplomats in row over US criticism of Belarus' human rights record.

## **Media curbs**

**2008** June - International tender launched for nuclear power plant.

Parliament passes new media law that independent journalists say will restrict online reporting and private media funding ahead of the autumn parliamentary elections.

**2008** August - Former opposition presidential candidate Alexander Kozulin and two other dissidents freed from prison.

**2008** September - Government candidates win all 110 seats in parliamentary polls; European observers say the vote fell short of international standards but note improvements since last election. US lifts some of its sanctions after the recent release of dissidents.

**2008** October - EU lifts its travel ban on President Alexander Lukashenko in an attempt to encourage democratic reform.

**2009** April - President Lukashenko visits the Vatican in his first official visit to Western Europe since 1995.

**2009** May - President Lukashenko does not accept EU invitation to attend "Eastern Partnership" summit with six former Soviet states in Prague.

**2009** June - Russia imposes ban on Belarussian dairy products, ostensibly on health grounds. Belarus retaliates by installing a highly symbolic customs post on the two countries' joint border. Both measures are later reversed.

**2010** January - Belarus threatens to cut electricity supply to Russian Baltic enclave of Kaliningrad in wake of unresolved dispute over Russian oil supplies to Belarus. The two sides eventually reach a compromise over the amount of duty-free oil Russia will supply to Belarus.

**2010** June - President Lukashenko orders the shutdown of transit of Russian gas to Europe, escalating a new "gas war" after Moscow slashes supplies to Minsk in a debt dispute. Russia's Gazprom state gas company later resumes supplies after Belarus pays the outstanding debt.

**2010** July - Belarus signs up for customs union with Russia and Kazakhstan despite objections to continued Russian duty on oil and gas exports.

**2010** September - Parliament approves 19 December as date for presidential elections, two months earlier than necessary. Political analysts saw this as an attempt to wrong-foot the opposition and hold the poll before another winter "gas war" with Russia.

European Union Foreign Affairs chief Catherine Ashton calls for an independent investigation into the death of Oleg Bebenin, the founder of opposition website Charter '97, who was found hanged in his summer cottage in September.



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## CHERNOBYL DISASTER



On April 26, 1986, the fourth reactor of the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant exploded at 01:23 am local time, which caused the biggest nuclear disaster in history of mankind. It took three days before all permanent residents of Chernobyl and the Zone of alienation were evacuated due to dangerous levels of radioactivity.



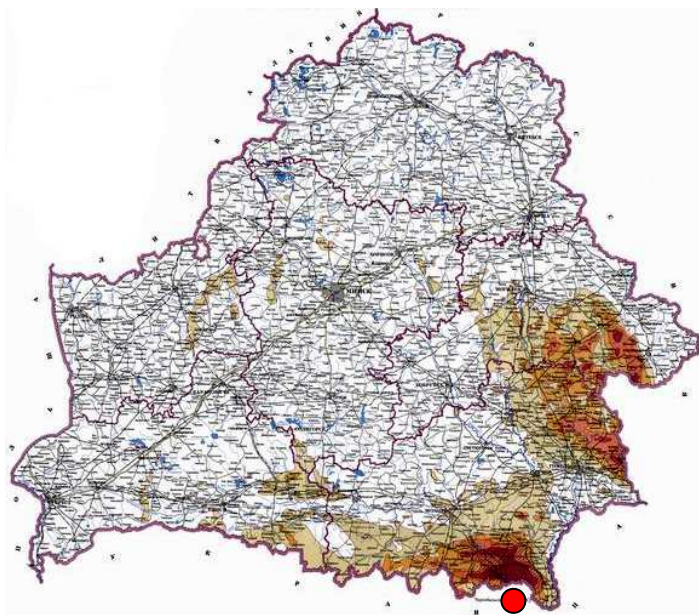
The explosion inside the primary nuclear reactor spread a radioactive cloud outside the Soviet border, into the east, west and north Europe, and even in the some parts of the North America. Approximately 200 000 people were evacuated from the zones most affected by the radiation. Chernobyl, Pripiat (large town near by) and other badly effected populated areas became ghost towns.

Approximately 60-80%of all the radioactive matter fell over Belarus.

Please see the map below of radiation hotspots resulting from Chernobyl nuclear plant accident.

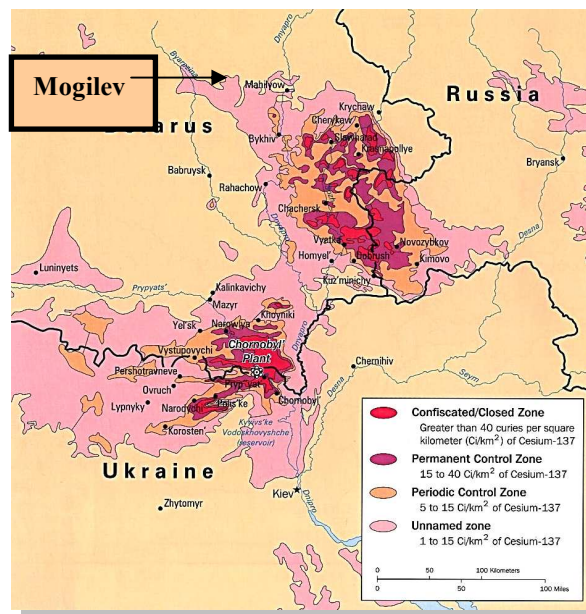
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## Radiation spread in Belarus



Chernobyl

## Radiation spread in Mogilev & Gomel regions



## FURTHER REFERENCE MATERIAL

There has been much written about the Chernobyl accident and the general safety of the nuclear industry. For computer buffs, “Encarta” is a good source of information on the accident, nuclear fallout and the geography of the area. “Century”, a CD of 100 years of the Daily Mail was the source of the contemporary article printed on page A6.

“Children of Chernobyl” by Adi Roche, published by Fount, to quote the book’s cover, “is a vivid and shocking account of the 1986 disaster and its aftermath. Although its conclusions are depressing and contrast strongly with the claims of the nuclear industry, the book also records the efforts of individuals offering hope to live and the hand of friendship to the embattled people of Belarus, Western Russia and the Ukraine.”

You can also visit some of the websites that document the disaster in photographs:

- <http://basik.ru/historical/chernobyl/>
- <http://inmotion.magnumphotos.com/essay/chernobyl>
- <http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2006/04/photogalleries/chernobyl/>

and other related links:

- [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/country\\_profiles/1102180.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/country_profiles/1102180.stm)
- <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/4923342.stm>
- [http://www.martinfrost.ws/htmlfiles/chernobyl\\_disaster.html](http://www.martinfrost.ws/htmlfiles/chernobyl_disaster.html)

For readers of travel books, Lonely Planet publish a comprehensive travel guide to Russia, Ukraine and Belarus price £16.95 (try the library first). There is a section devoted to Belarus, which is aimed at the potential traveller, but for the interested layperson, the latest edition gives a quite comprehensive overview of the countries political and economic situation post Chernobyl.

The list of phrasebooks, computer software and background reading noted above are not meant to be comprehensive, but simply to point you in the right direction.

No entry sign to  
Chernobyl

