

BELARUS COUNTRY REPORT

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Figure 1 - [Castillo Bielorruso Bielorrusia - Foto gratis en Pixabay - Pixabay](#)

Introduction

Former Belorussia or White Russia, today known as The Republic of Belarus, gained independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, yet is one of the few former Soviet states to have retained close ties with its most powerful neighbour, Russia. These close ties can be exemplified through the continued presence of the Russian language as one of the country's main languages and of the Belarusian Ruble as its currency. With the current president Aleksandr Lukashenko remaining in power since he was first elected in 1994, the legacy of Belarus's Soviet past continues to manifest itself, in the form of communist political parties and in the country's authoritarian style of government.

Landlocked by Lithuania and Latvia to the northwest, Russia to the north and east, Ukraine to the south, and Poland to the west, Belarusians share a distinct ethnic identity and language, however unity and political sovereignty do not feature highly in their historical records, but for a brief period in 1918 when the first Belarusian state was created. In the Soviet post-war years, Belarus became one of the most prosperous states of the USSR, however independence was soon followed by economic decline. Today, with Lukashenko's opposition to the privatisation of state enterprises, the country now relies heavily on Russia for its energy supplies and the share of Russia in Belarus' foreign trade in goods increased from 49% in 2021 to 58% in mid-2022 and more than 60% by the end of 2022, mainly as a result of the sanctions imposed by the UK, EU, US and Canada (UK Gov).

This report aims to present an overview of the history, economy and politics that have shaped and defined The Republic of Belarus. It will also consider the impact of the most recent events linked to the war in Ukraine and the immigration crisis in Europe on the country's economy, international relations and as a one of the principal causes resulting in a national humanitarian crisis affecting its citizens.

1918 a new state declared - the creation of the first Belarusian state; a historical journey leading to and going beyond independence.

Belarus' known existence on the historical map can be traced from the ninth century where it formed part of the early medieval state of Rus', lasting up until the 13th century. Rus comprised Russia, Ukraine and Belarus, and the main Belarusian part was known as the principality of Polotsk, on the River Dvina (now Daugava), which dominated trade with the Baltic via client cities in what is now Latvia. Many Belarusian historians have claimed the origins of a proto-Belarusian identity to be a merger of Balts and Slavs.

During the 15th century, Litva, the land which now makes up Lithuania, Belarus, Latvia, Ukraine, Poland and Russia, became the largest state in Europe, a multi-ethnic state of Lithuanians, Belarusians, Poles and Jews. By the 18th century, Litva had been completely swallowed up by the Russian Empire and with it the notion of a separate local identity. Before 1918, the presence of a national movement was so subdued that it was barely given a mention until, towards the end of World War One, Belarus proclaimed its independence as the Belarusian National Republic but, a year later, the Russian Red Army conquered Belarus, and established communist rule.

The 1921 Treaty of Riga which ensued divided Belarus between Poland and Soviet Russia. A national movement was scarcely visible before being stamped down by the purges of any intellectuals or deemed political opponents took place under the orders of the Soviet dictator, Joseph Stalin in the 1930s. During this period, more than 100,000 people were executed in Belarus, and thousands more sent to labour camps (BBC World). In the 1940s, during the invasion of Nazi Germany, over 800,000 Jews were killed locally and the multi-ethnic basis of Litvinism, was destroyed, amounting to a quarter of the whole population being wiped out (History Today).

Yet the Belarusians were not prepared to be defeated just yet and their resistance towards the invasion in 1941 slowed down German advance and resulted in their failure to reach Moscow. Three years later, during the summer of 1944, the Soviet military campaign, otherwise known as Operation Bagration, decimated the German army on Belarusian territory. The Red Army exploited the collapse of the German front line to encircle German formations in the vicinity of Minsk in the Minsk Offensive and destroy them, and Minsk was liberated on 3rd July of that year. With the end of effective German resistance in Belorussia, the Soviet offensive continued on to Lithuania, Poland and Romania over the course of July and August. The postwar leadership of the Communist Party in Belarus was dominated by veterans which resulted in high levels of Russian investment in Belarus as far up to the 1980s making Belarusia one of the most prosperous states of the Soviet Union.

Yet the following postwar decades of the Soviet Union were marked by a series of events leaving Belarus stripped of any form of possible independence and opportunity to grow as a nation until the late 1980s when the Belarusian Popular Front was formed as part of a nationalist revival prompted by Mikhail Gorbachev's political liberalisation. These included a policy of Russification during the 1960s relegated the Belarusian language and culture to second-class status and the 1986 Chernobyl nuclear explosion contaminating 20% of agricultural land in Belarus thereby rendering it unusable (BBC World).

By 1990, Belarusian had become the official state language, once again. In 1991, Belarus declared independence although, in comparison to other Soviet Republics who publicly declared independence through a popular referendum, Belarusian independence was merely evident through a name change from the 'Belorussian Soviet Socialist Republic' to the 'Republic of Belarus'. Unlike other former Soviet states who annually celebrate independence from Soviet rule, on the 3rd July, Independence Day in Belarus is celebrated to mark the liberation of Minsk from German occupation.

In 1994, Belarus' first and only directly elected president, Aleksander Lukashenko, won power, promising to preserve what he considered to be the best of the Soviet system which included its social contract and historical memory, and a return to peace and stability. Since coming to power, Lukashenko has consolidated his rule over all institutions. A 'Union State' between the two nations has existed since 1999, which guarantees free movement and employment in both states. As his power consolidated in the early 2000s, he was able to enjoy huge Russian subsidies of cheap oil and gas in return for his political loyalty. However, Lukashenko's presidency, as will be detailed further down in the report, has come at a very high cost for Belarusian civilians, who continue to pay the price of his "iron fist" approach to leadership.

The "vassal state of Russia" - a trade and economy heavily reliant on its most powerful neighbour.

The devastating effects of World War II almost single-handedly wiped-out agriculture and industry in the Belorussian Soviet State Republic. The intensive push to restore the economy during the postwar Soviet era, through the industrial sector, resulted in Soviet republics depending largely on Russia for energy and raw materials. Whilst the cost of raw materials increased dramatically following the cessation of the Soviet Union, so did the traditional market demand for Belarusian manufactured goods. The agricultural sector in Belarus, which employed about one-tenth of the labour force but constituted a diminishing proportion of GDP, was dominated by large collective and state farms. In the early 21st century a significant number of collective farms were sold to private or state-controlled companies.

The shift towards a market economy in Belarus was slower than that of its counterparts in the former Soviet republics, and, today, Belarus retains a mainly state-controlled economy where state-owned enterprises (SOEs) dominate the market with only a small percentage of state-run industry and agriculture privatized in the years following independence (UK GOV).

Belarus' economy has traditionally been export-oriented with about 65% of their manufactured products being sent abroad. Despite Belaruse's growing trade with the European Union and China in the early 21st century, Russia has continued to remain a major trading partner throughout, although the two countries have experienced periods of tension as a result of disputes over the price of imported gas and oil.

Chief exports include refined petroleum, machinery, trucks, tractors, potassium chloride, metals, and foodstuffs. Major imports include crude petroleum, machinery, natural gas, rolled metal, chemical products, and foodstuffs. The share of Russia in Belarus' foreign trade in goods increased from 49% in 2021 to 58% in mid-2022 and more than 60% by the end of 2022 (UK Gov). In the last 2020 World Bank Ease of Doing Business Report, Belarus was ranked 49 among the 190 countries surveyed. However, the political crisis in Belarus, aggravated by the Russian invasion of Ukraine, has highlighted problems with the business climate such as weak rule of law and protection of property rights, lack of transparency, macroeconomic and financial instability, burdensome regulations with frequent changes and a shortage of affordable and long-term finance (UK Gov).

In response to the flawed elections of August 2020, which were met by a series of violent retaliation towards protests and any form of opposition in relation to the election, the UK government and key international partners including the United States, Canada and the European Union, introduced sanctions against Belarus. These measures were enforced in order to encourage the government to respect human rights, democratic principles and the rule of law as well as to refrain from actions, policies or activities that repress civil society and the independent media. In 2022, sanctions introduced by the UK extended Russian measures to Belarus in order to constrain Belarus' ability to provide economic, military and in-kind support to Russia's illegal invasion and occupation of Ukraine.

According to the UK FCDO website regarding Belarus's economic future prospects, *"the World Bank (WB) expects a real GDP decline of 2.3% in Belarus in 2023 and a rebound to 2.5% in 2024. The WB's baseline projections assume that sanctions on Belarus and Russia remain in place through the forecast period"* and yet Lukashenko's latest punitive actions towards Belarusians, occurring as recently as September this year, are a clear indicator that these aforementioned measures have yet to have an effect.

“Europe’s last dictator” - how Lukashenko’s almost thirty-year rule has isolated the country from its European neighbours and the rest of the world.

Since Lukashenko gained power in 1994, his presidency could be described as a “balancing act between Russia, his closest economic and political partner, and overtures to the West, while maintaining authoritarian rule at home” (BBC Belarus Country Report). For many years, this balancing act was somewhat successful and was able to secure Lukashenko’s position in power. However, it came at a huge cost for the Belarusians which eventually led to the mass protests in 2020. Former culture minister and one time ambassador to France Pavel P. Latushko describes the current political system as “(..) a system of suppressing dissent in Belarus that instills the feeling of animal fear in people,” (NY Times).

The decisions made by Lukashenko to help maintain a stable and favourable relationship with Russia post-independence include the friendship and cooperation pact signed 1995, and referendums which restored Russian as co-official language and boost the president's powers, followed by an accord in 1998 to merge their currencies and tax systems (BBC World). On the EU front, the relationship has been less consistent with the EU swaying between critiquing the re-elections and referendums, in 2001 and 2004 consecutively, securing Lukashenko’s presidency, as undemocratic leading to travel restrictions for senior officials, followed by visa bans on Lukashenko and numerous ministers and officials in 2006. In 2008, both the EU and the US lifted their travel bans in an attempt to encourage democratic reform but by 2011, travel bans were reinstated in response to Lukashenko’s 2010 re-election win (BBC World).

But it was the president's brutal reaction to the mass protests that took place after the opposition claimed the latest presidential election, which led to a further distancing from Belarus’s Western neighbours and Belarus asking for further support from Russia. Lukashenko promptly ignored the claims of a further rigged election and declared an 80% plus victory, provoking the biggest protests in Belarusian history (History Today). Other international reactions have led to large financial institutions including The European Investment Bank (EIB) ceasing activity in Belarus and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) halting any new investments in Belarus since 2021 (UK Gov). It was not only on the economic and political front that these measures were implemented but were also extended to other international bodies. In 2022, the Nobel Prize Foundation, which organises the annual Nobel prize ceremony and banquet in Stockholm, decided not to invite the Russian and Belarusian ambassadors to the awards event because of the war in Ukraine, after an initial invitation sparked anger amongst other ambassadors who had threatened to boycott the event should this invitation not be returned (The Guardian, 2022).

Since the 2020 protests, Belarusian authorities continue to carry out their “purge” of independent voices prosecuting and harassing human rights defenders, journalists, lawyers, opposition politicians, protesters, and activists (Human Rights Watch). As it stands, no rights organization is able to operate legally in Belarus resulting in subterranean networks coming together to form a new spirit of solidarity, first awakened by the pandemic. To date, protests have remained peaceful and even polite but are always met with systematic and widespread repression. This, coupled with Russia launching its illegal invasion of Ukraine partially from Belarusian territory, has demonstrated a continued evident support of Russia through a supposed impartial standing point on the invasion.

Despite the former efforts of international partners to sway the country towards a more democratic political system and a market economy, these efforts continue to be in vain and the West is starting to lose interest. Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, a 40-year old teacher who was forced to leave the country following the 2020 protests, comments *“Dictatorship is contagious,(...) if Belarus is forgotten, Lukashenko can do whatever he wants.”* (The Guardian, August 2023) and it seems that, with the recent events concerning changes to conditions for Belarusians living overseas and immigrants coming into Belarus, Sviatlana’s predictions may have been correct.

The Green Border - a symbol of the growing barriers and hostility existing between Belarus and the west.

The exclusion zone between Poland and Belarus, now the location for an apparently unending ordeal for refugees is known as “the green border”. The humanitarian crisis on the Poland-Belarus border has been ongoing since 2021, with grave ill-treatment of migrants and asylum seekers by border forces on both sides (The Guardian, 2023). Migrants attempting to seek asylum in the EU from countries including Iraq, Syria, Iran, Yemen, Afghanistan, and Cuba end up being trapped in the inhospitable border area between the two countries due to neither country wanting to take responsibility for the migrants. Lukashenko has been accused of luring in refugees to come to Belarus as a “foot in the door”, or in this case onto Polish territory, by encouraging them to cross the border via the Białowieża Forest in what has been deemed to be a way of undermining the EU for its sanctions and as a means to create tensions between Poland and the rest of the EU when it comes to immigration laws and policies. Caught in the crossfire, migrants have been subdued to horrific treatment or total neglect on both sides of the border. A Human Rights Watch report on Belarus describing the situation stated that *“Polish authorities have an obligation to prevent further deaths and suffering and should ensure access to the asylum procedure and allow humanitarian aid workers and independent observers access to the currently restricted border area”* and *“Poland and Belarus should immediately halt ping-pong pushbacks and investigate abuses and hold those responsible to account”* (HRW 2023).

As mentioned earlier in the report, it is not just non-Belarusians who feel unwelcome on Belarusian territory but even native Belarusians living overseas are now being discriminated against following the new presidential decree introduced in September this year, denying the country’s citizens the ability to obtain or renew their passports or to process other essential documents at Belarusian consulates overseas. This could potentially leave thousands of Belarusians, who fled the country for their safety, in exile without access to valid documents and therefore forcing many to return to Belarus in order to obtain documents and face potential arrest or prosecution.

Less than a year earlier, in December 2022, parliament passed a law requiring Belarusian nationals to notify authorities on whether they hold another citizenship or residence permit. Not only this, but Belarusians living overseas and who have been convicted of crimes “against the interests of Belarus” face a revocation of citizenship (Human Rights Watch). These aggressive measures have left Belarusians feeling trapped and persecuted, both in their country or overseas and, as the interest from the West begins to wane or turn its attention elsewhere, so are they left with little hope for change.

Earlier this year, at a recent conference in Slovakia, French President Emmanuel Macron of France referred to Belarus as a “vassal state,” adding that Europe is partially responsible for this. He goes onto say *“We put*

him in a situation to be trapped in the hand of the Russians,” and further supported his argument by emphasizing that Western leaders needed to offer Mr. Lukashenko an “exit strategy (NY Times). Yet with the latest events happening in the Middle East, it is unlikely that this exit strategy will materialise anytime soon.

Conclusion

Little continues to be known about Belarus; many see it merely as an extension of Russia, a former Soviet state that never quite managed to fully cut ties with “the motherland”. A country, like many in the region, utterly devastated by the impacts of World War II, followed by more than 40 years of Soviet rule, a policy of Russification relegating the Belarusian language and culture to second-class status and, post-independence, a president whom, since his rule, has sought to re-establish ties with its former ruler. Today, the country is openly seen as a threat by its European neighbours, with increasing sanctions being imposed, borders being closed off and constant criticism towards its apparent allied position with Russia when with regards to the invasion in Ukraine.

However, as history has previously demonstrated, it is its citizens who have suffered the most, more so with the recent restrictions for Belarusians living overseas, referred to as “an apparent retaliation against its critics in exile” (Human Rights Watch), in addition to the clampdowns on protesters following the last elections. Belarusians are left feeling disempowered and defeated on a national scale and ignored and forgotten on an international scale. But with the war in Ukraine continuing to rage and Lukashenko maintaining his grip on power, any change feels like a distant future.

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