

# Republic of Belarus Country Report



## Table of contents:

**Executive Summary**..... 2  
Belarus’ history of domination by foreign powers has subdued its national identity and drive for independence. Belarus’ struggling economy retained its state-controlled, pre-independence structure. The country has a number of active Jewish communities but the government inconsistently addresses Jewish community issues. *Read more.*

**History** ..... 2  
Belarus comprises about 1% of the total territory of the former Soviet Union. Largely destroyed in WWII and redeveloped by the Soviets, Belarus has largely retained its Soviet-era character. *Read more.*

**Government, Economy, Human Rights, and Religious Freedom**.....4  
In power since 1994, Aleksandr Lukashenko is head of state. The other branches of government are subordinate to the executive. Belarus retains a state-controlled economy reliant on Russia. Belarus maintains a poor human rights record with severe restrictions on freedom of speech and assembly. *Read more.*

**Foreign Policy**..... 8  
Belarus retains close ties with Russia and is a member of the Eurasian Economic Union. Recently, overreliance on Russia has led Belarus to maintain a balancing act through carefully coordinated pivots to the European Union and the United States as a means of shoring up economic security. *Read more.*

**Relations with the U.S.**.....11  
The United States opened its embassy in Minsk in early 1992. Since Belarus’ turn toward authoritarianism in the mid-90s, relations with the United States have mostly remained strained over human rights concerns. In 2016, the United States lifted some sanctions and in 2017, Belarus introduced limited visa-free travel for Americans. *Read more.*

**Relations with Israel**..... 12  
Diplomatic relations between Belarus and Israel were established in 1992. In 1993, Israel opened its embassy in Minsk. The countries retain ties through cooperation on cultural, economic, and scientific projects. In January

2016, Israel announced it would close its embassy in Minsk but reversed its decision two months later. [Read more.](#)

### **Jewish Community** ..... 13

Located within the Pale of Settlement, to which Jews were confined by the Russian Tsars, Belarus was a center of Jewish life prior to the Holocaust. Jewish communities first appeared in Belarus in the 14<sup>th</sup> century when the country was part of Poland-Lithuania. [Read more.](#)

#### **Executive summary:**

*Belarus' history of domination by successive Russian governments has historically subdued a national identity distinct from that of Russia's. Belarus' struggling economy retained its pre-independence structure; the current regime has stopped, and in some cases even reversed, market-oriented reform. Belarus' failure to hold free and fair elections has kept Belarusian President Aleksandr Lukashenko in power since he was first elected to a five-year term of office in 1994.*

*As most Western governments remain largely alienated and foreign assistance and investment remain low, Belarus largely depends on Russia. However, because of Russian energy price hikes, increasing stagnation in the Russian economy, moves to gain control over Belarusian gas and oil distribution networks, and financial and political fallout from Russia's war in Ukraine, Belarus now finds itself between a largely unsympathetic West and tough-minded Russia that is no longer willing to subsidize its domestic policies.*

*Although its constitution provides for fundamental freedoms, the government stridently restricts freedom of speech and assembly, maintains control over the media, and commits other rights violations.*

*The Belarusian Jewish community – once at the heart of the Pale of Settlement but nearly wiped out by the Holocaust and by Soviet policies – is now represented through many local organizations and is actively supported by Israeli and American organizations. Anti-Semitism has been prevalent throughout Belarus' history, but there have been fewer reported incidents in recent years. Relations with the government are cordial, but infrequent prosecutions of anti-Semitic incidents and unresolved communal property restitution and preservation issues are complicating factors.*

#### **Statistics:**

**Population:** 9,399,000 (2017 est.)

**Size:** 207,560 sq. km.

**Capital:** Minsk

**Major cities:** Gomel, Minsk, Mogilev, Vitebsk

**Jewish population:** 45,000

**2016 Aliyah** (emigration to Israel): 620

**Head of State:** President Aleksandr Lukashenko

**Head of Government:** Prime Minister, Roman Golovchenko

**Foreign Minister:** Vladimir Makei

**Belarusian Ambassador to the U.S.:**

Charge d'Affaires: Dmitry Basik

**U.S. Ambassador to Belarus:**

Charge d'Affaires: Julie D. Fisher

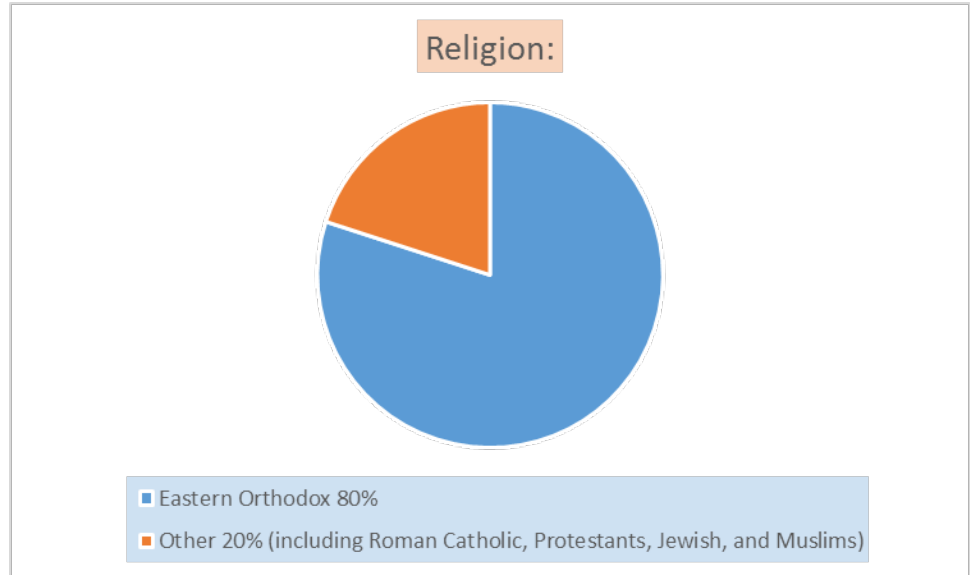
**Freedom House Rating:** Not Free

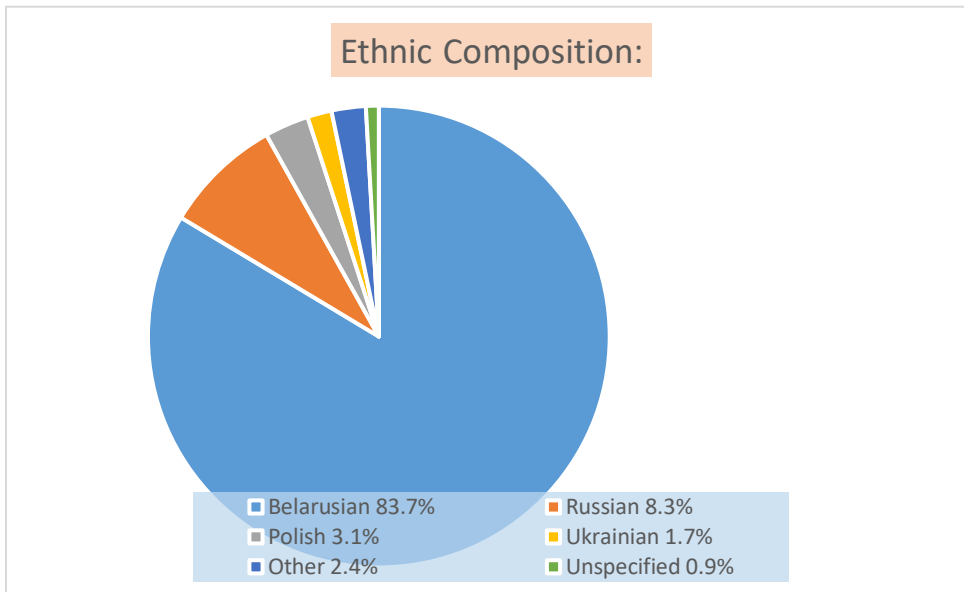
## History:

Belarus comprises about 1% of the total territory of the former Soviet Union. Mostly landlocked, flat and slightly smaller than Kansas, Belarus is bordered by Russia, Ukraine, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland.

Belarus has a long history of domination by foreign powers. Part of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth

from the 13<sup>th</sup> to the 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, then incorporated into the Russian Empire during the partitions of Poland (1772-95), Belarus endured repeated periods of Russification during its long occupation by the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union. While some groups began to assert a Belarusian national identity distinct from Russia towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, this identity has remained marginal until only very recently. In March 1918, after the collapse of Tsarist Russia, local nationalists established a short-lived Belarusian Democratic Republic, crushed by the Red Army less than a year later. In 1922, Belarus (known then as the Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic) formally became one of the four constituent Soviet republics. Belarus lost almost 2.2 million citizens (one-quarter of its population) in World War II. Belarus is perhaps most famous for its partisan army units that fought against the Nazis during the war. This theme, in addition to victory in WWII itself, remains central to contemporary Belarusian identity. Many Belarusian cities were nearly entirely destroyed, including Minsk during the war. The Soviets rebuilt the Belarusian SSR in the image of an idealized Soviet society with a highly specialized, undiversified economy. The country has retained much of this economic structure and concept of identity today.





As the Soviet Union began to collapse, elections in March 1990 brought reformist Stanislau Shushkevich to power in Belarus. Shushkevich advocated for free market reforms and distancing Belarus from Russia. However, in a March 1991 referendum, 83% of the Belarusian electorate voted to preserve the Soviet Union. Nevertheless, Belarus declared its independence

that August. Shushkevich signed the Belovezhskaya Pushcha accords dissolving the Soviet Union, forming the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) with Russia and Ukraine in December 1991. His opposition to closer relations with Moscow motivated his ouster by conservative lawmakers in January 1994. The rise of Aleksandr Lukashenko has brought with it sustained authoritarianism and heavy resistance to political, economic, and social reform.

**Government, Economy, Human Rights, and Religious Freedom:**

*Domestic Politics*

Belarus is a presidential republic. The popularly elected President is head of state and nominates the Council of Ministers and its chairman, the prime minister. The legislative and judicial branches are separate but subordinate to the executive. Presidential elections are held every five years. The government suppresses opposition parties and since 1996, all outside election observers have found Belarusian elections to be unfree.

Alexander Lukashenko was elected as the President of the Republic of Belarus in 1994.

*Economy:*

Belarus had a relatively well-developed industrial base and a well-educated technical workforce under Soviet rule and retained much of it following the breakup of the USSR. A strong agricultural sector and quality public education afforded Belarus one of the highest standards of living among the Soviet republics. However, Belarus has had to manage the massive social and economic repercussions of the April 1986 Chernobyl nuclear disaster in neighboring Ukraine, which spread radioactive fallout across large sections of southern and eastern Belarus.

The Soviet Union's collapse in 1991 brought an end to Belarus's reliance on a highly specialized, undiversified economy. This cut off Belarus from its traditional supply sources and markets, leaving it in the precarious position of having to import two-thirds of its raw materials.

Another challenge to Belarus' economic growth is its dependence on the Russian Federation as its key economic partner. Russia accounts for 40% of Belarus' export market, with heavy emphasis on energy supplies and raw materials. Furthermore, since 2011, Russia's state-owned energy giant Gazprom owns 100% of the Yamal pipeline which traverses Belarus and provides substantial energy supplies to Western Europe.

Belarus pursues active economic and financial integration with several other CIS countries within the Customs Union of the Eurasian Economic Community. Belarus signed the Treaty on Creation of the Eurasian Economic Union, which took effect on January 1, 2015. Major trade policy decisions within the EEU cannot be made without Russia's approval.

However, Russian integration has come at a steep price. In 2015, national GDP contracted by 28%, largely as a result of U.S. and European sanctions on the Russian Federation as well as general contraction of the Russian economy.

**Currency** 2.12 Belarusian Rubles (BYN) = \$1 USD  
**GDP:** \$59.643 billion (2018 est.)  
**GDP per capita:** \$6,283 (2018 est.)  
**GDP Growth:** -3.1% (2018 est.)

In recent years, Belarus has sought greater foreign investment from and trade with China. In 2012, \$3 billion in trade was conducted between the two countries with a great imbalance favoring China, which sold \$2.4 billion in goods to Belarus. China invests large sums of money in infrastructure projects, including a large industrial park near Minsk National Airport, a planned \$5 billion project expected to house over 100,000 people by 2030.

The technology and IT services sector are one bright spot in the Belarusian economy. While the tech sector employs less than 5% of the workforce, exports from the tech industry in Belarus amounted to over \$1 billion in 2015. In 2019, the main contribution to the country's economy was made by the IT-sphere. A big role in this process plays Belarus High Technologies Park (HTP), a local analog of Silicon Valley in the US.

In December 2019, Russia and Belarus had tensions negotiating the price of oil. At the beginning of January, the oil import from Russia to Belarus was stopped for a few days, and Belarus had to buy the oil from Norway. Later, the leaders of both countries could find a compromise.

### *Human Rights:*

The Belarusian government has come under severe criticism from international rights organizations. Freedom of speech, movement, and assembly are limited and the government maintains a virtual monopoly over the press. Some Soviet-era restrictions remain in effect, and overt expressions of protest

can draw harsh reaction from the authorities. A number of opposition figures have gone missing after criticizing President Lukashenko, while others have been given show trials and jailed.

Belarus has one of the most repressive media environments in Europe. Belarusian authorities keep all traditional mass media under strict control, and TV broadcasting in the country is fully controlled by the state.

Opposition activists continue to be repressed and jailed on a regular basis. In 2015, the country released six political prisoners on humanitarian grounds but the move is viewed largely as a bargaining chip to curry favor with the United States and European partners. In March 2017, over 700 people were arrested at peaceful protests during Belarus' Freedom Day celebrations. Before the demonstrations, police raided the offices of Viasna, a leading human rights organization based in Minsk.

Belarus remains the only country in Europe to continue to use capital punishment. There were at least six state executions carried out in 2016. The death penalty is typically carried out by firing squad.

#### *Religious Freedom:*

The U.S. State Department reports that while the Belarusian constitution grants religious freedom, the government does not always respect this right in practice, especially with respect to "nontraditional" faiths such as Protestantism or Eastern religions. President Lukashenko has promoted the Belarusian Orthodox Church, granting it privileged status as the only officially recognized Orthodox denomination in Belarus via a 2003 declaration.

In October 2002, the government enacted the Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations. The Law narrowed the number of groups able to register as legal religions, limited the activities of all nontraditional religions, and emphasized the Russian Orthodox Church's position as the country's preeminent religion. For a group or local chapter to be registered, it must have been active in Belarus for at least 20 years and must consist of 20 Belarusian citizens. Unregistered groups are banned from any religious activity. Religious literature (particularly of foreign origin) requires the approval of a state agency, effectively subjecting it to government censorship. With or without official registration, some faiths have encountered police harassment, difficulty renting or purchasing property to establish places of worship, and difficulty training clergy.

Citizens theoretically are not prohibited from proselytizing and may speak freely about their religious beliefs; however, authorities often interfere with or punish individuals who proselytize on behalf of some registered and unregistered religions.

## Foreign Policy:

Belarus retains close ties with Russia. A 1995 referendum strengthened economic relations, and the 1997 and 1999 Belarus-Russia Union Treaties provide for close coordination of foreign, military, and economic policies, although few provisions have been implemented.

Belarus and Russia planned to achieve currency unification by 2005. However, persistent differences over energy and transportation costs, tax policy, customs, foreign trade, and constitutional issues, as well as worsening relations between President Lukashenko and the Russian leadership, make currency union increasingly unlikely.

President Lukashenko's foreign policy grew more inconsistent in 2006 and early 2007, especially following a sharp dispute with Russia over energy price hikes in January 2007. Lukashenko has sought to secure new markets and win new allies and energy suppliers, pursuing closer relationships and trade deals with Venezuela, Cuba, and Iran.

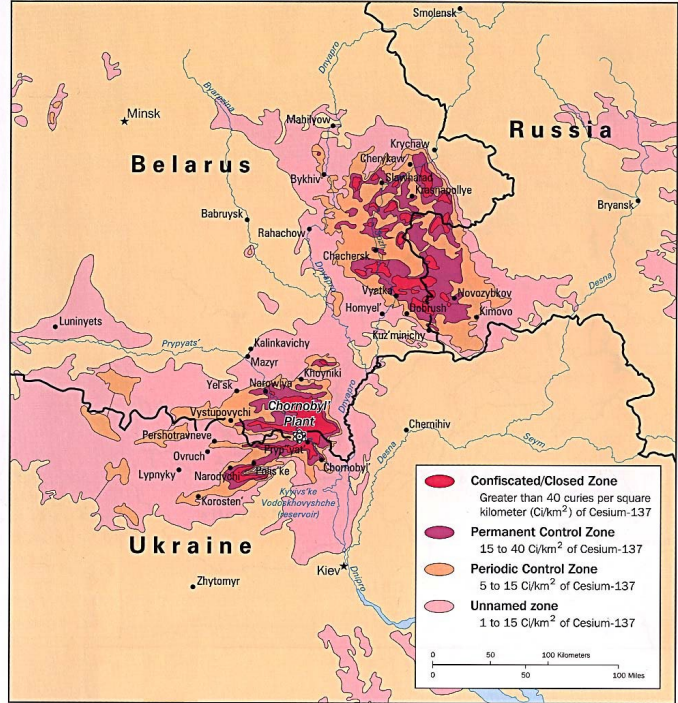
Analysts suggest that the shock of the 2007 Russian energy price hikes and his resentment of Russia's actions forced President Lukashenko to re-examine his country's isolation, dependence on Russia, and difficult relations with America and Europe. However, Lukashenko rejected EU preconditions for closer relations and said Belarus will not tolerate foreign pressure.

In 2009, a serious diplomatic row erupted between Russia and Belarus. President Lukashenko accused Russia of offering a \$500 million loan on the condition that Belarus recognize Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Russia also banned all dairy imports from Belarus, which accused Russia of employing the ban for political reasons. Russia soon lifted the ban and Belarus resumed deliveries of dairy products to Russia.

Russia remains key partner for Belarus both in political and economic fields. The legal framework between Russia and Belarus includes nearly 200 treaties, agreements and protocols. Russia accounts for almost 50% of the Belarusian foreign trade, in 2014 the mutual trade amounted to \$37.6 billion.

Belarus has been part of such collective organizations as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) since the 1990s. However, relations with, and support from, these groups have deteriorated as economic and democratic reforms in Belarus have stalled or reversed.

Figure 31. Radiation Hotspots Resulting From the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant Accident



Belarus is an active Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) member. As a result of Ukraine's refusal to hold the CIS chairmanship in 2014, Belarus agreed to take over the chairmanship and conduct a series of CIS official meetings in Minsk.

Belarus also remains an active member of the Collective Security Treaty Organization which includes five other Eurasian countries (Russia, Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan).

In May 2014, Belarus joined Russia and Kazakhstan in establishing the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), came into effect on 1 January 2015..

Minsk has become the main venue for diplomatic negotiations aimed at resolving the war in Ukraine between Ukrainian forces and Russian-backed separatists. Two summits were held in August 2014 and in February 2015 to arrange ceasefire agreements and it remains a meeting point for diplomatic envoys from various countries, including Kurt Volker from the United States, to discuss conflict resolution with regional counterparts.

Recently, Belarus has expressed its readiness to broaden its cooperation with Iran and China.

China and Belarus established a comprehensive strategic partnership in 2013, which set the political foundation for greater military cooperation.

Tensions with Russia continue to pose sporadic problems for the Belarusian government. In January 2016, President Lukashenko adopted a new military doctrine in response to the Russian state's behavior in nearby Ukraine.

In February 2017, Russia reinstated mandatory border controls with Belarus for the first time in 17 years after the Belarusian government announced it was relaxing its visa rules for Western states, including the United States.

In September 2017, Belarus and Russia will hold joint military exercises entitled *Zapad (West)*. As many as 100,000 soldiers from the countries' two armed forces are expected to participate, raising anxiety in the region that Russia may use the opportunity to stage a hostile takeover of Belarus or another neighboring country. Both Belarus and Russia have refuted these claims. The Russian military has stated only around 13,000 troops will participate in the exercises, scheduled to follow NATO military exercises held in Eastern Europe in July 2017.

Belarus maintains diplomatic relations with 174 countries and represented by foreign offices in 56 countries worldwide. In 2014 Belarus established embassies in Australia, Qatar, Mongolia, Pakistan, Ecuador and a Consulate General in Italy.



## **Relations with the United States:**

The U.S. and Belarus enjoyed good relations immediately following Belarusian independence. The United States opened its embassy in Minsk in early 1992 and, by early 1993, the countries had signed a bilateral trade treaty guaranteeing reciprocal most-favored-nation status; several other economic and assistance agreements followed. By 1995, the United States had provided several hundred million dollars in humanitarian assistance and technical aid to Belarus.

In July 2000, citing the failure of Belarus to respect internationally accepted workers' rights, the Clinton administration withdrew benefits from Belarus in the Generalized System of Preferences (GSP), through which countries may export certain items duty-free to the United States.

In April 2014, Belarusian opposition leaders met with U.S. Members of Congress in Lithuania to discuss the future of the U.S.-Belarus relationship, the crisis in Ukraine, and the 2015 presidential elections.

In September 2014 officials from the State Department, the Agency for International Development and the Department of Defense visited Minsk to discuss potential for cooperation between two states.

Relations with Belarus warmed slightly beginning in late 2015 after the United States suspended its sanctions regime on nine Belarusian companies for President Lukashenko's release of political prisoners. The Trump administration extended sanctions relief in April 2017 and is to remain in place until October of this year.

In September 2016, the U.S. Commission for the Protection of America's Heritage Abroad entered into an agreement with the Belarusian government. The agreement commits the two governments to protect and preserve cemeteries, memorials, historic sites, places of worship, and archives related to all peoples, with a focus on those that were victims of genocide during World War II.

In January 2017, the Belarusian government announced it was amending its visa regime for holders of U.S. passports and other nations. U.S. passport holders may now visit Belarus without a visa for a stay of no longer than five days if they enter and exit the country through its main international airport in Minsk.

## **Relations with Israel:**

Diplomatic relations between Belarus and Israel were established in 1992. In 1993, Israel opened its embassy in Minsk.

In April 2000, Belarus and Israel signed an agreement on trade, science, culture, and education. The two countries also formed a joint committee on improvement of bilateral relations. President Lukashenko visited Israel in January 2000.

In June 2009, Israel's Minister of Foreign Affairs visited Belarus. Agreements were signed on cultural, educational, and scientific cooperation in 2009-2012.

Bilateral trade has increased in recent years, exceeding \$100 million in 2012. Israel's investments in the Belarusian economy in 2012 amounted to \$300 million.

In March 2014, Belarusian Ambassador to Israel Vladimir Skvortsov and Israeli Minister of Tourism Izi Landau met in Israel to discuss intensification of bilateral cooperation on tourism. They also touched upon a possibility of introducing a visa-free regime between Israel and Belarus.

In February 2014, the Belarusian trade commercial chamber with support of the Embassy of Belarus in Israel organized a visit of Belarusian business specialists to Tel-Aviv, Israel, to conduct a joint meeting on trade and economic cooperation, and formed a joint trade chamber to foster business connections between both countries and promote Belarusian goods on the international market.

In August 2015 Israeli government announced the closure of its Minsk embassy as part of an extensive cost-cutting program. In response, Belarus intended to close its embassy in Israel. In January 2016, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu reversed the decision to close the embassy in Belarus, which is the third largest Jewish community in the former Soviet Union.

In November 2015, Israel and Belarus entered into a visa-free travel agreement. The new Israeli ambassador to Belarus, Alon Shoham, arrived in Minsk in February 2017. He has been actively engaged in supporting the local Jewish community. In September 2017, Shoham visited the city of Gomel to meet with Jewish community members then involved in a dispute over construction of an apartment building on a site some believe to be a Jewish cemetery. More information about this dispute can be found in the section below.

### **Jewish Communal Life & Anti-Semitism:**

The Jewish community of Belarus has a long and rich history. Jewish communities first appeared in Belarus in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, when the country was part of Poland-Lithuania. Present-day Belarus is located at the heart of the Pale of Settlement, the territory of the Russian Empire created at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century where Jews were permitted to settle. By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Jews comprised 13% of the total population of Belarus, with half of the populations of cities like Minsk, Vitebsk, Mogilev, and Gomel being 50% Jewish. Jews faced discrimination and pogroms in Belarus as they did elsewhere in the Russian Empire. Marc Chagall (1887-1985), the world famous Russian painter, was born in a village outside of Vitebsk and first studied art in that city before relocating to Paris. His art has served as a window on to Jewish life in pre-war Jewish Belarus, including pogroms that plagued Belarus at the time.

Tragically, the Jews of Belarus were nearly wiped out by the Holocaust and Soviet policies. After the German invasion of Belarus in 1941, Jews in Nazi-occupied Belarus were massacred en masse and in some cases deported to concentration camps. As many as 142,000 were evacuated to other locales of the USSR and survived. The Minsk ghetto was the largest in the Nazi-occupied USSR. The Nazis established a death camp outside of Minsk called Maly Trostenets where it is estimated that as many as 65,000 Jews were killed there during the Holocaust. During World War II, German forces and local collaborators murdered between 600,000-800,000 Belarusian Jews. In total, one-quarter of Belarus' entire population was killed in the war, and 90% of the country's Jewish population was wiped out.

The Soviet Union brought with it policies that marginalized Jewish identity and sidelined Holocaust narratives. Religious expression was widely suppressed and memorialization of the Holocaust was largely not observed. Belarus was the site of some Stalinist purges of Jewish cultural figures, including the murder of the director of the Moscow State Yiddish Theater, Solomon Mikhoels, who was intentionally run over by a truck in Minsk in 1948. From the 1970s on, Jews emigrated in waves from Belarus to Israel and the United States. This wave of immigration continued after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 when Belarus gained its independence. From 1979 to 1999, it is estimated that the Jewish population of Belarus decreased from over 135,000 Jews to fewer than 50,000. Jewish population estimates fluctuate greatly; current estimates place the Jewish population at around 50-60,000 though official statistics placed the number at as low as 13,000 during the last census in 2009.

The current Jewish community is represented through many local organizations and is actively supported by Israeli and American organizations. Anti-Semitism has been prevalent throughout Belarus' history, but there have been fewer reported incidents in recent years. Relations with the government are cordial, but infrequent prosecutions of popular anti-Semitism and unresolved communal property restitution and preservation issues are complicating factors.

### **Organizations and Programs:**

There are currently 39 active religious communities in Belarus. The primary coordinating body is the Belarus Union of Jewish Organizations and Communities (ABJOC). Religious services are provided throughout Belarus by several organizations, including Chabad Lubavitch, Aish HaTorah, the World Union for Progressive Judaism, and the Union of Religious Jewish Congregations (URJC). At least half of the country's Jewish population is thought to live in or near Minsk.

The Jewish community produces a number of publications in regular circulation including Berega and Mishpocha to provide Belarusian Jews with news, resources, and information about community events.

Educational programs operate in cities throughout the country, with one Jewish day school each in Minsk, Gomel, Mogilev, and Pinsk. The Israeli Education Ministry currently funds all of the Jewish day schools. In the mid-2000s, up to 19 Sunday schools were operational in Belarus but that number is thought to be smaller today.

There are six comprehensive Jewish schools in the state. Jewish classes are offered at Minsk #132 Secondary School with support from Israel's Ministry of Education, the Lauder Shneur College in Minsk is supported by the Ronald Lauder Foundation, and the Jewish Bi-L gymnasium and the Or Avner school also operate in Minsk. In 2000, the Beys Aharon boarding school opened in Pinsk and was later renamed for Nobel Prize winner Simon Kunetz in 2007. There are two other Or Avner schools in Mogilev and Babruysk, respectively. There are five Jewish kindergartens in Minsk, Gomel, Hrodna, Mogilev, and Vitebsk. The Gomel Jewish community of Beit Yakov operates a Yeshiva out of its synagogue building, opened with JDC funding in 2009.



World War II Memorial at Khatyn

The Marc Chagall Institute of Jewish Studies opened at the Belarus State University in 1999 but closed in 2004. In February 2004, during the school's winter break, the Belarus Education Ministry suddenly ordered MHI closed, ostensibly due to a reorganization of BSU. However, foreign observers and Belarusian Jewish community leaders believed the closure was related to what the Lukashenko government saw as MHI's "pro-Western bias" and to growing state anti-Semitism in Belarus. The Belarusian government first indicated its displeasure with MHI in 2003, when the school unveiled plans to build a new campus with Western and Israeli funding. The former MHI Judaica program continued as an independent entity within the BSU until the International Relations department absorbed it in 2005.

In September 2004, the Belarus Ministry of Foreign Affairs denied registration to the Belarus Bureau of the Union of Councils for Jews in the Former Soviet Union (UCSJ) and froze its funds, arguing that the group was late in submitting its request for accreditation. The head of the UCSJ Belarus Bureau, which was first registered in Belarus in 2001, said the move was aimed at silencing his organization, which had spoken out against rising anti-Semitism and other extremist activity in Belarus.

The Jewish Agency for Israel (JAFI/ "Sochnut") runs a network of Hebrew-instruction ulpan, youth clubs, and other programs to encourage aliyah. A chapter of Hillel, based in Minsk, has over 150 students, who contribute to many community events, particularly as part of the FSU Hillel Pesach Project, which organizes seders for thousands in Belarus. The American-based Yeshiva and University Students for the Spiritual Revival of Soviet Jewry (YUSSR) has operated youth camps and seminars in Belarus since 1992, and sponsors adult education, Yiddish, and Jewish cultural programming, primarily in Minsk and Mogilev. An ABJOC-initiated Holocaust education program operates in several non-Jewish schools in Minsk and other cities. The program expanded in April 2003, when it held a two-day seminar for mostly non-Jewish teachers in Minsk, sponsored with help from the Euro-Asian Jewish Congress (EAJC) and the Belarusian Ministry of Education.

The American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC/"Joint") is active in Minsk and 14 other Belarusian cities. It runs the Creative Intellectuals Club for Jewish Studies, provides food and medicine to impoverished Jews through its network of Hesed (charity) centers, and operates a "Warm Homes" aid program for Righteous Gentiles who saved Jews during the Holocaust. Hesed serves as many as 18,000 elderly Jews in the country. In 2002, JDC, with financial assistance from World Jewish Relief and the Atlanta, Georgia Jewish community opened the Minsk Jewish Campus, which also houses a new Belarusian Jewish history museum established by ABJOC. Other programs include women's clubs, children's activities, and computer classes. In April 2007, the Minsk Jewish Campus, which now hosts 18 separate Belarusian Jewish organizations – among them the "Hesed-Rahamim" charitable and welfare organization, the "Rainbow" program for the rehabilitation of disabled and handicapped Jews, and the "Emunah" Jewish Cultural Society – celebrated its fifth anniversary. JDC also runs a program called



The Yama Holocaust Memorial in Minsk

“Active Jewish Teens” which remains popular with Minsk’s Jewish youth. Jewish Family Outreach Services support needy Jewish families during the winter, as part of the Minsk Jewish Campus. JFOS compliments the Hessed welfare system for elderly Jews by offering food packages, counseling and job training. JFOS maintains a database of over 3,500 families including 1,200 families in Minsk. Moishe House, an international network of social group residences for Jews, is active in Minsk.

In 2017, a dispute arose when an Israeli-Ukrainian journalist released a story claiming that the Belarusian government was planning on taxing JDC-funded assistance to elderly Belarusian Jews and Holocaust survivors. The issue involved a lack of clarity in the Belarusian tax code regarding contributions of charitable materials from international organizations. NCSEJ and other international Jewish organizations worked with the Belarusian government to clarify the language of the tax code and the issue was resolved without issue.

Several war veteran and ghetto survivor societies operate throughout Belarus, advocating for state benefits and for German and Swiss compensation; war veterans receive a state pension of about \$100 per month.

### **Heritage, Memorial Sites, and Restitution:**

Yama (“the pit”) was the first official Holocaust memorial established on the territory of the Soviet Union. Erected in 1946, it was dedicated in Yiddish and Russian to the 5,000 Jews from the Minsk ghetto who were murdered at the site on March 2, 1942. In recognizing the Jewish heritage of its victims in a Yiddish-language dedication, this monument was unique in the Soviet Union. Unlike at other Holocaust sites in the Soviet Union, Jews were legally permitted to gather at Yama throughout the Soviet period. Another mass grave was discovered in October 2002 at Slutsk. Residents report that the estimated 12,000 victims, mostly Jews, were taken from Slutsk and a nearby concentration camp and executed by Nazi forces in 1942-44; a memorial was installed and dedicated in 2007.

In 2002, a Jewish museum opened in Minsk and remains operational today. Several other small museums featuring exhibits on Jewish heritage are functioning in Belarus, including a museum dedicated to the birthplace of Marc Chagall.

In April 2013, the government of Belarus announced that it will renovate a 17<sup>th</sup> century synagogue in Bykhaw, one of the country’s oldest synagogues, and turn it into a Jewish museum.

In June 2013, Limmud FSU held its conference in Vitebsk, where over 500 young Jews gathered to learn more about their history and culture.

In June 2017, the European Jewish Cemeteries Initiative announced it will conduct an exhaustive survey of Jewish cemeteries in Belarus with funding from the U.S. Commission for the Preservation of America's Heritage Abroad (USCPAHA).

The survey is ongoing. So far, ESJF has conducted surveys at 729 potential cemetery sites and identified 420 as being explicitly Jewish, as opposed to a previously defined figure of 293. The condition of most of these cemetery sites is poor. Cemeteries were built over, their headstones used in construction works by Soviet and Nazi authorities. Many other cemeteries that were not entirely destroyed or otherwise desecrated are unfenced and untended, leaving them to erode in the elements. ESJF is continuing to work with Belarus to identify, document, and protect cemetery sites. A delegation from USCPAHA will visit Belarus in September 2017.

Issues concerning Belarusian Jewish cemeteries came to the fore in Gomel twice, first in April 2008 and later in 2017. In 2008, human remains from an old Jewish cemetery were discovered during excavation work near a stadium in Gomel (constructed during the Soviet era) and were reburied at another local Jewish cemetery. A rabbi traveled from Israel to conduct the ceremony. Local government officials attended and facilitated the reburial.

In 2017, controversy arose when a local Gomel archaeologist claimed that a site across the street from the abovementioned stadium was also a cemetery and that the construction of a new apartment building on this territory should cease immediately. Using historical maps of the city to prove his case, the archaeologist showed that the Jewish cemetery extended across the street from where the stadium is to the apartment construction site. The Jewish community led efforts to work with the developer and check the site for evidence of burial and human remains; none were found.

Belarus has no law on the restitution of communal property, and attempts to salvage Jewish cemeteries and properties have met with mixed success. Jewish cemeteries in Slonim, Volozhin, and Radim have been fenced off to prevent construction, thanks to efforts by the Jewish community.

A small number of Communist-seized buildings, including nine synagogues, have been returned to the Jewish community, but little progress has been achieved overall. Some 96 synagogues remain in state hands despite community efforts and letter campaigns to government authorities.

The Volozhin Yeshiva, built in 1803 as the founding institution of the modern Yeshiva movement, was returned to the care of the URJC in the early 1990s, as was the Slonim Synagogue. Both have been registered as state historical sites and need restoration.



The Volozhin Yeshiva building



Lukashenko and then-Jewish Agency Treasurer Chaim Chesler during the rededication ceremony in 2000

In some cases, historical and cultural landmarks have been destroyed despite Jewish community opposition. A former synagogue, built at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and located in a historic district of Minsk, was demolished in September 2001 to make way for luxury apartments. Before the building's demolition, the



The Minsk Choral Synagogue, now a state theater

Ministry of Culture revoked the building's status as a historical monument. Jewish community protests addressed to the Minsk city government and to the Ministry of Culture received no response. In November 2002, 75 Belarusian lawmakers took up this cause, appealing to President Lukashenko to stop the destruction of Jewish cultural landmarks, especially the apartment construction and the construction of a parking lot on the foundations of a ruined 16<sup>th</sup> century synagogue.

### **Anti-Semitism:**

The primary sources of anti-Semitism are local Orthodox churches, individual politicians and intellectuals, and marginal youth groups that include neo-Nazis and skinheads. Anti-Semitic publications have also appeared in local newspapers and in books published by "Orthodox Initiative," a Minsk publishing house whose majority owner is the Minsk Orthodox Diocese. It and other local publishing houses have published stridently anti-Semitic books in the recent past that depict Belarusian Jews and "world Jewry" as enemies of Belarus.

The 2016 State Department Religious Freedom Report notes that the Jewish community remains concerned over the Belarusian Orthodox Church's commemoration of a young child allegedly killed by Jews near Hrodna in 1690. The commemoration has been associated with anti-Semitic acts of vandalism in the past.

Anti-Semitic acts involving Jewish cemetery desecrations, graffiti, and attacks on community property (especially on synagogues and Holocaust memorials) have taken place in Brest, Gorodeya, Pinsk, Rechica, and other cities across Belarus in recent years.

In November 2016, a trio of skinheads smeared black paint on a Holocaust memorial in the city of Mogilev. In February 2017, the group was convicted of hooliganism and the oldest member at 19 years of age has been sentenced to two years in prison; another received a sentence of six months. The third is a minor and was given six months' probation.

On August 2014, vandals painted swastikas on several plaques commemorating Jews in Hrodna. The plaques were installed at an alley of trees planted during the festival of national minorities in Hrodna in June.

On December 2014, vandals painted swastikas and anti-Semitic slogans on a Jewish religious and secular community center in Homyel.

In April 2013, graffiti with Nazi symbols and anti-Semitic inscriptions were discovered on one of the central streets of Mogilev.

In February 2008, vandals set fire to wreaths and flowers laid at the memorial to Holocaust victims in Brest. The memorial has been vandalized many times since it was erected in 1992. On May 9, 2007, vandals set fire to flowers laid at the monument. Police opened a criminal case but did not identify any suspects. In February 2007 vandals desecrated the monument, but no suspects were identified. In November 2006 an explosion occurred at the same monument, which police attributed to petty hooliganism.

In April 2008, a Holocaust memorial in Slutsk was damaged in a vandal attack. Unknown persons splattered brown paint over the fence around the memorial, daubed fifteen swastikas on the memorial using a stencil, and painted the (incorrect) birth date of Adolf Hitler.



In November 2006, swastikas and anti-Semitic slogans were painted on the wall of the Israeli Information and Cultural Center in Minsk

In March 2007, a Holocaust memorial in Minsk was vandalized on the 65<sup>th</sup> anniversary of a mass killing of German and Belarusian Jews by the Nazis in the wartime Minsk ghetto. A Holocaust memorial plaque was stolen from the same site but was recovered in April 2007 after the German Embassy in Minsk offered a reward for its return.

In August 2005, the Yama memorial was found covered with wreath fragments and human waste. The Pinsk Holocaust memorial was damaged in April 2005. In Brest, a monument commemorating local Jewish Holocaust victims was defiled in November 2004. In Gorodeya, a Holocaust memorial was damaged in July 2004.



Vandalism at a Minsk Holocaust memorial in May 2003



In July 2004, reports surfaced that a publishing company connected with the Russian Orthodox Church in Belarus published two anti-Semitic works sold through the "Orthodox Book" shop in central Minsk. One book, *There Are No Inferior Peoples*, claims that the Soviet system was built on the model of the Jewish community. The other book, *How Anti-Semites are Made*, compares Zionism to fascism. The author, priest Andrey Kuraev, remains an influential figure in the Church in Belarus.



The old synagogue in Mogilev

Belarus sent a delegation to the 2005 OSCE conference on anti-Semitism in Cordoba, Spain. The Belarusian Chairman of the Committee on Religion and Nationalities, Stanislav Buko, submitted a statement saying that "Belarus, its civil society, categorically condemns all forms of anti-Semitism, as well as xenophobia and intolerance and racism as a whole." In December 2005, Eduard Skobelev, editor of the Presidential Administration's bulletin, released a book containing anti-Semitic statements and accusations, while claiming he had the support of the Presidential Administration.

In April 2006, a Jewish music teacher was threatened with criminal prosecution for celebrating Purim with Jewish children during an optional class on Jewish culture at a state-run kindergarten in the eastern city of Mogilev.

In July 2006, former Belarusian parliamentarians and opposition members requested the Prosecutor General to file incitement charges against a publisher of anti-Semitic literature connected to the Orthodox Church. Noting that the literature is being printed at a state-run facility, the oppositionists warned that this implicated the government in the publication of hate literature.

In November 2006, the Belarusian KGB declined to investigate the latest desecration of the Yama Holocaust memorial in Minsk, which had been defaced with swastikas and anti-Semitic leaflets by a group calling itself the "White Rus-Aryan Resistance Front." Dismissing the incident as "teenage hooliganism," the KGB said it saw no need to investigate the incident and that it had no information on this group. In October 2006, in response to complaints by a local opposition activist who had been threatened by local members of the openly neo-Nazi Russian National Unity (RNU) movement, the Belarusian KGB replied that no such organization was registered with local authorities and therefore did not operate in the activist's home region. Belarusian opposition activists reported several other cases of RNU harassment, intimidation, and death threats in 2006, and have accused the Belarusian government of turning a blind eye.

In March 2007, following a visit by the Israeli ambassador to Belarus, the city authorities of Mogilev gave permission for the reconstruction of an old ruined synagogue in the city and for the erection of a Holocaust memorial on the site of the former Mogilev ghetto, to be funded in part by the local Jewish community. Later in the month, an international conference on Belarusian-Jewish dialogue took place in Minsk. Experts from Belarus, Israel, Russia, and Ukraine participated in the conference, which was

organized by the Belarusian State University with the assistance of the Israeli Embassy and several Jewish organizations.