

World Watch Research

Belarus: Background Information

September 2024



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Copyright and sources

World Watch Research has divided up the previously named Full Country Dossier into two separate documents:

- Background country information (published annually in summer)
- Persecution dynamics (published annually in January).

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Map of country



Belarus: Population (UN estimate for 2024)	Christians	Chr%
9,455,000	7,439,000	78.7

Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., World Christian Database, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024

Recent history

Belarus only became an officially independent republic in 1991. Neighboring countries have always been dominant: The government of Belarus under President Alexander Lukashenko cannot make major policy decisions without bearing in mind what its powerful eastern neighbor Russia thinks.

Until the 20th century, the territory of modern-day Belarus was controlled by a variety of states including the Principality of Polotsk (11th-14th centuries), the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (14th-18th centuries), and the Russian Empire (1795-1917). When the Russian Empire ended with the Communist revolution in October 1917, Belarus officially became a socialist republic and founding member of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) in 1922. Soviet agricultural and economic policies, including collectivization and five-year plans for the national economy, led to famine and political repression.

Belarus declared itself sovereign on 27 July 1990 and officially became the Republic of Belarus on 25 August 1991. A national Constitution was adopted in March 1994 in which the functions of prime minister were given to the president of Belarus - thus concentrating most of the power in the country in the hands of one person. The formerly unknown Alexander Lukashenko was elected president in July 1994 and he was re-elected in 2001, 2006, 2010, 2015 and again in 2020. Western governments have criticized Lukashenko's authoritarian style of government.

After years of embracing Russian influence in the country, President Lukashenko began to encourage a revival of Belarusian identity in 2014, following the Russian annexation of Crimea and the military intervention in Eastern Ukraine. For the first time, he delivered a speech in Belarusian (rather than Russian, which most people use), in which he said "We are not Russian - we are Belarusians", and later encouraged the use of Belarusian. Trade and border disputes, and a much more relaxed official attitude towards dissident voices are all part of a weakening of the long-time warm relationship with Russia.

On 9 August 2020 presidential elections were held in Belarus, but this time, things did not go so smoothly. On 24 May 2020 more than a thousand people [demonstrated](#) against Lukashenko and his intention to go for a sixth term in office (RFE-RL, 24 May 2020). Demonstrations in Belarus became more widespread and continued after Lukashenko won the 9 August elections. When the head of the Roman Catholic Church in Belarus, Archbishop Tadeusz Kondrusiewicz, made some critical remarks, the Belarusian government refused him [entry to the country](#) after he had visited family in Poland (Source: Asia News, 1 September 2020). The conflict with the Roman Catholics was only solved when the archbishop [stepped down](#) in December 2020 (Asia News, 25 January 2021).

Lukashenko was sworn in as president on 23 September 2020. After consultations with Russian President Putin the regime of Lukashenko began tightening the screws: Hundreds of pro-democracy demonstrators were arrested. In March 2021 more than 400 people had been convicted in the crackdown. In April 2021, lawmakers approved a second reading of [several amendments](#) to legislation severely restricting civil rights and the free flow of information (RFE/RL, 16 April 2021). These events caused the Lukashenko regime to move closer to Russia.

When Russia invaded Ukraine on 24 February 2022, Lukashenko officially stated that his country's armed forces were not taking part in the operation ([RFE/RL, 24 February 2022](#)). It soon became clear that this did not mean his country was not assisting Russian forces. In March 2022 the Belarusian government shut down Ukraine's consulate in the western city of Brest and ordered an unspecified number of Ukrainian diplomats to leave the Ukrainian Embassy in Minsk ([RFR/RL, 23 March 2022](#)).

As reported by [Euro News on 26 February 2024](#):

- The February 2024 elections "have further cemented the 30-year iron rule of Lukashenko, who [also] declared his intention to seek yet another five-year term in next year's presidential election." (He marks his 70th birthday in August 2024.)
- "Only candidates belonging to the four officially registered parties that are loyal to the country's authoritarian leader, President Alexander Lukashenko, were allowed to compete in the polls."
- "Opposition leader, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, in exile since challenging Lukashenko in the 2020 presidential election, had called for a boycott of the vote which she said was a 'senseless farce'".

Political and legal landscape

According to the Belarusian Constitution, Belarus is a presidential republic, governed by a president and the National Assembly. The term for each presidency is currently five years. Alexander Lukashenko has been the president of Belarus since 1994.

The National Assembly is a bicameral parliament comprising the 110-member House of Representatives (the lower house) and the 64-member Council of the Republic (the upper house). In the 2012 parliamentary election, 105 of the 110 members elected to the House of Representatives were not affiliated with any political party. The Communist Party of Belarus won 3 seats, and the Agrarian Party and Republican Party of Labor and Justice, one each.

Belarus has been labeled "Europe's last dictatorship" by some Western journalists, because President Lukashenko has described himself as having an "authoritarian ruling style". The Council of Europe has barred Belarus from membership since 1997 for undemocratic voting and election irregularities in the November 1996 constitutional referendum and parliament by-elections. The Belarusian government is also criticized for human rights violations and its harsh attitude towards non-governmental organizations, independent journalists, national minorities and opposition politicians.

President Lukashenko has continued a number of Soviet-era policies, such as state-ownership of large sections of the economy. Elections under Lukashenko's rule have been widely criticized as unfair; and according to many countries and organizations, political opposition has been violently suppressed. Belarus is also the last country in Europe using the death penalty. The political unrest after the 9 August 2020 presidential elections was brutally crushed (see further below in this section).

According to Article 16 of the Constitution, Belarus has no official religion. While the freedom of worship is granted in the same article, religious organizations deemed harmful to the government or social order can be prohibited. The Office of the Plenipotentiary Representative for Religious and Nationality Affairs (OPRRNA) regulates all religious matters. The government has continued to restrict religious freedom in accordance with the provisions of a 2002 law on religion. The law bans all religious activity by unregistered groups and subjects group members to penalties ranging from unspecified fines to two years in prison. The government has continued to arrest or fine individuals for organizing unauthorized religious meetings in private homes, for proselytizing, and for refusing to serve in the armed forces despite the enactment of a law permitting alternative forms of national service. Minority religious groups continued to have difficulty registering and in some cases remained reluctant to apply for registration, reportedly out of fear of harassment and punishment.

According to US State Department ([IRFR 2023 Belarus](#)):

- “The constitution grants individuals the freedom to profess or not to profess and to spread any religious belief and to participate in acts of worship and religious rituals and rites that are not prohibited by law. It stipulates all faiths are equal before the law. The constitution states relations between the state and religious organizations shall be regulated by the law ‘with regard to their influence on the formation of the spiritual, cultural, and state traditions of the Belarusian people.’ It prohibits activities by religious groups that are directed against the country's sovereignty, its constitutional system, and ‘civic harmony’; involve a violation of civil rights and liberties; ‘impede the execution of state, public, and family duties’ by its citizens; or are detrimental to public

health and morality. It also prohibits the creation of political parties or other associations, or political activities that propagate religious hatred. The constitution states the law shall determine conditions for exemption from military service and the performance of alternative service as a substitute. It stipulates the state may grant asylum to persons persecuted in other states for their religious beliefs.”

- “The law recognizes the ‘determining role’ of the BOC, an exarchate (affiliate) of the Russian Orthodox Church, in the development of the traditions of the people, as well as the historical importance of four other religious groups that the government commonly referred to as ‘traditional’ faiths: Roman Catholicism, Judaism, Islam, and evangelical Lutheranism. The law does not consider as traditional faiths newer religious groups or older groups, such as the priestless Old Believers, Greek Catholics, and the Calvinist churches, which have roots in the country dating to the 17th century.”
- “The law penalizes organizing and participating in unauthorized gatherings, the announcement of an intention to hold a mass event before securing official authorization, training protesters, financing public demonstrations, or soliciting foreign assistance "to the detriment" of the country. Included in the definition of ‘mass event’ are religious events held in places not specifically intended for this purpose, whether outdoors or indoors. The law requires organizers to request permission from authorities to hold a mass event, including those involving religious groups, at least 15 days before the event. Some violations of the law prohibiting unauthorized mass events may be punishable by up to three years in prison. Authorities must inform organizers of a denial no later than five days before the event. In some cases, a first violation of the law within a year's time involves an administrative penalty of a fine or detention up to 15 days, while if there is a second or further violation during that period the person may be imprisoned up to three years.”
- “The law confines the activities of religious communities and associations to the jurisdictional area where they are registered. The law permits state agencies in charge of registration to issue written warnings to a registered religious group for violating any law or undertaking activities outside the scope of responsibilities in the group's charter. Authorities may apply to a relevant court, depending upon jurisdiction, to shut down the group if it has not ceased the illegal activity outlined in the written warning within six months or if the activity is repeated within one year of the warning. Authorities may suspend activities of the religious group pending the court's decision. The law does not contain a provision for appealing a warning or suspension.”
- “The law prohibits all religious activity by unregistered groups and criminalizes activities conducted on behalf of unregistered groups, which are punishable by up to two years in prison.”

According to [USCIRF Report on Religious Freedom in Belarus](#), December 2023:

- “The religious freedom situation in Belarus continues to deteriorate as Belarusian President Aleksandr Lukashenka subjugates every aspect of social life to the state's security and bureaucratic apparatuses. Following popular protests against the fraudulent 2020 election which kept President Lukashenka in power, authorities launched a brutal and ongoing crackdown on civil society that has transformed the country into a totalitarian state, with the government perceiving any activities independent of its control as a threat to its existence. The government has banned or shut down independent media, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and opposition political parties and criminalized engaging with these organizations. Law enforcement has regularly imprisoned, tortured, denied medical care to, and killed prodemocracy protesters,

opposition politicians, journalists, and human rights activists for peacefully expressing their views, assembling, or documenting government abuses.”

- “The state has not exempted religious communities from this overwhelming pressure and has sought to re-exert its authority to regulate religious affairs. In 2023, Belarus’ parliament considered adopting a new religion law that would impose stricter requirements on religious communities and unjustifiably prohibit them from certain religious and political activities. Law enforcement agencies harass Protestants who conduct ordinary religious activities without state approval, and local authorities pressure Roman Catholics by targeting their houses of worship, including Minsk’s iconic Church of Saints Simon and Helena (also known as the Red Church). Christian religious leaders of all denominations are often detained, fined, imprisoned, and forced into exile for activities that the state perceives as political in nature. From 2004 to 2012, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) had previously placed Belarus on its tier two “Watch List” for its government’s violations of religious freedom.”

According to Forum 18 [BELARUS: Religious Freedom Survey, January 2023](#):

Freedom of religion and belief, with its interlinked human rights, are being seriously violated in Belarus. Violations have increased since the presidential election in August 2020, and the regime's support for Russia's renewed invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Serious freedom of religion and belief violations documented by Forum 18 include but are not limited to:

- a web of "legal" restrictions which against international human rights law make the exercise of freedom of religion and belief dependent on state permission;
- surveillance by the KGB secret police of religious believers along with monitoring of and restrictions on religious communities by the Plenipotentiary for Religious and Ethnic Affairs;
- banning religious communities from legally existing unless they have state registration;
- arbitrary obstacles imposed on the activities of even registered communities, such as denials of building permission;
- multiple restrictions on where religious events can be held, what an event can be about, and how participants can act;
- obstacles against religious communities using and reclaiming their places of worship including, in Minsk, the denial of use of the Catholic "Red Church" after a fire in unexplained circumstances, and the forcible eviction of New Life Pentecostal Church and bans on it meeting in-person for worship;
- compulsory prior state censorship of and restrictions on the distribution of most religious literature and objects, which runs in parallel with the threat of banning texts or websites as allegedly "extremist";
- large scale repression of meetings for worship and nationwide belief-based protests against election fraud, regime violence, and the invasion of Ukraine;
- the prosecution of and removal from office of religious leaders, which in the case of Orthodox clergy happens in collaboration with the Belarusian Orthodox Church;
- forced participation of state employees in regime-ordered religious events to support the regime;
- serious human rights violations against political prisoners, including their freedom of religion or belief;

- strict controls on the exercise by foreign citizens of their freedom of religion and belief, including arbitrary denials of permission to work to Catholic priests.

On 2 June 2023, the regime made public on its legal website the draft of the [proposed new Religion Law](#), prepared by the Plenipotentiary for Religious and Ethnic Affairs Aleksandr Rumak (Forum 18, 15 June 2023). The website said the draft Law was open for public comments from 5 to 15 June. This new, repressive law was sent to parliament in [October 2023](#) (Forum 18, 18 October 2023).

The proposed new Law would among other things:

- continue to require all religious communities to gain state registration before they are allowed to operate;
- ban "the activity of unregistered religious organisations";
- impose compulsory re-registration within one year on all registered religious communities, paralleling earlier demands on political parties and other public associations;
- impose even tighter registration restrictions and conditions;
- make extensive and arbitrary use of the undefined terms "extremism", "terrorism", and "the ideology of the Belarusian state" to justify restricting the exercise of freedom of religion or belief and related fundamental freedoms;
- give the regime new powers for regime to inspect and monitor religious communities;
- give greater "legal" possibilities for the regime to forcibly close religious communities;
- continue and increase censorship and restrictions on religious literature and items, including banning educational establishments from including religious literature in their libraries;
- impose new restrictions on religious education by religious communities, as well as increasing regime surveillance of this;
- aim to separate religious communities from involvement with wider society;
- and impose new restrictions on religious charitable activity (see below).

When Lukashenko was sworn in as president on 23 September 2020, he held consultations with Russian President Putin and then began dealing harshly with political demonstrators; when church leaders began to show support for the demonstrations, they too were targeted by Lukashenko's regime. There were at first no changes in the religious legislation of Belarus after it came once more under closer Russian influence. The equivalent of the Russian Yarovaya laws, for instance, have not been introduced in Belarus, and Jehovah's Witnesses are not banned in Belarus as they are in Russia. However, the June 2023 proposal for a New Law on Religion shows the government's intention to considerably tighten control.

On 21 December 2020, President Lukashenko issued a [decree against all forms of regime dissent](#) by religious leaders (Asia News, 23 December 2020). The decree required the new head of the Department for Religions and Nationalities, Aleksandr Rumak, "to punish in the most severe way all those who disturb the peaceful coexistence of our people and work to the detriment of our state". According to the president, "these are not many, but we must take them and show them, even within religious communities". Among those targeted was the former Orthodox Metropolitan Pavel, removed by the very top of the Moscow patriarchate and replaced by the more loyal Venjamin. Lukashenko has thus made it clear that no church leaders in Belarus may express any form of government criticism.

When dispersing peaceful protests, the authorities, including plain-clothes law enforcement officers, resorted to excessive use of force. Police arbitrarily detained people for wearing or exhibiting the white-red-white stripe pattern associated with the protest movement, at times using brutal force, and charged them with violating rules on public gatherings even if they were detained during raids on apartment buildings (HRW 2022 Belarus country chapter).

On 27 February 2022 a referendum was held in Belarus. The vote was marked by large protests in Minsk and elsewhere against the ballot and Belarus's role in Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Nearly 800 people were detained by police, according to the Interior Ministry. The constitutional changes would allow Lukashenka, who has ruled the country since 1994, to secure further time in office and guarantee him lifelong immunity from prosecution after his eventual withdrawal from politics. It would also allow Russian troops and nuclear weapons to be permanently stationed in Belarus in the future (Source: [RFE/RL, 28 February 2022](#)).

The Belarusian authorities have used a variety of bogus charges to prosecute their critics, including "defamation" charges over insulting Aleksandr Lukashenka or the government, "inciting enmity" against the "social group of law enforcement officers," or "violent acts or threat of violence against law enforcement officers." Authorities also widely used charges related to "extremism" and "terrorism" against critics for actions such as leaving critical comments on social media, following "extremist" Telegram channels, or having a white-red-white tattoo. Belarusian authorities continued detaining and prosecuting people in connection with peaceful protests in 2020, including some who returned to Belarus from abroad. Workers of state companies faced mass layoffs in connection with their alleged participation in the protests. In 2023, authorities subjected family members of political prisoners to arbitrary searches, detentions, interrogations, and other forms of harassment. In January 2023, a court in Brest sentenced Daria Losik to two years' imprisonment on charges of "aiding extremist activity" over an interview she gave about her incarcerated husband, a popular blogger and journalist, Ihar Losik, to independent broadcaster Belsat, which Belarusian authorities had labeled extremist. Her sentencing left the Losiks' 4-year-old daughter in the care of her grandparents (Source: Human Rights Watch [World Report 2024 - Country Chapter Belarus](#)).

2024

In January 2024, President Lukashenka signed the law tightening the activities of religious organizations by forcing re-registration and restricting associations to older groups with nationwide presences (Source: [RFE/RL, 4 January 2024](#)).

- On 25 February 2024 tightly controlled parliamentary elections were held under heavy security at polling stations amid calls for a boycott by the country's beleaguered opposition. Electoral authorities in Belarus have said that all 110 mandates of the lower parliament chamber have been occupied. The Central Election Commission said that voter turnout was nearly 74% amid reports of people being intimidated into going to polling stations against their will (Source: [RFE/RL, 26 February 2024](#)).
- President Lukashenko (70 in August 2024) has declared his intention to seek another five-year term in the 2025 presidential election.

Religious landscape

Belarus: Religious context	Number of adherents	%
Christians	7,439,000	78.7
Muslim	26,100	0.3
Hindu	0	0.0
Buddhist	1,100	0.0
Ethnic religionist	480	0.0
Jewish	8,600	0.1
Bahai	100	0.0
Atheist	219,000	2.3
Agnostic	1,760,000	18.6
Other	0	0.0
<i>OTHER includes Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian.</i>		

Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., *World Christian Database*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024

78.7% of the population are Christian according to World Christian Database estimates (accessed May 2024), the majority being Orthodox believers (61.1%). The minority is made up mainly of Roman Catholic, Baptist, Pentecostal and Seventh-Day Adventist churches. Despite decades of atheistic propaganda by the Communists during the Soviet era, most Belarusians consider themselves Christians and part of the Belarusian Orthodox Church (BOC). There is no social hostility towards Orthodox Christians, who generally live their faith as a cultural tradition with occasional attendance at church services. Outreach activities by non-Orthodox denominations are not welcomed.

According to US State Department ([IRFR 2023 Belarus](#)):

- “According to OPRRNA data, as of January 1, there were 25 religious faiths and denominations registered in the country, encompassing 3,417 religious communities and 173 religious associations, monasteries, missions, brotherhoods, sisterhoods, and schools. The BOC has 1,733 religious communities, 15 dioceses, six schools, 36 monasteries, one mission, 15 brotherhoods, and nine sisterhoods. The Roman Catholic Church has four dioceses, six schools, 11 missions, nine monasteries, and 500 communities. Protestant religious organizations of 13 denominations encompass 1,040 religious communities, 21 associations, 22 missions, and five schools. There are 34 registered religious communities of Old Believers. There are three Jewish religious associations - Orthodox, Chabad-Lubavitch, and Reform Judaism - comprising 51 communities. There are 24 registered Muslim religious communities - 23 Sunni and one Shia.”

- “A concordat between authorities and the BOC provides the church with autonomy in its internal affairs, freedom to perform religious rites and other activities, and a special relationship with the state. The concordat recognizes the BOC's "influence on the formation of spiritual, cultural, and national traditions of the Belarusian people." Although the concordat states that it does not limit the religious freedom of other religious groups, it calls for authorities and the BOC to combat unnamed "pseudo-religious structures that present a danger to individuals and society." The BOC, unlike other religious communities, receives state subsidies pursuant to presidential orders. In addition, the BOC possesses the exclusive right to use the word "orthodox" in its title and to use as its symbol the double-barred image of the Cross of Saint Euphrosyne, the country's Orthodox patron saint.”

Belarus is not listed in the [USCIRF 2024 report](#) as either a Country of Particular Concern or a Special Watch List country.

Due to the old Soviet educational system, practically all Belarusian citizens (99.7%) can read. As a result, Christian materials potentially have a big market. But printing, importing and distributing religious materials is strictly monitored.

As described above in *Political and Legal landscape*, Lukashenko made it clear that no church leaders in Belarus can expect to make any form of criticism against the government without punishment. Christians can practice their faith without disruption as long as they are not critical of the regime. They know they are under constant surveillance.

Economic landscape

According to the [World Bank Belarus data](#) (accessed 24 May 2024):

- **GDP (current US\$) (billion):** 72.79 (in 2022)
- **GDP growth (annual %):** -4.7% (in 2022)

According to the [World Factbook Belarus](#) (accessed 24 May 2024):

- “Declining Russian energy subsidies will end in 2024; growing public debt; strong currency pressures have led to higher inflation; recent price controls on basic food and drugs; public sector wage increases and fragile private sector threaten household income gains and economic growth.”

According to [Britannica](#), accessed 24 May 2024), since independence the Belarus economic situation has gone through many ups and downs:

- Devastation during World War II nearly wiped out agriculture and industry in the Belorussian S.S.R., and the intensive postwar drive to restore the economy resulted in a large industrial sector that depended on the other Soviet republics, particularly Russia, for energy and raw materials. The dissolution of the Soviet Union not only dramatically increased the cost of those raw materials but also reduced the traditional market for Belarusian manufactured goods. As a result, production decreased in Belarus during the early 1990s. Moreover, the movement toward a market economy in Belarus was slower than that of other former Soviet republics, with only a small percentage of state-run industry and agriculture privatized in the years following indepen-

dence. Largely in response to this economic upheaval, Belarus sought closer economic ties with Russia. In the early 21st century Russia remained a major trading partner, although relations between the two countries had become tense as a result of disputes over the price of imported gas and oil. Meanwhile, Belarus experienced substantial increases in its gross domestic product (GDP) as well as growing trade with the European Union. The country was hit hard, however, by the global recession that began in 2008. Manufacturing, particularly in the automotive industry, declined, and in 2009 the national currency was devalued.

- The agricultural sector in Belarus, which employs about one-tenth of the labor force but constitutes a diminishing proportion of GDP, is dominated by large collective and state farms. Private holdings were permitted for household use during the Soviet era, but, while their number increased dramatically following independence, they remained small in size. In the early 21st century a significant number of collective farms were sold to private or state-controlled companies.
- Belarus is generally poorly endowed with mineral resources. The government is attempting to accelerate the development of its raw-material base, but Belarus remains dependent on Russia for most of its energy and fossil-fuel requirements. In the 1960s, petroleum was discovered in the southeastern part of the republic, near Rechytsa. Production peaked in 1975 and fell to one-fourth of that total by the 1990s, when it stabilized.
- Belarus does possess, however, one of the world's largest reserves of potash (potassium salts), which was discovered south of Minsk in 1949 and exploited from the 1960s around the new mining town and fertilizer-manufacturing centre of Salihorsk. Potash exports remained high into the early 21st century. The country also is a world leader in the production of peat, which is especially abundant in the Pripet Marshes. In briquette form it is used as fuel. Among the other minerals recovered are salt, an important deposit of which, near Mazyr, was opened in the 1980s; building materials, chiefly limestone and, near Hrodna, quartz sands for glassmaking, both used locally; and small deposits of gold and diamonds.
- Heavy industry is well developed in Belarus. Heavy-duty vehicles, particularly trucks and tractors, are manufactured in Minsk, Zhodzina, and Mahilyow. Other engineering products include machine tools, such as metal-cutting equipment. Precision manufacturing was developed during the 1970s and '80s, notably of such consumer goods as radios, television sets, watches, bicycles, and computers. Other industries are small-scale, and products are mostly for local consumption. These have included timber processing, furniture making, match and paper making, textile and clothing manufacture, and food processing.

According to Bertelsmann Stiftung Transformation Index [Belarus Country Report 2024](#) (accessed 24 May 2024):

- "Economically, Belarus recovered post-COVID-19 in 2021 but faced a recession in 2022 (-4.7%) due to Western sanctions, reinforced after the migration crisis on the Belarusian-European border and the regime's complicity in the Russian war against Ukraine. Growing isolation from the West prompted deeper integration with Russia."

- "It's worth noting that the Belarusian economy is characterized by a high level of monopolization in raw material markets and a substantial concentration of economic power within financial-industrial groups and holding companies. These challenges have been further compounded by adverse external and internal economic conditions, including the impact of Western sectoral sanctions. As of the beginning of 2023, the State Register of Natural Monopolies included 185 entities, while the Register of Economic Entities Holding a Dominant Position in Commodity Markets listed 857 entities."
- "Economic ties with Russia remain strong and are facilitated by Belarus' membership in the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and the Union State. The EAEU Treaty establishes shared tariffs and coordinated non-tariff trade rules. Nonetheless, as of early 2023, there were 34 administrative constraints and eight market access barriers even within EAEU member states. Belarus is also obligated by the EAEU to align its tariffs with those of Russia and Kazakhstan in accordance with their WTO commitments."

Christians in Belarus do not experience any difference in economic matters from other Belarusian citizens.

Social and cultural landscape

According to the [World Factbook Belarus](#) (accessed 24 May 2024):

- **Main ethnic groups:** Belarusian 83.7%, Russian 8.3%, Polish 3.1%, Ukrainian 1.7%, other 2.4%, unspecified 0.9% (2009 est.)
- **Main languages:** Russian (official) 71.4%, Belarusian (official) 26%, other 0.3% (includes small Polish- and Ukrainian-speaking minorities), unspecified 2.3% (2019 est.)
- **Urban population:** 80.7% of total population (2023)
- **Literacy rate:** 99.9% (male: 99.9%, female: 99.9%) (2019)

According to the [UNDP Human Development Report Belarus](#) (updates as of 13 March 2024):

- **HDI score and ranking:** 0.801 (0.801 for females, 0.799 for males), ranking 69 (2022)
- **Total population:** 9.5 million (2022)
- **Life expectancy at birth:** 73.2 years (78.4 for females, 68.1 for males) (2022)
- **Expected years of schooling:** 14.0 years (13.9 for females, 14.0 for males) (2022)
- **Gender Inequality index:** 0.096 (2022)
- **Labor Force Participation Rate (% ages 15 years and older):** Female: 65.8, Male: 75.3 (2022)

Like many other eastern European countries, Belarus has a negative population growth rate and a negative natural growth rate. With an efficient health system, Belarus has a very low infant mortality rate. According to the United Nations Development Program, the GINI coefficient (inequality indicator) is one of the lowest in Europe.

The Belarusian labor market is highly regulated. Important elements of the central-planning system are still in place. In principle, the decision to determine wages is left to firms, but the government can influence the structure of wages through the so-called tariff system, a type of centrally determined wage grid. The tariff system is binding in the budget sector, including enterprises and organizations

mainly financed and subsidized within the state and/or the local budgets. The private (so-called self-financing) sector, representing only a small share of employment, has little autonomy.

The official unemployment rate is lower than 1%. Many unemployed people in Belarus are trying to avoid registration because of the resulting obligatory public duties, while unemployment benefits are very low (~70,000 BYR per month, or less than \$5).

Many people in Belarus earn low wages – luxury goods are scarce. 5.7% of the population is living below the poverty line. The economic problems have also had its effect on the Church. Buying equipment and materials for maintaining churches has been nearly impossible in recent years.

The fact that Belarus depends so heavily on Russia has also affected Protestants in particular, since contacts with the West have been limited.

Technological landscape

According to [DataReportal Digital 2024: Belarus](#) (23 February 2024) / survey date - January 2024:

- **Internet usage:** 89.5% penetration
- **Social media usage:** 59.4% of the total population. As of January 2024, 54.0% of Belarus's social media users were female, while 46.0% were male.
- **Active cellular mobile connections:** 120.5% of the total population

According to the [World Factbook Belarus](#) (accessed 24 May 2024):

- "7 state-controlled national TV channels; Polish and Russian TV broadcasts are available in some areas; state-run Belarusian Radio operates 5 national networks and an external service; Russian and Polish radio broadcasts are available (2019)"

According to [BuddeComm Research](#) (updated May 2024):

- "The government of Belarus has successfully promoted the migration to an all-IP platform as part of a wider effort towards a digital transformation for the economy. In the process, the state-supported infrastructure operator beCloud has built an extensive fibre network which reaches all but the smallest settlements in the country. Belarus has the second highest fibre penetration rate in Europe, behind only Iceland. LTE coverage is almost universal, while considerable progress has also been made in developing 5G services."
- "On the down side, the country faces considerable political and economic turmoil, and telcos have had to invest in network infrastructure while managing a significant fall in the value of the local currency (particularly against the euro and the US dollar). The depreciation of the currency is expected to continue further into 2022, though at an uncertain rate. Telcos are separately affected by difficulties in securing supplies of equipment as a result of EU sanctions. In addition, Ukrainian mobile operators have stopped roaming with Belarusian networks."
- "Although the sector has been reformed, this has not yet resulted in the privatisation of the incumbent, despite the government being pressed to sell state enterprises in a bid to reduce overall debt. Revenue growth for Beltelecom is expected to come from the FttP sector, where much of the company's capex is directed."

According to Freedom House's [Freedom on the Net 2023](#) Belarus report:

- Belarus is listed as 'not free' with a score of 25 points.
- “Internet freedom in Belarus deteriorated further during the coverage period. The government intensified its suppression of online critical voices, blocking of independent media outlets and information sources, and use of legislation to criminalize online materials produced by what it deemed to be “extremist” or “terrorist” groups. Although virtually all nonstate media outlets are now operating from exile, they continue to disseminate content via social media and messaging applications. In the context of the ongoing political crisis and the full-scale Russian military invasion of Ukraine, the Belarusian government increased its arbitrary arrests of media workers, online activists, and ordinary users, imposing lengthy prison sentences on those detained. Security forces conducted raids, employed torture, and released forced-confession videos to deter and silence critical speech. The impact of war and international sanctions has compelled the government to sharply increase its propaganda and other efforts to manipulate the information environment.”
- “Belarus is a consolidated authoritarian state ruled by Alyaksandr Lukashenka, who first took office as president in 1994. Elections are openly orchestrated, and civil liberties are tightly restricted. Since 2020, when Lukashenka’s fraudulent reelection prompted mass protests, the regime has depended on support from Moscow to maintain its grip on power and the country’s overall human rights situation has declined precipitously. Tens of thousands of people have been arrested, and as many as 250,000 Belarusians, including most of the country’s independent media workers, may have emigrated since the crackdown began. By the end of May 2023, approximately 3,300 people had been convicted in politically motivated criminal crimes, and the Viasna Human Rights Center, a Belarusian civil society organization, had recognized 1,496 political prisoners in the country, including at least 33 media workers.”

Security situation

Until 2020, Belarus was a stable, authoritarian country ruled by President Alexander Lukashenko. Until 2020, Belarus tried to maintain a good relationship with the West. No visas were required and usually travelling and the crossing of borders went without problems. This changed dramatically in May 2020, when growing numbers of the opposition took to the streets to protest against President Lukashenko running for re-election. At first these demonstrations took place peacefully, but after President Lukashenko claimed he had won the 9 August 2020 elections the situation deteriorated. Security forces and police began to use increasing violence and hundreds of protestors were arrested and sent to jail. Leaders of the opposition fled abroad, but even this did not satisfy the regime. In a dramatic example of the regime’s ruthlessness towards the opposition, the [Belarusian authorities](#) forced down a Ryanair flight on false pretenses on 23 May 2021 to enable them to detain activist Raman Pratasevich and his girlfriend, Sofya Sapega (Human Rights Watch, 24 May 2021).

In 2021, thousands of migrants from the Middle East, South Asia, and Africa attempted to enter Poland and fellow EU members Latvia and Lithuania illegally via Belarus, many of them after arriving in Minsk by plane. This led to a huge refugee crisis and the sealing of the borders ([RFE/RL, 10 November 2021](#)).

Although the regime of Lukashenko has so far managed to stay out of the war in Ukraine that was launched by Russia on 24 February 2022, there have been joint military exercises in Belarus which

clearly gives a signal to Ukraine. The war has also increased tension with neighboring NATO countries Latvia, Lithuania and Poland (Source: [RFE/RL, 30 December 2021](#)).

Nuclear weapons in Belarus

On 13 June 2023 President Lukashenko announced that Russian tactical nuclear weapons were to arrive in his country shortly, earlier than previously thought for a move that has heightened already strained tensions between the Kremlin and the West. Lukashenka said the decision to deploy tactical nuclear weapons on Belarusian soil was his and not that of Russian President Vladimir Putin, who said that the weapons would likely be deployed around the second week of July, once storage facilities were ready (Source: [RFE/RL, 13 June 2023](#)). In April 2024 Lukashenko then confirmed that "several dozen Russian nuclear weapons" were now deployed in Belarus. Speaking at the All-Belarusian People's Assembly in Minsk (broadcast live on YouTube on 25 April 2024), Lukashenko stated that a new military policy had been adopted which sees the deployment of Russian nuclear weapons on Belarusian soil as a strategic deterrent (Source: [RFE/RL, 25 April 2024](#)).

Christian origins

Christianity came to Belarus from two separate directions - in the form of Catholicism from the west, and in the form of Orthodoxy from the east. Poland converted to Catholic Christianity in 966, while Russia converted to Orthodoxy in 988. Both churches spread the Gospel into surrounding areas. By the end of the 12th century, Europe was generally divided into two blocks: A western area dominated by Catholicism and an eastern area dominated by Orthodox and Byzantine influences. The dividing line between the two was roughly along the Bug River. This is the area where today's Belarus is to be found. When Protestantism came into existence in the 16th century, it soon reached Lithuania (and Belarus). The first Protestant Church in Belarus was established in Brest by Mikolaj "the Black" Radziwill (1515-1565).

Before 1917, Belarus had 2,466 religious communities, including: 1,650 Orthodox, 127 Catholic, 657 Jewish, 32 Protestant, and several Muslim communities. Under Communist rule, the activities of these communities were severely restricted. Many religious communities were eradicated and their leaders exiled or executed; the remaining communities were sometimes co-opted by the government for its own ends, as in the effort to instill patriotism during World War II.

(Sources: Fedor, H (ed.), Belarus: [A Country Study](#). Washington: GPO for the Library of Congress, 1995; [q4 Tours](#), accessed 4 March 2024)

Church spectrum today

Belarus: Church networks	Christians	%
Orthodox	5,780,000	77.7
Catholic	976,000	13.1
Protestant	251,000	3.4
Independent	74,000	1.0
Unaffiliated	378,000	5.1
Doubly-affiliated Christians	-18,500	-0.2
Total	7,440,500	100.0
<i>(Any deviation from the total number of Christians stated above is due to the rounding of decimals)</i>		
Evangelical movement	79,400	1.1
Pentecostal-Charismatic	238,000	3.2

Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., *World Christian Database*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024

Orthodox: Eastern (Chalcedonian), Oriental (Pre-Chalcedonian, Non-Chalcedonian, Monophysite), Nestorian (Assyrian), and non-historical Orthodox. **Roman Catholics:** All Christians in communion with the Church of Rome. **Protestants:** Christians in churches originating in or in communion with the Western world's 16th-century Protestant Reformation. Includes Anglicans, Lutherans and Baptists (any of whom may be Charismatic) and denominational Pentecostals, but not Independent traditions such as Independent Baptists nor independent Charismatics. **Independents:** Christians who do not identify with the major Christian traditions (Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Protestant). **Unaffiliated Christians:** Persons professing publicly to be Christians but who are not affiliated to churches. **Doubly-affiliated Christians:** Persons affiliated to or claimed by 2 denominations at once. **Evangelical movement:** Churches, denominations, and individuals who identify themselves as evangelicals by membership in denominations linked to evangelical alliances (e.g., World Evangelical Alliance) or by self-identification in polls. **Pentecostal-Charismatic:** Church members involved in renewal in the Holy Spirit, sometimes known collectively as "Renewalists".

According to the World Christian Database data (accessed May 2024) the largest denominations in Belarus are:

- The Belarusian Orthodox Church
- The Roman Catholic Church
- Unaffiliated Christians
- The Pentecostal Union

Further useful reports

A selection of in-depth reports and smaller articles are available on the Research & Reports pages of the Open Doors website:

- <https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/research-reports/>.

These are also available on the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom):

- <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/?s=Belarus>
- <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/reports/>.

External Links

- Recent history: demonstrated - <https://www.rferl.org/a/more-than-1-000-belarusians-protest-lukashenka-s-bid-for-sixth-term/30631784.html>
- Recent history: entry to the country - <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Lukashenko:-Archbishop-Kondrusiewicz-'persona-non-grata'-in-Russia-and-Belarus-50917.html>
- Recent history: stepped down - <http://asianews.it/news-en/Msgr.-Kondrusiewicz's-farewell:-'Thank-you-for-your-solidarity'-52155.html>
- Recent history: several amendments - <https://www.rferl.org/a/belarus-lawmakers-approve-second-reading-of-draconian-bills-to-limit-freedoms/31207699.html>
- Recent history: RFE/RL, 24 February 2022 - <https://www.rferl.org/a/31720334.html>
- Recent history: RFR/RL, 23 March 2022 - <https://www.rferl.org/a/31767073.html>
- Recent history: Euro News on 26 February 2024 - <https://www.euronews.com/2024/02/26/belarus-elections-were-a-sham-us-says-as-results-are-announced>
- Political and legal landscape: IRFR 2023 Belarus - <https://www.state.gov/reports/2023-report-on-international-religious-freedom/belarus/>
- Political and legal landscape: USCIRF Report on Religious Freedom in Belarus - <https://www.uscirf.gov/news-room/releases-statements/uscirf-releases-report-religious-freedom-belarus>
- Political and legal landscape: BELARUS: Religious Freedom Survey, January 2023 - https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2806
- Political and legal landscape: proposed new Religion Law - https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2839
- Political and legal landscape: October 2023 - https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2868
- Political and legal landscape: decree against all forms of regime dissent - <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/-Lukashenko-clamps-down-on-churches-and-opposition-51920.html>
- Political and legal landscape: RFE/RL, 28 February 2022 - <https://www.rferl.org/a/31727695.html>
- Political and legal landscape: World Report 2024 - Country Chapter Belarus - <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2024/country-chapters/belarus>
- Political and legal landscape: RFE/RL, 4 January 2024 - <https://www.svaboda.org/a/32758849.html>
- Political and legal landscape: RFE/RL, 26 February 2024 - <https://www.rferl.org/a/belarus-parliament-elections-farce-sham-lukashenko/32835316.html>
- Religious landscape description: IRFR 2023 Belarus - <https://www.state.gov/reports/2023-report-on-international-religious-freedom/belarus/>
- Religious landscape description: USCIRF 2024 report - <https://www.uscirf.gov/news-room/releases-statements/uscirf-releases-2024-annual-report-new-recommendations-us-policy>
- Economic landscape: World Bank Belarus data - <https://data.worldbank.org/country/belarus>
- Economic landscape: World Factbook Belarus - <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/belarus/>
- Economic landscape: Britannica - <https://www.britannica.com/place/Belarus/People#ref33467>
- Economic landscape: Belarus Country Report 2024 - <https://bti-project.org/en/reports/country-report/BLR>
- Social and cultural landscape: World Factbook Belarus - <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/belarus/>
- Social and cultural landscape: UNDP Human Development Report Belarus - <https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/specific-country-data#/countries/BLR>
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- Technological landscape: World Factbook Belarus - <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/belarus/>
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- Technological landscape: Freedom on the Net 2023 - <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2023/repressive-power-artificial-intelligence>
- Security situation: Belarusian authorities - <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/05/24/belarus-shocking-new-low-crushing-dissent>
- Security situation: RFE/RL, 10 November 2021 - <https://www.rferl.org/a/belarus-eu-migrants-border-explainer/31555214.html>
- Security situation: RFE/RL, 30 December 2021 - <https://www.rferl.org/a/belarus-russia-military-drills-/31632460.html>
- Security situation: RFE/RL, 13 June 2023 - <https://www.rferl.org/a/32457509.html>

- Security situation: RFE/RL, 25 April 2024 - <https://www.rferl.org/a/32920346.html>
- Christian origins: A Country Study - <https://countrystudies.us/belarus/20.htm>
- Christian origins: g4 Tours - <https://belarus-travel.com/religious-history/>