

# Belarus

## *Ethnicity in Belarus*

### *Power relations*

The demographic majority in Belarus are the Byelorussians, they operate as senior partners next to the largest minority, the Russians. The Russians are junior partners. Russians of Belarus represent an advantaged minority. The current regime of Alexander Lukashenka is decidedly pro-Russian in economic, political and cultural terms. The Russian and Belarusian languages are very similar. And most Belarusians hold a clear affinity to and identification for Russia and the Soviet Union in general. Many of the former differences between the Belarusian and Russian culture and languages were diminished during Soviet rule. A large part of the Belarusian population identifies with Russia <sup>(161)</sup>. The Russian and Byelorussian languages have equal legal status, but, in practice, Russian is the primary language used by the government <sup>(162)</sup>. Russians have also a special status in Belarus, because the country is dependent on Russia (trade, energy) <sup>(163)</sup>. Therefore the Belarusian government adopted inclusive policies towards the Russian minority. The ruling party for example, is ethnically mixed and extremely pro-Russian <sup>(164)</sup>.

The Polish minority was powerless until 2004, then they became discriminated. Starting in May 2005, there was increased governmental and societal discrimination against the ethnic Polish population <sup>(165)</sup>. The government interfered in the internal affairs of the most important Polish NGO: The Union of Belarusian Poles held a congress to elect new leaders. Credible sources stated that the BKGB and the police stopped the Union of Belarusian Poles members' cars in order to prevent them from attending the congress, warned other members to stay away, and pressured others to change their vote in an unsuccessful attempt to secure the re-election of pro-government leaders. Later, the Ministry of Justice declared the congress to have been undemocratic and invalid. And the government-run Grodno regional printing plant refused to print the Union of Belarusian Poles' newspaper, *Glos znad Niemna*, and began printing pro-government versions of the paper without the knowledge of the group's leadership. The defense ministry newspaper *Vo Slavu Rodiny* published an article and poem that denounced the election of the Union of Belarusian Poles' leadership as undemocratic and illegal, likening it to Hitler's fifth column and insinuating that it was aiding a foreign country in trying to overthrow the government.

<sup>161</sup> [Eke Kuzio, 2000]

<sup>162</sup> [U.S. State Department, 2005 - 2009]

<sup>163</sup> [Hancock, 2006]

<sup>164</sup> [Eke Kuzio, 2000]

<sup>165</sup> [U.S. State Department, 2005 - 2009]

The poem encouraged the public to meet such efforts with violence, such as using clubs against "these" Poles. To date governmental and societal discrimination against the ethnic Polish population persists. Authorities continue to harass the unrecognized Union of Poles (<sup>166</sup>). The other minorities, such as Ukrainians, Jews, are irrelevant at the national level. Belarus is an autocratic and repressive state, where the president Lukashenka holds all the power resulting discrimination and suppression of any political opposition (<sup>167</sup>).

*Update 2010-2013:* No changes in the power states since 2005. The Byelorussians are the senior partners in the power-sharing regime with the ethnic Russians, who are the largest minority, as junior partners. Belarus is an autocratic state and the power is concentrated around president Lukashenka. The Polish minority is still politically discriminated due to ongoing arbitrary harassment against and detention of representatives of the Union of Poles of Belarus, the largest political organization of Poles in Belarus (<sup>168</sup>, <sup>169</sup>; <sup>170</sup>).

<sup>166</sup> [U.S. State Department, 2005 - 2009]

<sup>167</sup> [von Steinsdorff, 2010]

<sup>168</sup> [BelarusDigest, 2010]

<sup>169</sup> [BelarusDigest, 2012]

<sup>170</sup> [Radio Free Europe, 2014]

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## *Political status of ethnic groups in Belarus*

*From 1991 until 2004*

Group name	Proportional size	Political status
Byelorussians	0.78	SENIOR PARTNER
Russians	0.132	JUNIOR PARTNER
Poles	0.041	POWERLESS

*From 2005 until 2013*

Group name	Proportional size	Political status
Byelorussians	0.78	SENIOR PARTNER
Russians	0.132	JUNIOR PARTNER
Poles	0.041	DISCRIMINATED

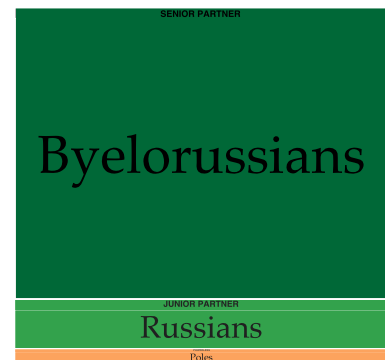


Figure 40: Political status of ethnic groups in Belarus during 1991-2004.

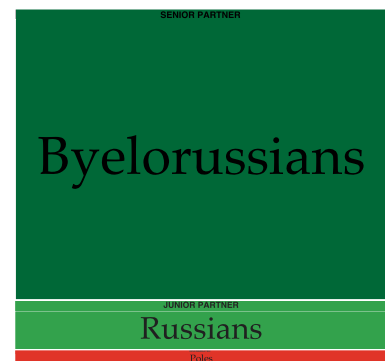


Figure 41: Political status of ethnic groups in Belarus during 2005-2013.

## *Geographical coverage of ethnic groups in Belarus*

*From 1991 until 2013*

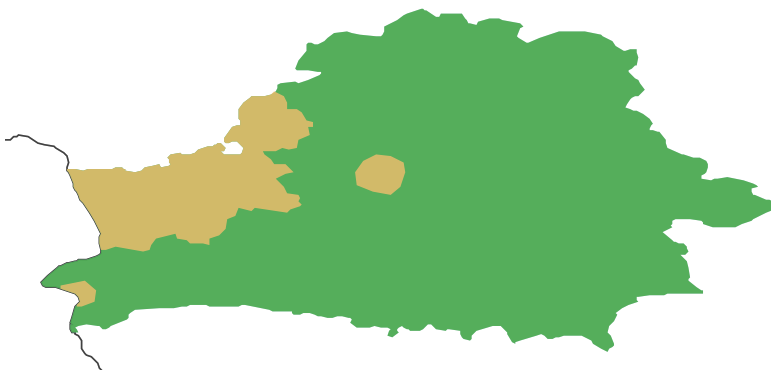


Figure 42: Map of ethnic groups in Belarus during 2005-2013.

Group name	Area in km <sup>2</sup>	Type
■ Byelorussians	206 853	Statewide
■ Russians	206 853	Regional & urban
■ Poles	28 127	Regional & urban

Table 18: List of ethnic groups in Belarus during 1991-2013.