

Reaching the Nations International Church Growth Almanac

Country reports on the LDS Church around the world from a landmark almanac. Includes detailedanalysis of history, context, culture, needs, challenges and opportunities for church growth.



Belarus

Population: 9.61 millions (#93 out of countries)

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Geography

Area: 207,600 square km. Landlocked in Eastern Europe, Belarus borders Russia, Ukraine, Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia. The climate has temperate and maritime characteristics and experiences cold winters and cool summers with frequent participation. Most the terrain is flat with many marshes, swamps, and forests. Large rivers include the Dnieper, Prypyats, and Nyoman. Environmental hazards include the pollution of soil from pesticides and fallout in southern areas from the Chernobyl nuclear accident. Belarus is administratively divided into six provinces and one municipality.

Peoples

Belarusian: 83.7%

Russian: 8.3%

Polish: 3.1%

Other: 2.4%

Ukrainian: 1.7%

Unspecified: 0.9%

Belarus has historically numbered among countries with the most rapidly shrinking populations worldwide due to emigration and low birth rates. Non-Belarusians tend to live in large cities or near the nation’s borders.

Population: 9,527,543 (July 2018)

Annual Growth Rate: -0.24% (2018)

Fertility Rate: 1.49 children born per woman (2018)

Life Expectancy: 67.8 male, 79.0 female (2018)

Languages: Russian (70.2%), Belarusian (23.5%), other or unspecified (6.3%). Belarusian and Russian are the official languages. Polish, Ukrainian, and Eastern Yiddish each have over 100,000 speakers. Languages with over one million speakers include Russian (6.7 million) and Belarusian (2.2 million). The 1999 census reported that 85.6% of Belarusians designated Belarusian as their mother tongue, although only 36% reported speaking it as the primary language in the home. [1] A 2009 study by the Belarusian government reported that 72% of Belarusians speak Russian at home, whereas only 11.9% speak Belarusian at home; 29% can read, write, and speak Belarusian, whereas another 52% can read and speak but not write; this data suggests declining use of Belarusian. Belarusian language was a vernacular arising from the old Russian language with heavy borrowing of Polish vocabulary from the time of the Polish-Lithuanian commonwealth and some orthographic changes to make the language more phonetic (for example, an unstressed “o” in Russian is pronounced as an “a,” whereas in Belarusian it is written as an “a.” The literary form of modern Belarusian was standardized only in the twentieth century. A spectrum of dialects persists, especially near the Polish and Ukrainian borders. Belarusian has relatively high mutual intelligibility with Russian, and somewhat less with Ukrainian and Polish.

Literacy: 99.7% (2015)

History

Slavs first settled Belarus, known as White Russia or White Ruthenia prior to 1918, in the sixth century and later assimilated into the Kievan Rus’ state. Following its collapse, principalities in Belarus aligned with Lithuania and Poland between the twelfth and the late eighteenth centuries. Russia acquired Belarus and retained control. Belarus was occupied by Germany in World War I and in 1918 declared independence. Between 1919 and 1939, territory was divided between the Soviet Union and Poland until united into a single Soviet republic. World War II decimated Belarus and resulted in millions of deaths. Ceded to the Belarusian SSR after World War II were 181,000 square km of Eastern Poland. Independence from the Soviet Union occurred in 1991. Out of the former Soviet republics, Belarus has maintained the closest ties with Russia and signed a treaty in 1999 to propel greater economic and political interaction. The government has heavily regulated political and civil freedoms.

Culture

A lack of distinct, natural borders has allowed cultural influences from most surrounding nations to contribute to modern Belarusian culture. The Soviet Union took drastic strides in attempting to erase Belarusian culture in an effort to suppress Belarusian nationalism. Wars in the twentieth century destroyed most old buildings. Belarus has a proud legacy of poets and writers who focused on rural life. There is also a rich history of music and theater. Alcohol consumption rates rank among the highest in the world at 17.6 liters of pure alcohol per person as of 2010. Tobacco cigarette use rates also number among the highest in the world. Divorce rates are high. Gender roles are traditional and slowly changing.

Economy

GDP per capita: $18,900 (2017) [32% of U.S.]

Human Development Index: 0.808 (2017)

Corruption Index: 44 (2017)

Despite the fragmentation of the Soviet Union, Belarus retained socialist economic policies in the mid-1990s. In the 2000s, a number of private companies had been renationalized, and government has executed stricter regulations and more control. Today, state-owned entities and banks comprise 70-75% of the GDP and banking sector. Although Belarus had a well-developed industrial infrastructure prior to the dissolution of the Soviet Union, it has since become outdated and dependent on Russian energy subsidies to properly function. Ties remain strong with Russia and have fueled much of the increase in GDP during the past couple decades. Economic growth occurred during much of the 2000s despite government policy that limited private business and investment both domestically and internationally. Inflation has been a recent concern. Services constitute the largest economic sector, claiming 66.8% of the workforce and producing 51.1% of the GDP. Industry employs 23.4% of the workforce and produces 40.8% of the GDP. Primary industries include machine tools, tractors, and trucks. Grain, potatoes, and vegetables are common agriculture products. Russia is the primary trade partner; it sends 57.2% of imports and receives 43.9% of Belarusian exports. Other significant trade partners include Ukraine, the United Kingdom, China, and Germany.

Government is highly centralized. Corruption has been regarded as a long-term, serious problem. However, perceived corruption in Belarus according to Transparency International has significantly improved within the last decade. Human trafficking for sexual exploitation and forced labor is a major concern.

Faiths

Christian: 59%

Uncertain: 22%

Unspecified: 9%

Atheist: 8%

Other: 2%

Christians

Denominations – Members – Congregations

Belarusian Orthodox – 5,049,598

Catholic – 571,653

Seventh Day Adventists – 3,773 – 94

Jehovah's Witnesses – 5,913 – 78

Latter-day Saints – 469 – 3

Religion

Approximately 53% of the population self-affiliates as adherents of the Belarusian Orthodox Church, whereas six percent of the population self-affiliates as Roman Catholic. Twenty-two percent (22%) of the population is "uncertain" in regards to its religious affiliation, whereas eight percent is atheist. Two percent of the population pertains to other religious groups such as Protestants, Muslims, Jews, Buddists, Bahais, and other Christian denominations such as Jehovah's Witnesses and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. There are approximately 30,000-40,000 Jews in the country.[2]

Religious Freedom

Religions are regarded as equal in the constitution, but freedom of religion has grown more restricted, especially since a 2002 law pertaining to religion was enacted. There is no official religion, but the Belarusian Orthodox Church receives preferential treatment in order to safeguard traditional religion and Belarusian culture. There are three classifications for religious groups, the smallest being a religious community, which must have at least twenty individuals over age eighteen to function. The registration of religious communities for some denominations (mainly Protestants) has taken years to accomplish. Foreign religious groups and personnel are often viewed with contempt and experience the most harassment. Only registered religious groups can actively follow their beliefs and practices. The government regulates the importation and distribution of religious literature by requiring prior government approval. Foreigners cannot lead congregations. The government often detains those accused of proselytism. Foreign missionaries may serve in the country if approved by government officials.[3]

Largest Cities

Urban: 78.6% (2018)

Minsk, **Gomel, Mogilev, Grodno,** Vitebsk, **Brest, Babruysk, Baranovichi, Barysaw, Pinsk, Orsha, Mazyr, Soligorsk, Lida, Navapolatsk.**

Cities in **bold** have no congregation of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Two of the fifteen cities with over 100,000 inhabitants have a Church congregation. Fifty-five percent (55%) of the national population lives in the thirteen largest cities.

Church History

Elder Russell M. Nelson dedicated Belarus for missionary work in May 1993. At the time there were six young elder missionaries and two senior couples serving in the country.[4] Belarus was included in the Latvia Riga Mission for a brief time. In 2004, two American missionaries accused of illegally proselytizing in Mogilev were expelled.[5] In 2012, the Church reassigned Belarus to the Baltic Mission.

Membership Growth

LDS Membership: 469 (2018)

In the mid-1990s, there were approximately 200 members. At the end of 2000, membership increased to 383 members, reaching 403 in 2002. In 2014, a local member in Minsk reported that the Minsk Branch had a large primary and many families who attended church – a rarity in the Baltic Mission. There were 469 members in 2018 – approximately 90% of whom reportedly lived in the Minsk metropolitan area.

In 2018, one in 20,315 was a Latter-day Saint.

Congregational Growth

Branches: 3 (2018)

Many congregations were organized in the early 1990s in Minsk when the Church was first established in Belarus. In the mid-1990s, there were nine branches, including four in Minsk. The Minsk Belarus District was organized during this period. Most of these congregations were closed or consolidated in the late 1990s. By year-end 2000, there was only one branch in Minsk. Despite only one branch functioning, small groups of members also met in Baranovichi, Brest, Gomel, Mogilev, and Vitebsk.

By 2005, two branches were functioning in Minsk.[6] A branch was organized in Vitebsk around the same time. In 2011, a small branch met in Mogilev. In 2012, the two branches in Minsk were consolidated into a single branch and the district was discontinued. By early 2013, only two branches appeared to operate in Minsk and Vitebsk. In the mid-2010s, the Church reinstated the Minsk Belarus District and organized a district branch to administer areas of the country outside of Minsk and Vitebsk.

Activity and Retention

Church-going members are very active in their faith. Missionaries frequently remark on the faith and diligence of active local members and leaders. Most members are converts who previously affiliated as Orthodox Christians prior to their conversion. In recent years, converts have come from more religiously diverse backgrounds including Baptists and Pentecostals. A large number of inactive members joined the Church in the early to mid-1990s and did not remain active for very long. Youth conferences are held regularly. Each of the Minsk branches had fifty attending meetings in late 2009. The Vitebsk Branch had eight active members in early 2010. The congregation in Mogilov had few active members. Thirteen were enrolled in seminary or institute during the 2008–2009 school year. Very few converts have joined the Church in the past decade. For example, one member in 2014 reported less than five convert baptisms in the Minsk Branch although approximately two-thirds of recent converts remained active one year after baptism. All missionary activity is conducted by member referral as foreign missionaries do not proselyte per government restrictions. The Church in Minsk reported approximately 100 active members in the branch between 2014 and 2018. In 2018, the Vitebsk Branch had fewer than five active members, indicating that only 10% of membership in the branch was active. Total active membership is likely no more than 125, or 25-30%

Language Materials

Languages with Latter-day Saint Scripture: Russian, Polish, Ukrainian.

All Latter-day Saint scriptures are available in Russian, Polish, and Ukrainian. Russian, Polish, and Ukrainian have a large number of Church materials translated, including many institute manuals. The Church has translated few materials into Belarusian; they include the Articles of Faith, The Prophet Joseph Smith's Testimony, Gospel Principles Simplified, the sacrament prayers, a video on the First Vision and Restoration, and a couple family history forms. The Liahona magazine has twelve issues a year in Russian.

Meetinghouses

Church meetings take place in rented spaces. In 2014, the Minsk Branch lacked an adequate meetinghouse.

Humanitarian and Development Work

The Church has conducted significant humanitarian and development work in Belarus. There have been 631 projects completed since 1985.[7] This unusually large number of projects for such a small country with a minimal Church presence appears attributed to full-time missionary activities being limited to humanitarian and development work. Missionaries have conducted wide-reaching anti-smoking campaigns with school children for many years. Humanitarian missionaries have taught more productive agricultural practices resulting in higher crop yields.[8] Wheelchair donations occur regularly. In 2009, the Church donated humanitarian supplies to boarding houses in Vitebsk and the Brest Region.

Opportunities, Challenges, and Prospects

Religious Freedom

Missionaries operate under many restrictions. Foreign missionaries are prohibited from teaching in Church meetings, leading congregations, and wearing nametags. Members must provide missionaries with referrals, as missionaries are not permitted to proselyte. Little time is spent teaching investigators or strengthening members as missionaries provide humanitarian service. Whereas missionaries served in several large cities in the 1990s, missionaries are presently only registered in Minsk and Vitebsk and are not allowed to be assigned elsewhere. The law requires at least twenty members over age eighteen to hold Church services as a religious community, and so many small groups are unable to hold public meetings.

Cultural Issues

Many Belarusians have sought to return to traditional Belarusian traditions and in turn have become less receptive to the Church. Decades of communism have resulted in a many becoming nonreligious. High tobacco cigarette and alcohol consumption rates indicate that potential converts may struggle with overcoming addictive substances prior to baptism. Some converts who relapse may be a source of member attrition. High divorce rates challenge Church efforts to instill greater importance on the family unit and bring full families into the Church.

National Outreach

Government restrictions result in most having no contact or awareness of the Church. Only members and family, friends, and associates of members have any mission outreach. Cities with a congregation account for one-quarter of the national population. Missionaries are only assigned to Minsk and Vitebsk, but they have historically traveled to other cities for humanitarian work, teaching investigators, and strengthening members.

Member Activity and Convert Retention

Belarus experienced poor convert retention in the 1990s when the bulk of nominal Church members were baptized. There has been no noticeable change in the number of active members within perhaps as long as fifteen years. The Church appears to have achieved greater convert retention since the early 2000s, although growth has been very slow as very few converts have joined the Church. The high level of dedication for investigators joining the Church in a country with increasing restrictions on religious freedom over the past two decades may have been a source of greater strength. Isolated members in remote cities lack the member support base enjoyed in Minsk and may be more prone to casual Church attendance and lower levels of doctrinal understanding such as in Vitebsk.

Ethnic Issues and Integration

With the exception of Belarusians and Russians, membership size and distribution remain too limited for ethnic integration issues in congregations. As most Belarusians speak Russian as their primary language and use of Russian is increasing, ethnic issues have presented little difficulty.

Language Issues

Members switch between Russian and Belarusian frequently in Church meetings. However, only a few members prefer to primarily use the Belarusian language. Most of the population has some functionality in both languages, and members in Church meetings likely determine what language to speak based on the demographics of the congregation. No Latter-day Saint scriptures are available in Belarusian. There presently appears to be little impetus for Belarusian translations, as the vast majority of Belarusians use Russian as their primary language, and the majority of Belarusians can read but not write in Belarusian. Belarusian translations may be helpful in demonstrating respect for national pride and cultural heritage but are likely

to have little impact on national outreach.

Missionary Service

Both humanitarian and proselyting missionaries serve in Belarus. The first Belarusian called to serve as a mission president was President Davydik of the Minsk Belarus District, who served as the mission president for the Russia Samara Mission. Some local members have served missions, one of whom was serving in the Russian Vladivostok Mission in early 2010.

Leadership

All Church leaders in Belarus are natives due to government restrictions on foreigners leading congregations. This has allowed for greater self-sufficiency among Belarusian leadership compared to many other Eastern European nations where foreign missionaries have often assumed these leadership roles. Training of local leadership from mission and area Church leaders may be difficult due to laws forbidding foreigners from preaching in meetings.

Temple

When the Helsinki Finland Temple was dedicated, Belarus was included in the temple district. In 2009, members traveled to the Freiburg Germany Temple. Temple trips occur twice a year for Belarus, last for one week, and have at least thirty to forty members in attendance.

Comparative Growth

Belarus has experienced the slowest membership growth of any former Soviet Republic that opened to the Church in the early 1990s. Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania have a combined population less than Belarus but have approximately 3,000 members and fourteen congregations. The percentage of Church members in the population in Belarus is less than Russia, Moldova, and any Western European nation. However, Belarusian members are more self-reliant than members in many Eastern European nations with few members, and active members stand out for their diligence and devotion.

Other Christian groups experienced large gains in membership in the 1990s and have seen much more limited growth since the 2000s due to government restrictions. Seventh-Day Adventists have reported a net decline of more than 1,000 members during the past decade. Jehovah's Witnesses experience steady growth and have reported an increase of approximately one thousand active members since the early 2010s. Adventists and Witnesses maintain greater national outreach and larger church memberships than The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints due to greater institutional focus on member-missionary programs and less reliance on foreign missionaries.

Future Prospects

In the mid-1990s, the Church in Belarus was presented as a model of the growth and strength that can occur through member-missionary work alone; some mission leaders in other Russian-speaking missions took steps to discourage independent missionary finding and encourage missionaries to spend more time soliciting member referrals. However, the stagnation of growth, struggles to retain members, consolidation of congregations in Minsk, and lack of congregational viability in many outlying cities since missionaries discontinued proselytism all demonstrate the shortfall of such models. Both member-missionary outreach and full-time missionary outreach are needed for church growth to reach its potential. In regions where independent contacting by full-time missionaries is prohibited, like Belarus, or where it is limited by mission policy or lack of effort, as is the case in some other area missions, church growth is limited. Member-missionary efforts may hold increased future potential, yet considerable refinement of institutional member-missionary programs will be needed as well as local effort for this potential to be realized.

Belarusian members have proved faithful leaders and are capable of living Church teachings despite the many government regulations. Outlook for future growth appears positive, but few converts have joined the Church in recent years. The lack of new members may prove a significant challenge for the integration of converts and member enthusiasm for continued outreach. However local members have shown a willingness to participate in member-missionary work and finding activities, which may in the future yield greater increases in the number of active members in the country.

[1] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Belarusian_language

[2] “Belarus,” International Religious Freedom Report 2017. Accessed 22 November 2018. https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2017&dlid=280884#wrapper

[3] “Belarus,” International Religious Freedom Report 2017. Accessed 22 November 2018. https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2017&dlid=280884#wrapper

[4] “4 European lands dedicated,” LDS Church News, 12 June 1993. http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/23051/4-European-lands-dedicated.html

[5] “Belarus expels two Mormons for ‘illegal missionary activity,’” Associated Press, 25 October 2004. http://www.religionnewsblog.com/9104

[6] Timofeeva, Marina. “How Could We Go to the Temple?,” Liahona, July 2005, 42–43.

[7] “Where We Work,” LDS Charities. Accessed 23 November 2018. https://www.ldscharities.org/where-we-work

[8] Holland, Jeffrey R. “‘Witnesses unto Me,’” Liahona, July 2001, 15–17.