Belarus has been an independent nation since 1991. The term Belarus means “White Russia” and in the process of rising nationalism, Belarus is a relative latecomer. Located at low elevation on a vast plain between Russia, Poland, Ukraine, and the Baltic states, Belarus features gradual change, geographically and culturally. Belarus has maintained fairly close ties to Russia in the aftermath of the Soviet collapse and has been dominated by one political leader, Alexander Lukashenko for over 20 years. The capital city of Minsk is located along the major transportation routes between Russia and Western Europe.

Religion
Religion in Belarus is predominantly of the Eastern Orthodox Christian variety. The two largest ethnic groups in the country, Belarusians and Russians have been Orthodox in tradition for over a thousand years. The second largest religious affiliation is Roman Catholic, and represented primarily by the Polish minority. Belarus has no official state religion and both Catholic and Orthodox versions of Christmas and Easter are celebrated by state holiday. Freedom of religion is protected by the Constitution, however, the political nature of certain religious affiliations (for example Catholicism and Poland) has led to the degradation of religious freedoms in recent years. In the aftermath of the atheist Soviet era, a large proportion of Belarusians (41%) are irreligious.

Ethnicity
Belarusian ethnic and national identity is in many ways determined by its location somewhere in between Russian and Polish cultural historic influence. The official languages of Belarus are indicative of the stultified nature of Belarusian nationalism. Russian is the primary language of 73% of the Belarusian population, with only 11% of the population using Belarusian on a day to day basis. 

Nasha Niva, a weekly periodical from the early 20th century, was influential in cultivating a distinct Belarusian cultural and literary identity. It was brought back into print with Belarusian independence in 1991.

Family, Relationships & Customs
Belarusian fertility rates are some of the lowest in the world, especially for a country of its size and population. Family life and customs in Belarus are informed primarily by traditional Eastern Orthodox culture and the effects of the Soviet 20th century. Access to education and workplace equality for both genders was championed by the Soviet state, as well as the secularization of institutions of learning and governance. Public holidays are representative as well. May Day (May 1) and Victory Day (May 9) are celebrated along with Christian holidays such as Christmas and Easter.
CONTEMPORARY BELARUS

Belarus was one of the most prosperous socialist republics of the Soviet Union, however, with independence came economic troubles that continue to this day. One of the most prominent issues, both economic and political, is Belarusian energy dependence on Russia, a problem that they shared with Ukraine for the past 25 years. Belarus is a crucial middleman for the delivery of oil and natural gas from Russia to the rest of Europe. Politically, Belarus has been dominated by a single ruler, Aleksandr Lukashenko since 1994. Lukashenko has been derided by many as the “last tyrant” of Europe and on occasion has gotten into heated rows with German Foreign Ministers.

Belarus is a major refiner of crude petroleum, thus its largest import is crude petroleum and its largest export, by far, is refined petroleum. Other major exports include agricultural products such as potassic fertilizers. The small but significant Polish minority in Belarus is a persistent cause of controversy, as the Lukashenko regime has at times characterized them as a “fifth column” hellbent on overturning “stability” in Belarus. In many ways, this is the playing field of historic tensions and hatred between the Russian Empire and subjected Poland in the 19th and 20th centuries.

Long considered a staunch ally of Russia in the post-Soviet world, Belarus has been making moves to distance itself from Russia in light of recent issues surrounding the crisis in Ukraine, criticizing the Putin regime for heavy handedness.

BELARUSIANS IN THE USA

Some hopeful readers of John Smith’s largely fictional True Travels assert that he may have brought Belarusians to the United States as early as the founding of Jamestown. It is very difficult to ascertain the number of Belarusian Americans, because during the period of heaviest immigration from the region, little to no distinction was made between Russians and Belarusians. If the immigrant was Orthodox, they were Russian, if they were Catholic, they were Polish. The most recent census material on Belarusian Americans indicates that about 5,000 Americans claim Belarusian ancestry, although the number of immigrants with roots in what is today Belarus is undoubtedly much larger. Most migrants settled in urban areas on the East Coast.

USEFUL LINKS

http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-17941131
http://nn.by/?lang=ru

NAMES

Belarusian names are very similar to Russian or Ukrainian names. They follow the pattern of addressing a person by their first name and patronymic, often more frequently than their last name. Examples: Aleksandr, Oleg, and unlike Russia, Yan.

FAMOUS BELARUSIANS

Olga Korbut, an Olympic gold medalist gymnast from Belarus while it was still part of the Soviet Union is famous for pioneering the Korbut Flip in the uneven bars event. Alexander Lukashenko is the long-time dictator of Belarus. Scarlett Johansson and Gwyneth Paltrow are two American celebrities of Belarusian-Jewish descent.

BELARUSIAN WORDS

Hi ....................................... Vitayu
Bye .................................... Ubachymsia
Good morning ..................... Dobray ranitsy
Yes ......................................... tak
No ......................................... nyeh
Please/You’re welcome ............ Kali laska
Thank you .............................. Dziakuy
How are you? ........................ Jak spravy?
I do not understand .............. Ne razumeyu
I understand ........................... Razumeyu
What is your name?..Jak cyabye klichuts?
My name is .................. Myanye klichuts’...

USEFUL LINKS

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The flag is red and green with an ornamental pattern (red and white) at the hoist end. The pattern is used on traditional towels or “rushniki.”