

# Hrodna Region: the Land of Catholics and Smugglers

Belarus Digest starts a series of articles devoted to Belarusian regions. Most often only Minsk ends up in the focus of Western media. But around 80 percent of Belarusians live outside of Minsk. Each region has its own political, economic and cultural peculiarities. The series begins with Hrodna region and will also cover Brest, Vitsebsk, Homel and Mahiliou regions.

Hrodna region due to its specific culture and history, has always been the object of thorough attention of the authorities. It has the largest share of Catholics in Belarus and was a part of Polish Republic until 1939, while eastern regions of Belarus entered the USSR already in 1922. The region showed strongest support of the nationalist candidate Zianon Paźniak in 1994 presidential elections, arguable the only relatively honest presidential elections in Belarus.

## The West of Belarus

Hrodna region is situated in the western part of Belarus bordering Poland and Lithuania. It is the smallest of the six Belarusian regions in terms of population and territory. However, it has the largest percentage of Poles (21,5%) and around half of its population are Roman Catholics. Hrodna region also has one of the largest share of people speaking Belarusian at home (35%), second only to Minsk region (39%).



The regional centre, Hrodna city, is officially known since 1128 AD, when served the heart of principality. Soon the territories of the region united with neighbouring parts of Lithuania to form a medieval state called the Great Duchy of Lithuania. Hrodna region has absorbed the mix of ethnic and confessional groups on the border of Slavic and Baltic languages, Orthodox and Roman Catholic Christianity with specks of Judaism and Islam.

From 1921 to 1939 the region was a part of Polish Republic, while eastern regions of Belarus entered the USSR in 1922 already. In Poland, Belarusians had quite hard conditions for national development, but on the other hand no severe repressions occurred here.

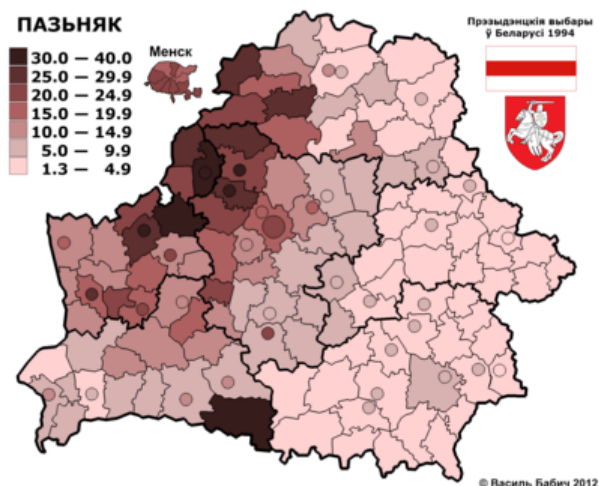
The 20 years of Polish rule had a significant influence on various aspects of life and identity of the people. A “westerner” remains an image of hard-working, non-drinking and more religious person compared to the “easterner”, more Sovietised and Russified.

### **The Anti-Communist Region**

For Soviet administration, population of Western Belarus presented “an unreliable element”, as they expressed more scepticism to Soviet rule. The same picture remained after USSR collapse.

In the first presidential elections, Hrodna region showed biggest support to the pro-Western nationalist candidate Zianon Paźniak. The results of subsequent election also showed that western Belarus supports democratic candidates clearly more than the east of the country. Lukashenka himself often publicly spoke of Hrodna as an “uneasy” region.

The map of Zianon Paźniak support in 1994 elections



Today, as in any other Belarusian region, the regime destroyed local political parties and NGOs. The only functioning NGO, Third Sector, remains the only spot of non-state civil activity.

The so called executive vertical, the hierarchical pyramid of executive bodies that persist from soviet times and subordinate to the president, presents the chief body of regional government. The heads of "the vertical", or governor, serves a major political figure in the region and Lukashenka personally appoints him from his reliable men.

The current governor, Siamion Šapira, has replaced his predecessor Uladzimir Saučanka in 2010. Saučanka was accused of “poor management”, which served an euphemism for all kinds of power abuse.

But being a friend and countryman of Lukashenka, he was simply removed from office and hidden for some time. Soon, however,

he quietly emerged on the post of director of a state-owned agricultural enterprise. Simply put, Lukashenka forgave him and charged with a lower position.

At first, the public perceived new governor, Doctor of Economics Siamion Šapira as a more educated and liberal ruler, than his notorious predecessor. He tried to uphold this reputation by speaking of "importance of preservation of cultural heritage" and "tourism development" which appealed to Hrodna people. Subsequently, however, he did not give evidence of his better style of government. Recently Šapira completely destroyed his reputation by ordering to fire academics and rector of Hrodna university on political grounds.

### **The Land of Smugglers**

Western Belarus appears less industrialised than eastern Belarus, and cannot boast a large number of big industrial plants. The biggest enterprise in the region is "Azot", the producer of chemical fertilisers. The plant consumes the largest amount of natural gas in Belarus, and therefore poses a certain problem for the government. In recent years, the government often expressed their readiness to sell it, but did not select the new owner yet.

The region appears among the best agricultural producers of the republic because of more fertile lands and a better work ethics.

Hrodna region has perhaps the richest architectural legacy in Belarus. A number of mediaeval castles, dozens of old Catholic and Orthodox churches and much more smaller objects like gentry estates can be found here. Thus, it has a large tourism potential, but as a matter of fact tourist infrastructure remains extremely poor here because of awkward policy of the government in this field.

For common people of Hrodna region, border smuggling became a popular occupation after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The

border that emerged between Belarus and its western neighbours, Poland and Lithuania, has become the main source of income for many people. Decades pass, but border smuggling remains a thriving industry.



People smuggle cigarettes and fuel from Belarus, where it is cheaper, and return with everything from clothes and products to electronics and tools. Although officially unemployed, these people lead a comfortable life and have income several times higher than their honest fellows working hard at factories.

Smugglers use various kinds of tricks to escape from border control. People hide the stuff in cars, buses and trains, on their body, in bags, balls and even cakes. The industry also experiences the influence of high-tech: many cases have been identified when people tried to float the cigarettes by river with GPS navigation devices.

Border smuggling became a distinct culture with its slang, legends and stories, and code of conduct. Thanks to Belarusians, you can often find illegal but cheap cigarettes in European streets.

This interesting feature of the local economy actually shows serious problems with regional development. The region that has a vast border with the EU fails to properly benefit from it because Belarus remains in isolation from the Western side. Little cooperation exists between local authorities, tourist

movement and investments remain at a very modest level.

People living in the Hrodna region are important stakeholders interested in rapprochement with the EU and should be treated as such.