Opinion: stereotypes about Belarus: true or false?

Stereotypes involve an element of reflection from members of society about themselves and adjacent groups.

Often, stereotypes stem from a historical legacy, perceived cultural, religious or ethnic differences, or a lack of ability to perceive “the Other” in a new light. Stereotypical views about specific countries are no exception to this rule.

Recently, during a youth exchange seminar in Brussels (Brussels Laboratory, a seminar on social inclusion and anti-discrimination strategies), students were asked to share some stereotypes about their countries.

A participant from Belarus shared what her colleagues had been posting on her Facebook page in the form of little stickers. Although positive stereotypes, such as “beautiful women” may be appealing to Belarusians, a discussion of negative stereotypes might be much more interesting and useful.

“People drink a lot”

This stereotype remains widespread not only in relation to Belarusians, but about Slavic peoples in general. Films about James Bond or Hollywood action thrillers about the Russian Mafia perpetuate such images.
Moreover, the “unusual” public behaviour of such figures as former Russian president Boris Yeltsin or his Polish counterpart Aleksander Kwasniewski often reinforce these stereotypes.

Although Alexander Lukashenka does not have such a reputation for bibulousness, it is nevertheless true that stereotypes surrounding alcohol consumption exist, especially in the eyes of Belarus’s western neighbours.

Nevertheless, in 2014 a report from the World Health Organisation came as an unpleasant surprise to the Belarusian public.

According to new data, the average Belarusian over the age of 15 consumes 17.5 litres of pure alcohol per year. Men drink more – about 27.5 litres a year, and women drink less – 9.1 litres. In terms of preference, 17.3% of alcohol consumers prefer beer, 5.2% prefer wine, 46.6% prefer strong spirits, and 30.9% drink something else.

This data from 2016 shows that Belarus has become the second
largest consumer of alcohol per capital after Estonia.

Given the low price of alcohol (compared to neighbouring countries) and its important role in every-day cultural and social life, it remains highly unlikely that the amount of alcohol consumed by the average Belarusian will decrease in the near future.

Due to the deterioration of the economic situation in Belarus in 2016 and the subsequent rise in unemployment, one can expect people to increasingly turn to alcohol in order to “drink away” their problems.
“Poor, uneducated…”

Stereotypes relating to the education and income level of Belarusians stem from a widespread negative perception of Eastern and Central European countries experiencing economic transition. But is the population of Belarus indeed as poor and uneducated as all that?

The CIA Factbook states that Belarus experienced GDP growth in both 2013 (1%) and 2014 (1.6%) despite the economic crisis of 2011. The year 2015 witnessed certain economic difficulties, with a negative growth of -3.9% of GDP. The "Still Doing Business" rating considers Belarus to have an upper middle income, ranking 44 out of 189 countries in ease of doing business. Furthermore, Belarus has enjoyed stable GDP per capita growth.
since the 1990s. Nevertheless, the country has remained behind its neighbours, with the exception of Ukraine in 2015.

The Human Development Index, which measures important indicators such as gender development, life expectancy at birth, and expected years of schooling, places Belarus 50th out of 188 countries, with an index of 0.798. Currently, the expected amount of schooling in Belarus is 15.7 years, meaning that most Belarusians continue studying after high school. Primary and middle school education together takes 11 years (9 of which are compulsory).

According to World Bank data, Belarus has experienced a steady increase of people of both sexes enrolled in tertiary education; in 2014 it became the leader in this area among its neighbours. Moreover, Belarus has 58 universities and institutions
providing higher education. This relatively high figure for a country with population of 9.5 million can be traced back to Soviet times, when specialists from all over the Soviet Union came to study in Belarus.

You can find a special collection of Belarus-related stereotypes on [Belarus Digest](https://example.com).

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