

# Minsk Hopes to Become Las Vegas for Russians

The Russian government severely restricted gambling in Russia in 2009, and the Belarusian authorities quickly spotted an opportunity.

Gambling supplemented by other services became a source of high profit for local authorities and businesses, which are often the same in Belarus. Since then, wealthy Russians have started their pilgrimage to Minsk to squander their fortunes.

For less rich and venturesome Russians, Belarus became attractive for other reasons. Some of them were looking for the Soviet spirit of their youth, others like the calmness and order of local life. For them, Belarus presents an example of how Russia could develop if the situation had developed differently after the USSR's collapse.

## **Good Old USSR with European Tinge**

When Russians speak about travelling to Belarus, they usually tell very similar stories which all involve positive feelings. When Russians cross the border, the good quality of Belarusian roads is the first impression. As the famous phrase goes, there are two disasters in Russia: fools and roads.

Belarusian roads really seem better than Russian roads. "Just try to drive the road between Moscow and Saint Petersburg, let alone any road in provinces, and you will feel the difference", Russians say to their sceptical Belarusian colleagues.

Belarus traffic police present another road-related issue that Russians cannot understand in a positive sense. They are amazed by the fact that Belarusian police usually do not take bribes, while in Russia being a traffic policeman became a

sort of business enterprise.

The second nice thing in Belarus is the state of cultivated lands and small settlements and villages. In Russia, the government dissolved most *kolhozes* (communist collective agricultural enterprises), and much land remains abandoned because peasants simply do not want to work it.

In Belarus, state enterprises remained, and have to cultivate all land regardless of their quality. This creates the picture of total diligence of Belarusians that contrasts with that of disorganised Russians. Furthermore, villages simply look better: houses and fences are fixed, and the area around them groomed well. This picture creates a somewhat more “European” image of Belarus compared to Russia.

### **“The Last Slavic Country”**

Practically all Russian visitors admire the omnipresent cleanliness of the streets, something that Belarusians spitefully call “sterility”. For elder people, Belarusian cities are a reminder of the good old Soviet past, with its confidence in one’s own future. People feel calm and relief after bustling life in Russian megalopolises.

However, for younger visitors, this creates the opposite impression. They look for night life, cultural events and shopping, and this type of entertainment for young people Belarus cannot offer. Belarusians themselves prefer to go to [neighbouring Lithuania](#), Poland or Ukraine for these purposes.

Somewhat surprisingly to Belarusians, visitors from Russia often note and particularly like the absence of people from the Caucasus and Central Asia in Belarus. This category of migrants have flooded Russian cities in search of income and have become a crucial feature in Russian society, which often causes tension on nationalist grounds.

The underdeveloped Belarusian state capitalism does not

attract migrants on such a scale. Belarus, in the eyes of many Russians, remains “the last white Slavic country”.

### **Post-Soviet Las Vegas**

In 2009, Russia introduced restrictions on the gambling industry. Apart from four special zones, the government ordered the closure of all gambling houses on Russian territory allowing online websites like the [Best UFC Betting Sites In Singapore 2021](#) to grow. The Belarusian authorities decided to exploit this important gap for enrichment and enhanced the development of their own gambling sector.

Some Russian companies that own gambling businesses decided to move their assets to Belarus. Around 30 casinos operate in Minsk and there are a lot more places with slot machines.

Minsk is becoming an entertainment centre for rich Russians, predominantly from Moscow. A poll in 2012 showed that Russians spent \$3,000-5,000 in casinos during one weekend in Minsk. Their average bill at a restaurant amounts to \$200, roughly half of the salary of a typical Belarusian.

The flight from Moscow takes only one hour, and many firms now offer gambling tours. When you drive the Moscow-Minsk highway, you can see more and more billboards advertising gambling as you approach Minsk. Likewise, a lot of of gambling ads are displayed on the road from Minsk international airport.

During holidays and weekends, Russians book numerous places in the hotels and restaurants of Minsk. The luxury service industry receives huge profits from such visitors, and in fact works mostly for Russians. Most Belarusians simply cannot afford such costly entertainment.

Although prostitution remains invisible on the streets of Belarus, the [sex industry](#) surely accompanies such cash-rich enterprise as gambling tourism. Inside hotels, it has become common, although from the outside one might think that Belarus

remains prostitution-free.

Gambling has become one of the reasons for an increase in elite real estate sales in the capital. To feel more comfortable, gamblers simply buy the best flats in Minsk for prices that seem insignificant compared to prices in Moscow.

### **The New Landlords**

Of course, gambling is not the only reason for Russians buying property in Belarus. After the 2011 economic crisis and devaluation of the Belarusian rouble, the property market fell and rich Russians started to buy elite flats in Minsk centre in order to sell them profitably when the crises ended.

Further, Russians eagerly buy houses in the regions with pleasant natural conditions – like the Braslaŭ region with its famous lakes in the north-western corner of the republic. They either use them for personal recreation or start tourist businesses there.

Another group of Russians that tend to buy property are ethnic Belarusians who return to the motherland after retiring from difficult work in the Russian north or noisy and stressful Moscow. They also have enough money to buy the best pieces of property, but do not aim to make profits. They seek a quiet life in the land of their grandfathers.

Some Russians even buy estates of the Belarusian gentry that locals abandoned either before the Russian revolution of 1917 or Soviet intervention in Poland in 1939. The estates are municipal property and local authorities sell them for ridiculous prices, because the investor has to pour in huge funds to renovate them. However, some Russians or ethnic Belarusians from Russia have enough courage to invest in them: apart from the building, the estates have beautiful lands around them with old parks and gardens.

In such a situation, many Belarusians worry about become

servants of rich Russian bosses on their own land. On the other hand, Russians present a desirable source of income for local business and authorities. Russia will always be here and Belarusians need to learn how to take advantage of that.