

# Life in Belarusian Villages – A Trip into the Past

The differences between the Belarusian capital, Minsk, and the countryside remain enormous. This insight tourists gain when coming to Belarus. During summer, tourists arrive from abroad and some of them do not only stay in Minsk but make trips around the country.

Very often, for them it feels like going to another country or century, for the Belarusian villages seem to live back in the past. Life however, is not only idyllic but also very hard, especially during the winter months.

Minsk, a metropolis of 2 Million, presents itself as a modern high-tech capital, amazing its visitors with flat screens in the metro stations, and modern buildings with glass fronts everywhere. While Minsk expands steadily – the number of inhabitants and the territory it includes grow steadily- the majority of Belarusians are living outside the capital.

According to the National Committee of Statistics, in 2011 75.1% of Belarusians live in urban areas, which include the regional centres like Brest, and Mahileu, but also smaller towns (in Belarus, a town describes a settlement with more than 6,000 inhabitants). This leaves one fourth of the population living in the countryside, which differs, in fact, from the urbanised areas: Wide fields, forests and scattered settlements characterise the rural parts of Belarus. Going to a Belarusian village today feels like going back in time.

## Rural exodus from 1959 till now



In Belarus, like in most other countries, urbanisation is a common phenomenon. After the World War II, the share of Belarusians living in rural settlements decreased dramatically from 80% to today's figures as a consequence of the progressive industrialization of the country. However, more than 23,000 rural settlements have been counted in the 2009 census.

Today, the average number of population in a village amounts to 103 inhabitants- more than half as much as in 1959. As in most countries, mainly young people leave the countryside to live in the towns. One reason for rural exodus lies in the need earn their living. This is not possible in most of the villages that often lack a modern infrastructure. Some people work in nearby collective farms (former Kolkhozes) and bigger villages have a shop, but apart from this, they earn money by working their own land.

Apart from the financial aspect, life in the villages is hard. While most have electricity nowadays, only few villages dispose of running water. Large ovens in the houses that heated with wood still function as heating. While this seems idyllic for Western visitors, it means a physically hard life for villagers – even more so as very often, only old people left in the settlements, mainly widowed women.

Men very often die much earlier than their wives, primarily because of alcohol abuse (alcohol is [very cheap in Belarus](#)). The population of some villages therefore consists mainly of old women. Most of them remain completely alone during the

week, with their children and grandchildren living in the towns and cities.

During the summer, the population of the villages rises. First of all, parents send their children to live with their grandparents in the villages during the long holidays- they last almost three months in Belarus. Moreover, many villagers have bought village houses during the last years. A good house with several acres of land could sometimes be purchased for as little as \$500.

As demand has risen, people now have to pay around \$5,000. Still, many Minsk inhabitants are glad to escape from city life and spend their free time in a village. This goes back to the fact that for many of them, the village reminds them of their childhood as most of the people living in Minsk do so in the second or third generation. Apart from this, economic instability and inflation make growing fruits and vegetables a necessity for many people.

### **Belarusian villages rely on mobile grocer for supply**

While the villages are revived in this way during the summer, whole weeks may pass in winter where the villagers do not see anybody from the outside. In some of the villages, electricity does not work and the snow clearing vehicles rarely manage to get through to every village. This proves especially problematic in such cases where there is no village shop.



In those villages, the population relies on “Autalauka”, a shop on wheels that gets to the villages. The driver of such a shop serves around 100 villages a week. His salary during

summer amounts to \$500 per months.

However, he has to live on what he earns in the summer during the whole year, as he often cannot work during winter because of the snow on the roads. For villagers this means that they do not have an opportunity to buy bread, flour, milk or other products for weeks in a row. Moreover, an ambulance or a doctor can hardly reach frail and elderly during the winter.

To fully understand how Belarus functions, one should leave Minsk and take a trip to one of the villages. Only after having spent a weekend there, analysts and policy makers will understand why Belarus still has the current political system and why it proves so difficult for the opposition to reach the people.

Life in those small villages seems apolitical, what happens in Minsk does not play a direct role for the villagers – only to the extent that their pensions and food prices rise or fall. Hardly any difference can be spotted in those villages between now and thirty years ago, back in the Soviet Union. Most villagers have seen so much in their lives and they remain so cut off from buzzing Minsk that at any possible demonstrations, one can hardly imagine them supporting opposition politicians or even taking part in a revolution.

In an ideal state, the authorities would redistribute the expenses to ensure better medical services in the villages instead of improving the outward appearance of the capital. Moreover, the state urgently needs to create incentives for families to move back to the villages by subsidizing private housing and founding schools.