

Minsk Region – the Heart of Belarus

The Belarusian statistics agency has recently published the average salaries by region in June. Minsk city appeared as the leader with an average salary of \$750. In second place was the Minsk region with an average of \$580, and in Salihorsk it even reached as high as \$840, higher than in the capital's average.

Salihorsk is a city located south of Minsk, where the whole economy is built around a highly profitable potassium trade. The Minsk region is home to many industrial areas. The region, of course, has close relations with its centre, Minsk city, which absorbs both human and financial resources from its periphery. This kind of centralisation of the economy can indeed have negative consequences for the region.

The Minsk region remains divided in terms of its political orientation and attitude towards the Belarusian language. The western part shows more support for the democratic opposition and uses the Belarusian language. The east appears more pro-regime and less Belarusian-speaking. Generally speaking, no political activity exists here beyond the state.

Typically for Belarus, the Minsk region was a home for its world renowned Jewish emigrants. Some of America's brightest media figures, such as Larry King, Louis Mayer and David Sarnoff have their roots here.

Not Only the Capital

The life of the Minsk region is determined to a great extent by its centre, Minsk city, which has more population than any of the other regions in Belarus (over 1.8 million people). As is true with many big cities in the world, Minsk draws commuters from nearby towns who can earn two or three times more there. However, this movement is not as massive as, for

instance, in Moscow, and typically no major traffic jams occur here.

The Minsk region, however, is more than a periphery of the capital. The region has a few other big cities in which a considerable amount of the country's economic resources are concentrated. Among them are Maladečna, Barysaŭ, Salihorsk and Žodzina, all of them big centres of industry.

The young Belarusian city of Salihorsk emerged with the establishment of its potassium extracting enterprise, Belaruskali. It alone is responsible around 10% of Belarusian export annually and presents perhaps the most profitable state company. Now that the Uralkali has halted its cooperation with Belarusian Potassium Company, the market prices are expected to go down and Belarusian export risk facing significant losses as a result. Such developments will necessitate a search of the other sources of income which Lukashenka is [apparently trying to find in China](#).



Žodzina city is known for another Belarusian industrial brand, BelAZ, the largest manufacturer of haulage and earthmoving equipment. Its dump lorry, also called Belaz, has become a symbol of Belarusian industry.

Barysaŭ city, although also an industrial centre, is more famous for its [BATE football team](#). BATE has proven to be the strongest team in Belarus for some time now and was the only team in Belarusian history to qualify for the group stage of the UEFA Champions league and UEFA Europa League.

Former Resistance and Current Silence

Today schoolchildren can hardly find mention of it in their history textbooks, but in 1920 a massive resistance against communist rule occurred in the Minsk region near Sluck, a town in the region, and received the name "the Sluck Rebellion." Two armed regiments declared support for the unrecognised Belarusian Popular Republic and resisted red army assaults for nearly a month, though eventually they eventually succumbed to the Bolsheviks.

The Minsk region historically appears as a region divided: the western part once belonged to the Polish Republic and the east to the BSSR. The Western part, and especially the northwest which borders the Vilnius region, showed the highest level of support for the democratic opposition during the presidential elections.

This mapping is also true for the persistence of the Belarusian language, as many western parts of Minsk region speak Belarusian, more so than in its eastern parts. Generally, the region has the largest overall population that speaks Belarusian at home.

Today, political activity not affiliated with the state has almost disappeared in the region. No independent local newspapers exist and once glorious regional organisations like Salihorsk Malady Front have stopped all their activity. The most recent protests in the region were related to the government's plans to build a Chinese industrial park in the Smaliavičy district not far from Minsk, but hardly anything can prevent the regime's *idee fixe*.

The governor of the region, Barys Batura, for his part, appears to be someone that the president can count on. As with all of Belarus' governors, he constantly has to travel around the region and ensure that every fence on the road is fixed and every field harvested. Batura descends from the Hrodna region and served in the state bureaucracy since the Soviet era. He worked in the housing and communal services ministry,

and then was appointed the governor of Mahilioŭ region in 2000 and governor of Minsk region in 2010. Like many officials in Belarus, he has not produced any extraordinary activity and quietly executes orders from above.

The Home of the US Media Tycoons

As Belarus in general, the Minsk region served a homeland to many Jewish emigrants who later gained world prominence and recognition.

Among them is Larry King (born Lawrence Harvey Zeiger), a famous American television and radio host. He is the son of Edward Zeiger, an immigrant from Austria, and Jenny Gitlitz, an immigrant from Belarus. King became perhaps the world's most well-known face on TV, but few Belarusians realise his ancestors lived somewhere around Minsk.



Louis Burt Mayer, an American film producer known for successful running of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer company, was born in Minsk in 1884 as Lazar Meir. His family moved to Rhode Island in 1887. Subsequently Mayer made a career in the entertainment business and headed one of the most famous film companies in American history.

David Sarnoff, born in 1891 in Uzliany village in Minsk region, was an American businessman and a founder of both radio and television broadcasting. His family moved to New York City in 1900, where he made a career in telecommunications, leading the Radio Corporation of America and National Broadcasting Company (NBC), two American telecommunication empires.

Moving from the US to Europe, we find other famous descendants of Minsk region. Chaim Soutine, was born in Smilavičy settlement in 1893. After studying art in Russian Empire, he emigrated to France and significantly contributed to the French expressionism movement.

Interestingly, in 2012 a Belarusian bank Belgazprambank, owned by Russian gas empire Gazprom, bought one of his paintings at a Christie's auction for \$400,000 together with a Marc Chagall piece. The bank is sponsor the return of works of artists of Belarusian origin, since none of their works have remained in Belarus.

For the time being, the Minsk region will have to go on without, much as it has, these fine people. In their place, remain the many challenges and issues to be overcome. The region draws more investment due to its central location and therefore is likely to remain the core of the Belarusian economy. However, its central location puts it at risk of being overshadowed by the capital, Minsk city, which absorbs most of its human resources and drains the potential for local development. The over-centralisation of Belarus presents a serious challenge for the Belarusian government.