

# Zapad 2017: limits of Belarusian independence, national unity, western attention – digest of Belarusian analytics

In September, analytics on Belarus both at home and abroad almost entirely focused on Zapad 2017 military exercises and related issues of security and defence.

Arciom Šrajbman claims that Russia showed Belarus the ceiling of its independence, Jaŭhien Prejhierman responds that rumours about these limits are exaggerated. Andrej Jahoraŭ explains why Belarus was not occupied during Zapad 2017. Belarus in Focus notes that the military drill prompted a heated discussion about national unity.

Zapad-2017 was also discussed by Bloomberg, ECFR, the National Interest Magazine, American Enterprise Institute and Lithuanian EESC.

This and more in the new edition of digest of Belarusian analytics.

[Rumors About the Ceiling of Belarusian Independence Exaggerated – Jaŭhien Prejhierman, at TUT.BY, argues with a journalist Arciom Šrajbman and states that the limits of Belarusian sovereignty are determined not by Moscow or Kiev, but Minsk's own ability to pragmatically manoeuvre between conflicting interests of neighbours. In fact, Zapad 2017 exercises showed that Belarus does not know how to effectively act in the information wars.](#)

[Why We Were Not Occupied. What Zapad 2017 Was About – Andrej](#)

[Jahoraŭ](#), at Belarusian Journal, notes that the military Russo-Belarusian drills are over; no occupation took place. According to the expert, the most important things occurred in the information sphere. Zapad 2017 is a doctrine of a consociational war, with an empirical test of the parties' reactions to information moves and attacks.

[Poverty and vulnerable groups in Belarus. Consequences of the recession of 2015-2016](#) This issue is dedicated to the analysis of various aspects of absolute and relative poverty in the Belarusian regions

[Belarus Is Shown the Ceiling Of Its Independence](#) – Arciom Šrajbman, TUT.by, draws attention to two events of the last month, which remind the real limits of today's Belarusian sovereignty. The journalist means an incident with a young Ukrainian Pavel Grib who was detained in Homiel and moved to Krasnodar detention centre and thousands of Russian soldiers who entered Belarus for the military exercises.

[Belarus Is the Real Victim of Russia's Zapad War Games \(Op-ed\)](#) – Jaŭhien Prejhierman, The Moscow Times, notes that this year's hype around Zapad 2017 exercises, obviously, reflects the West's deep mistrust for Russia and its military. The analyst believes that Russia and the West need to understand that it is in everyone's strategic interest to keep Belarus as a neutral ground for peace talks and not a part of the Russian-Western confrontation.

[Putin Pointed out to Lukashenka His Place](#) – [Aliaksandr Aliiesin](#), a military analyst, believes that Putin and Lukashenka separately inspected Zapad 2017 exercises because Russia wanted to show Lukashenka, that he is not an equal partner. The military exercises sharpened the contradictions between Russia and Belarus, while Lukashenka is still trying to play independence.

[Situation In the Field of National Security And Defence of Belarus. August 2017](#) – According to monthly monitoring of

Belarus Security Blog, the most important event of the month was the kidnapping of a Ukrainian citizen Pavel Grib by Russian special services in Homiel. Provocation was intended to cause a crisis in the Belarusian-Ukrainian relations.



Aliaksandr Lukashenka at Zapad-2017. Photo: president.gov.by

[Zapad on Belarus' Mind](#) – A non-paper of the 7th Belarus Reality Check analyses the recent developments in EU-Belarus relations and concludes that Minsk will try further building trust with the West, and continuing to work with and appease Russia, as its only ally. Organised by EESC, the 7th Belarus Reality Check took place in June 2017, in Vilnius to contribute to the policy debate in and outside of Belarus.

[The Zapad Military Exercise Reveals Putin's Fear](#) – Leonid Bershidsky, Bloomberg, considers the large-scale Russian military exercise known as Zapad, which [started](#) in Belarus on 14 September, as a propaganda success: it has alarmed Russia's NATO neighbours and garnered so much Western media coverage that one might think it was an actual combat operation. It has also provided an important insight into the fears of the Russian and Belarusian rulers.

[So Far From God, So Close To Russia: Belarus and the Zapad Military Exercise](#) – Fredrik Wesslau & Andrew Wilson, ECFR, consider that fears that Russia may use Zapad 2017 as cover to carry out a hybrid operation in Belarus are overblown. Moscow has other levers with which it can coerce Minsk, and it neither needs nor is interested in another military adventure at the moment.

[Zapad 2017: What It Reveals About the Prickly Russia-Belarus Relationship](#)– Bruce McClintock & Bilyana Lilly, The National Interest Magazine, suppose that the Kremlin has little to gain from using Zapad 2017 as a pretext to establish the military

presence in Belarus. Belarus continues to view Russia as its principal strategic military partner and seems likely to do so in the future.

[Belarus' Susceptibility to Russian Intervention](#) – David R. Marples believes that Russia's overriding geostrategic goal in Belarus is to keep a stable, relatively pro-Russian regime in power. Therefore, the chances of a Russian military intervention in Belarus are low for the near future.

[Indicators of Belarus export activity in the 1998-2016: what are the chances for growth?](#) The work analyses the indicators of export activity of Belarus in 1998-2016

[Zapad-2017. Who Will Benefit From the Russian-Belarusian Drills](#) – Arciom Šrajbman, Carnegie Moscow Centre, believes that despite all the reputational risks, Minsk will try to derive maximum diplomatic benefit from the military drills. On the one hand, Belarus shows to Western observers that they can trust to Minsk's guarantees. On the other hand, Belarus will convince Moscow that it does not 'follow the path of Ukraine', not being afraid to host large-scale exercises with Russian troops.

[West-2017 Russo-Belarusian Military Drill Causes Controversy in Belarusian Society](#) – Belarus in Focus notes that the September military drill prompted a heated discussion in civil society about national unity. The fact that the Belarusian authorities keep alternative political views exclusively outside the political system has increased the risks of external influences or interference in domestic political processes with possible destabilisation.

[West-2017: Facts and Analysis of Threats](#) – Ihar Tyškievič, the Ukrainian Institute of Future, argues whether there is a danger for Ukraine because of the joint military drills between Russia and Belarus. He concludes that the exercises will be held as they are publicly stated, and media noise will go away.

# Belarus Policy

[Indicators of Belarus export activity in the 1998-2016: what are the chances for growth?](#) The work analyses the indicators of export activity of Belarus in 1998-2016. It studies how the structure and complexity of the country's export basket, its competitive advantages, penetration to foreign markets and inclusion in global value chains changed over the period.

[Poverty and vulnerable groups in Belarus. Consequences of the recession of 2015-2016.](#) This issue of the 'Review of poverty and vulnerable groups in Belarus' is dedicated to the analysis of various aspects of absolute and relative poverty in the Belarusian regions. The study was carried out on the basis of sample surveys of living standards of households in 2013-2016.

*Belarus Digest prepared this overview on the basis of materials provided by Pact. This digest attempts to give a richer picture of the recent political and civil society events in Belarus. It often goes beyond the hot stories already available in English-language media.*

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**West 2017 in focus, London  
Conference on Belarusian  
Studies, human rights  
dialogue – Ostrogorski Centre**

# digest

In August and September, Ostrogorski Centre analysts analysed developments around West 2017 military drill, progress in the Belarus-EU dialogue on human rights and increase in poverty in recent years as well as the government's response to it.

The Centre announced call for proposals The Third Annual London Conference on Belarusian Studies, which will be held on 23–24 March 2018 at University College London.

We have also added new profiles to [belarusprofile.com](http://belarusprofile.com) and new policy papers to [Belaruspolicy.com](http://Belaruspolicy.com) databases.

## Analytics

Siarhei Bohdan demonstrates how approaches to West 2017 military drill [varied in Belarus and Russia](#). The Belarusian government struggled to reassure its neighbours, who continued to express concerns about the drills. Lukashenka himself repeatedly visited Ukraine to persuade Kyiv of Belarus's peaceful intentions.

In contrast, the Kremlin craved an intimidating military show. Thus, Minsk and Moscow were jointly holding an exercise which both countries saw in very different ways. It is unsurprising that their policy regarding West 2017 was vastly different.

Ryhor Astapenia discusses the [growth of poverty in Belarus](#) in recent years and the government's response to it. One of Lukashenka's greatest achievements in Belarusian society has been his fight against poverty. However, poverty is once again on the rise.

The main reason people end up below the poverty line is the loss of employment, as the state fails to provide any meaningful help for the unemployed. It seems that poverty is

doomed to continue spreading, as the authorities see no way out of the crisis other than shifting the country's economic woes onto the backs of the poor.

Igar Gubarevich analyses the development of the [Belarus-EU dialogue on human rights](#). Belarus hopes to put human rights issues on the back burner in its relationship with the West. At the same time, the country's authorities understand that avoiding any discussion of this subject could hamper the modest rapprochement between the two parties.

Meanwhile, the West continues to put pressure on Belarus in international human rights bodies, in particular the UN Human Rights Council. Only time will tell which of the two policies – dialogue or critical monitoring – will prove more effective in instigating democratic change in Belarus.

## **The Third Annual London Conference 'Belarusian Studies in the 21st Century'**



The Second Annual London Conference on Belarusian Studies, 25 February 2017. Photo: Yaraslau Kryvoi

The Belarusian Studies in the 21st Century Conference Committee, the Ostrogorski Centre and the Francis Skaryna Belarusian Library and Museum invite proposals from established academics and doctoral researchers for individual papers and panel discussions on contemporary Belarusian studies. The conference is a multidisciplinary forum for Belarusian studies in the West.

Proposals will be considered on any subject matter pertaining to Belarus. This year, however, proposals relating to human rights, social media, education, the history of the Belarusian People's Republic, Belarusian history and culture and sociology are particularly encouraged. A selection of peer-reviewed papers will be published in the Journal of Belarusian Studies in 2018.



As in previous years, in addition to the conference, which will be held 23–24 March 2018 at University College London, several other Belarus-related events will take place in London. The 2018 conference will coincide with the 100th anniversary of the Belarusian People's Republic, the first modern attempt of Belarusian statehood, as well as the 10th anniversary of Belarus Digest.

To submit a paper or panel proposal, please complete an [online registration form](#) by 15 December 2017. Successful candidates will be notified by 5 January 2018. The working language of the conference is English.

There is a £10GBP registration fee associated with the conference. You may pay the fee at the door or pay online (see the registration form for details). If a speaker or delegate is unable to pay the registration fee, the organisers can grant them a waiver. Please email [belauk2018@gmail.com](mailto:belauk2018@gmail.com) to ask for a fee waiver.

The organisers can provide non-UK based applicants with invitation letters for visas.

For any questions, please contact either Stephen Hall or Peter Braga at [belauk2018@gmail.com](mailto:belauk2018@gmail.com).

Conference co-chairs: Professor Andrew Wilson and Professor Yarik Kryvoi

## Comments in the media

Ryhor Astapenia on Polish Radio discusses the [hype around the West 2017](#) drills, the future of mass youth political organisations, and the possibility of political and social protests this autumn.

Siarhei Bohdan on Polish Radio explains [why Belarus refused to transport](#) oil products via Russian ports even at a 50%

discount. Russian ports require longer delivery time; Belarus has experience in the Baltic countries and invested in their infrastructure; in addition, it is one of the channels of cooperation with the European Union.



Public discussions on Asmalouška area. Photo: euroradio.fm

Alesia Rudnik on Polish radio discusses the [effectiveness of civil campaigns](#) in Belarus on the example of Asmalouška area protection. This became not the only success story of local activists, but usually victory is possible only if the project is not essential for the authorities. In most cases, civil campaigns fail.

Siarhei Bohdan on Polish Radio discusses the [role of Russia and China](#) in the development of the Belarusian defense industry. Last year Belarus exported arms worth \$1 billion. This achievement is the result of complicated partnerships with major players. Russian support of Minsk in the defense industry is limited and expensive, therefore Minsk had to seek an alternative and develop cooperation with China.

## Belarus Profile

The [BelarusProfile.com](#) database now includes the following people: [Alieh Dvihalioŭ](#), [Jury Šuliejka](#), [Mikalaj Korbut](#), [Vitaľ](#)

[Paŭlaŭ](#), [Uladzimir Karpiak](#), [Andrej Dapkiunas](#), [Alieh Dziarnovič](#), [Valieryja Kasciuhova](#), [Piotr Rudkoŭski](#), [Natallia Vasilievič](#).

We have also updated the profiles of [Siarhiej Hurulioŭ](#), [Anatoł Isačenka](#), [Ivonka Survila](#), [Paviel Uciupin](#), [Anatoł Kapski](#), [Victor Prokopenia](#), [Aliaksandr Pazniak](#), [Jury Chaščavacki](#), [Siarhiej Čaly](#), [Kanstancin Šabieka](#), [Aliaksandr Šamko](#), [Aliaksandr Šumilin](#), [Uladzimir Šymaŭ](#), [Aliaksiej Jahoraŭ](#), [Aliaksandr Jarašenka](#).

## Belarus Policy

The Ostrogorski Centre continues to update its database of policy papers on [BelarusPolicy.com](#). The papers of partner institutions added this month include:

- [Poverty and vulnerable groups in Belarus. Consequences of the recession of 2015-2016.](#) IPM Research Centre, 2017.
- Uladzimir Kavalkin, Andrei Sushko. [Electronic public procurement: evaluation of official electronic trading sites in Belarus.](#) BIPART, 2017.
- [Proposal of changes to the Law on Arms.](#) Belarus Security Blog, 2017.
- Iryna Tačyckaja. [Indicators of Belarus export activity in the 1998-2016: what are the chances for growth?](#) IPM Research Centre, 2017.
- Hinnerk Gnutzmann, Arevik Gnutzmann-Mkrtchyan. [The trade effect of Generalised Scheme of Preferences removal: evidence from Belarus.](#) BEROC, 2017.

Think tanks in Belarus are encouraged to submit their research for inclusion into the database by [emailing us](#).

*The Ostrogorski Centre is a private, non-profit organisation*

*dedicated to analysis and policy advocacy on problems which Belarus faces in its transition to market economy and the rule of law. Its projects include Belarus Digest, [the Journal of Belarusian Studies](#), [BelarusPolicy.com](#), [BelarusProfile.com](#) and [Ostro.by](#).*

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## **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.

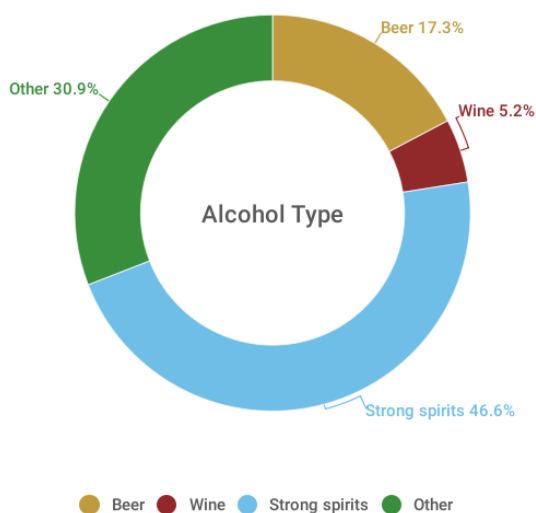
Recently, during a youth exchange seminar in Brussels (Brussels Laboratory, a seminar on social inclusion and anti-discrimination strategies), students were asked to share some stereotypes about their countries.

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.

Alcoholic drinks preferences in Belarus,  
2014. (Source: naviny.by)



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.

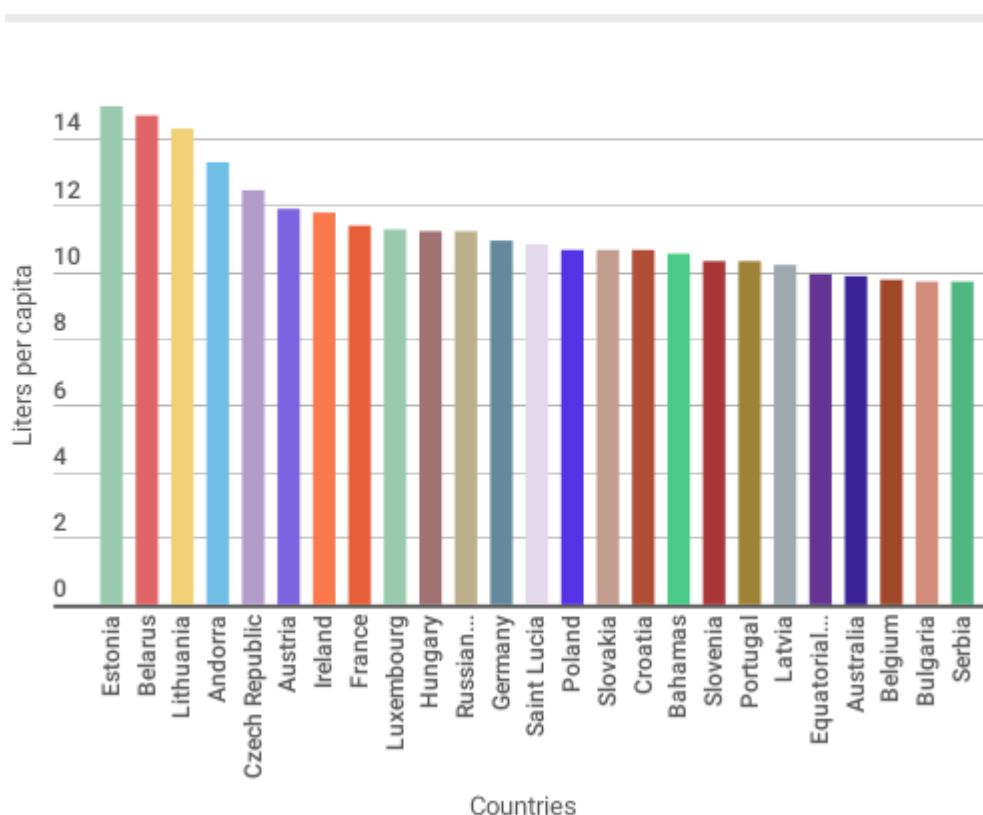
According to new data, the average Belarusian over the age of

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.

Countries with highest alcohol consumption, 2016 (litres of pure alcohol per capita). Source: worldatlas.com



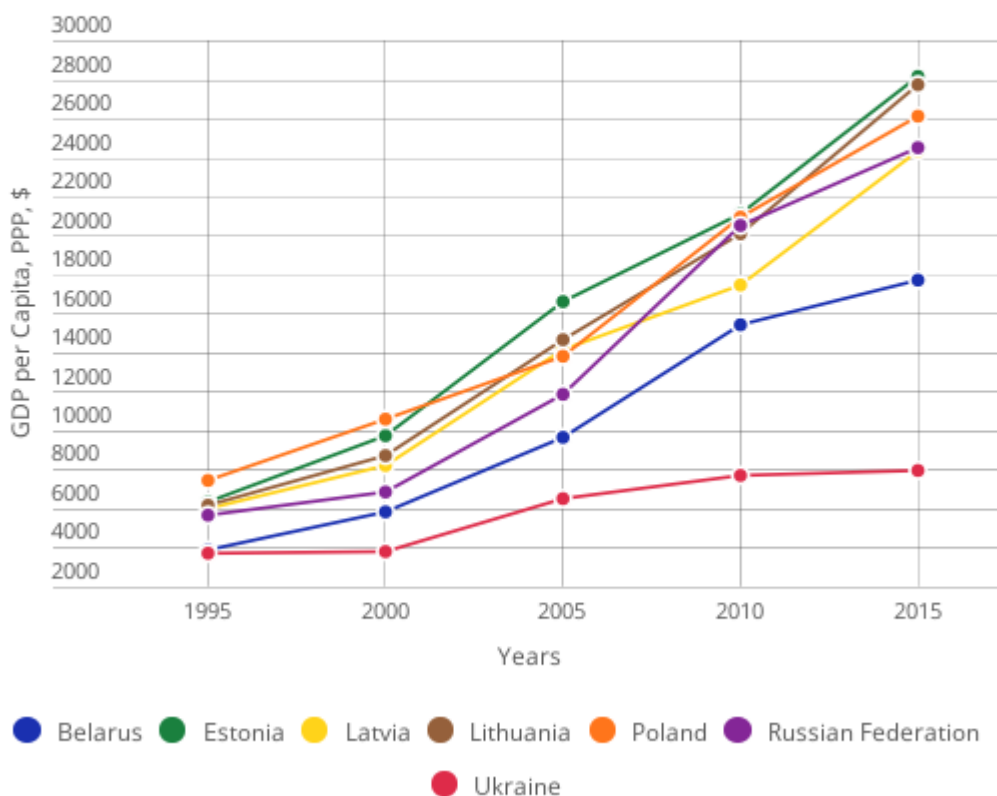
Due to the deterioration of the economic situation in Belarus in 2016 and the subsequent rise in unemployment, one can

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 wide-spread 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?

GDP per capita, PPP. Belarus and its neighbours, 2015.  
Source: worldbank.org.



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

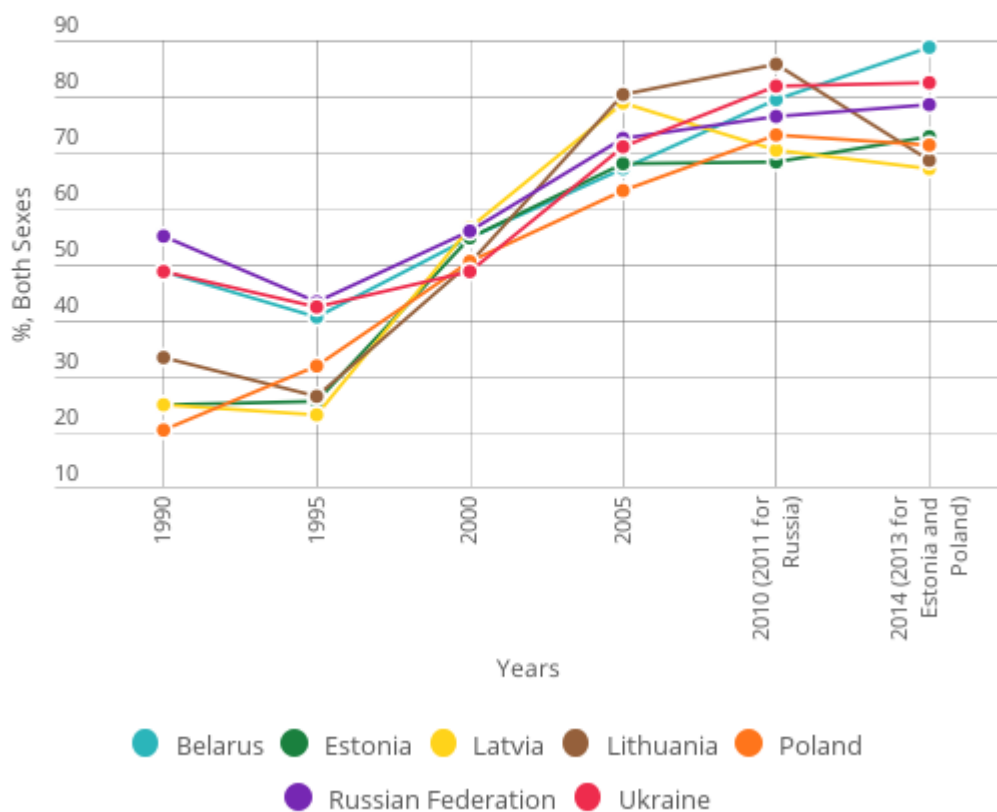
negative growth of -3.9% of GDP. The "Still Doing Business" rating considers Belarus to have an upper middle income, ranking 44 out of 189 countries in ease of doing business.

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).



**Total enrolment in tertiary education. Belarus and its neighbours, 2014. Source: worldbank.org.**



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](#).

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