Belarus, officially the Republic of Belarus, is a landlocked country in Eastern Europe bordered by Russia to the northeast, Ukraine to the south, Poland to the west, and Lithuania and Latvia to the northwest. Its capital is Minsk; other major cities include Brest, Hrodna (Grodno), Homiel (Gomel), Mahilyow (Mogilev) and Vitsebsk (Vitebsk). Over forty percent of its 207,600 square kilometres (80,200 sq mi) is forested, and its strongest economic sectors are service industries and manufacturing.

Until the 20th century, the lands of modern-day Belarus belonged to several countries, including the Principality of Polotsk, the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth, and the Russian Empire. In the aftermath of the Russian Revolution, Belarus became a founding constituent republic of the Soviet Union and was renamed as the Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic (BSSR). Much of the borders of Belarus took their modern shape in 1939 when some lands of the Second Polish Republic were incorporated into it after the Soviet invasion of Poland and were finalized after World War II. The nation and its territory were devastated in World War II, during which Belarus lost about a third of its population and more than half of its economic resources. The republic was redeveloped in the post-war years. In 1945, the Belorussian SSR became a founding member of the United Nations, along with the Soviet Union and the Ukrainian SSR.

The parliament of the republic declared the sovereignty of Belarus on 27 July 1990, and during the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Belarus declared independence on 25 August 1991. Alexander Lukashenko has been the country's president since 1994.

Over 70% of Belarus's population of 9.49 million resides in urban areas. More than 80% of the population is ethnic Belarusian, with sizable minorities of Russians, Poles and Ukrainians. Since a referendum in 1995, the country has had two official languages: Belarusian and Russian. The Constitution of Belarus does not declare an official religion, although the primary religion in the country is Eastern Orthodox Christianity. The second most popular, Roman Catholicism, has a much smaller following, although both Orthodox and Catholic versions of Christmas and Easter are celebrated as national holidays.

The name Belarus corresponds literally with the term White Rus. There are several claims to the origin of the name White Rus. An ethno-religious theory suggests that the name used to describe the part of old Ruthenian lands within the Grand Duchy of Lithuania that had been populated mostly by early Christianized Slavs, as opposed to Black Ruthenia, which was predominantly inhabited by pagan Balts. An alternate explanation for the name comments on the white clothing worn by the local Slavic population. A third theory suggests that the old Rus lands that were not conquered by the Tatars (i.e., Polatsk, Vitsiebsk and Mahilyow) had been referred to as "white." Other sources claim that, before 1267, the land not conquered by the Mongols was considered "White Rus."

The Latin term "Alba Russia" was used again by Pope Pius VI to recognize the Society of Jesus there 1783, exclaiming "Approbo Societatem Jesu in Alba Russia degentem, approbo, approbo." The first known use of White Russia to refer to Belarus was in the late-16th century by Englishman Sir Jerome Horsey, who was known for his close contacts with the Russian Royal Court. During the 17th century, Russian Tsars used "White Rus" to describe the lands captured from the Grand Duchy of Lithuania.

The term Belorussia (Russian: Белоруссия; the latter part similar but spelled and stressed differently from Россия, Russia) first rose in the days of the Russian Empire, and the Russian Tsar was usually styled "Tsar of All the Russias", as Russia or the Russian Empire was formed by all the Russias — the Great, Little, and White. This asserted that the territories are all Russian and all people are Russian; in the case of the Belarusians, they were variants of the Russian people. After the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917, the term White Russia caused some confusion as it was also the name of the military force that opposed the red Bolsheviks. During the period of the Belorussian SSR, the term Byelorussia was embraced as part of a national consciousness. In western Belarus under Polish control, Byelorussia became commonly used in the regions of Białystok and Grodno during the interwar period.

The region that is now Belarus was first settled by Baltic tribes in the 3rd century. Around the 5th century, the area was taken over by Slavic tribes. The takeover was partially due to the lack of military coordination of the Balts but the gradual assimilation of the Balts into Slavic culture was peaceful in nature.

The Principality of Polotsk, also known as the Kingdom of Polotsk or the Duchy of Polotsk was a medieval principality of the Early East Slavs. The origin and date of state establishment is uncertain. In the Russian chronicles it is mentioned as one being conquered by Vladimir the Great and thereafter became associated with the Rurik dynasty and Kievan Rus.

At the time of its greatest extent the principality stretched over large parts of today's northern and central Belarus and a smaller part of today's southeastern Latvia, including (besides Polotsk itself) the following towns: Vitebsk, Drutsk, Minsk, Izjaslaw (now Zaslawye), Lahojsk, Barysaw, Brachyslaw (now Braslaw), Kukeinos (now Koknese) and others.

There is no exact date on record when the principality was formed; it was likely an evolutionary process. In 862 Polotsk was first mentioned in the Primary Chronicle as a town within the realm of the Novgorod Rus, alongside with Murom and Beloozero. Initially the Principality of Polotsk was governed by a local dynasty, and not by an appointed governor from Kiev. Local statehood was a result of local political evolution in the Early East Slavs' tribal union of Krivichi.

The golden age of medieval Polotsk is associated with the rule of Bryachislav's son, Vseslav (1044–1101). He profited from the civil wars in Kiev in order to assert his own independence and run its affairs separately. During this time the principality became a centre of trade serving as a transit location between other lands of Kievan Rus and of Scandinavia. It also asserted its independent status balancing between Kiev, Novgorod and Varangians. Since late 10th century, Polotsk was also successful in colonizing the lands of its western neighbours, the ancestors of today’s Latvians and Lithuanians. In early 13th century, Teutonic knights seized the power over the former from the hands of Polotsk, but the historical ties with the latter proved much stronger and lasted for 700 more years, although the leading role in this “marriage” soon shifted to the other side. The last pagans of Europe, brave and skillful warriors, Lithuanians were initially serving Polotsk as auxiliary troops in its wars with the Teutonic knights and other Ruthenian principalities; but from 1183 they refused the obedience to the metropoly and established their own state.

Polotsk's Cathedral of Saint Sophia in Polotsk (built by Vseslav between 1044 and 1066) was a symbol of the independent-mindedness of Polotsk, rivalling churches of the same name in Novgorod and Kiev and referring to the original Hagia Sophia in Constantinople (and thus to claims of imperial prestige, authority and sovereignty).

Starting from the mid-12th century there have been changes in the lands to the west of the principality. The fortress of Riga became the main military basis of the Livonian Brothers of the Sword. In 1209 the German crusaders conquered principalities of Jersika and Koknese in the southeast of today's Latvia, which previously was under control of Polotsk, forcing Polotsk to permit free travel to German merchants in 1212 and ending Livonian tributes. In 1227 Smolensk ceded Polotsk by treaty to the city of Riga.

Many early Russian principalities were badly affected by a Mongol invasion in the 13th century, but the lands of Belarus avoided this invasion being a part of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania.

The Grand Duchy of Lithuania was a European state from the 12th century until 1795. It was founded by the Lithuanians, one of the polytheistic Baltic tribes from Aukštaitija. The duchy later expanded to include large portions of the former Kievan Rus and other Slavic lands, covering the territory of present-day Belarus, Latvia, Lithuania and parts of Moldova, Poland, Russia and Ukraine. At its greatest extent in the 15th century, it was the largest state in Europe. It was a multi-ethnic and multi-confessional state with great diversity in languages, religion, and cultural heritage.

On 2 February 1386, the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and the Kingdom of Poland were joined in a personal union through a marriage of their rulers. This union set in motion the developments that eventually resulted in the formation of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth, created in 1569. The Russians, led by Ivan III of Moscow, began military conquests in 1486 in an attempt to reunite the lands of Kievan Rus, specifically the territories of Belarus and Ukraine.

The union between Poland and Lithuania ended in 1795 with the partitioning of Poland by Imperial Russia, Prussia, and Austria. During this time, the territories of Belarus were acquired by the Russian Empire under the reign of Catherine II and held until their occupation by the German Empire during World War I.

During the negotiations of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, Belarus first declared independence under German occupation on 25 March 1918, forming the Belarusian People's Republic. Immediately afterwards, the Polish–Soviet War ignited, and Belarus found itself torn between resurgent Poland and Soviet Russia.

A part of Belarus under Russian rule emerged as the Belorussian Soviet Socialist Republic in 1919. Soon thereafter it merged to form the Lithuanian–Belorussian Soviet Socialist Republic. The contested lands were divided between Poland and the Soviet Union after the war ended in 1921, and the Belorussian SSR became a founding member of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics in 1922. The western part of modern Belarus remained part of Poland.

In 1939, Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union invaded and occupied Poland, marking the beginning of World War II. Much of north-eastern Poland, which had been part of the country since the Peace of Riga two decades earlier, was annexed to the Belorussian Soviet Socialist Republic, and now constitutes West Belarus. The Soviet-controlled Belarusian People Council officially took control of the territories, whose populations consisted of a mixture of Poles, Ukrainians, Belarusians and Jews, on 28 October 1939 in Białystok. Nazi Germany invaded the Soviet Union in 1941. The Brest Fortress, which had been annexed in 1939, at this time was subjected to one of the most destructive onslaughts that happened during the war. Statistically, BSSR was the hardest-hit Soviet republic in World War II and remained in Nazi hands until 1944. During that time, Germany destroyed 209 out of 290 cities in the republic, 85% of the republic's industry, and more than one million buildings.

After the war, Belarus was among the 51 founding countries of the United Nations Charter and as such it was allowed an additional vote at the UN, on top of the Soviet Union's vote. Vigorous postwar reconstruction promptly followed the end of the war and Belorussian SSR became a major center of manufacturing in western USSR, creating jobs and attracting ethnic Russians. The borders of Belorussian SSR and Poland were redrawn and became known as the Curzon Line.

Belarus declared itself sovereign on 27 July 1990 by issuing the Declaration of State Sovereignty of the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic. With the support of the Communist Party, the country's name was changed to the Republic of Belarus on 25 August 1991. Stanislav Shushkevich, the chairman of the Supreme Soviet of Belarus, met with Boris Yeltsin of Russia and Leonid Kravchuk of Ukraine on 8 December 1991 in Belavezhskaya Pushcha to formally declare the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the formation of the Commonwealth of Independent States.

A national constitution was adopted in March 1994 in which the functions of prime minister were given to the president of Belarus. Two-round elections for the presidency on 24 June 1994 and 10 July 1994 catapulted the formerly unknown Alexander Lukashenko into national prominence. He garnered 45% of the vote in the first round and 80% in the second, defeating Vyacheslav Kebich who received 14% of the vote. Lukashenko was re-elected in 2001, in 2006 and again in 2010.

The National Assembly is a bicameral parliament comprising the 110-member House of Representatives (the lower house) and the 64-member Council of the Republic (the upper house).

The House of Representatives has the power to appoint the prime minister, make constitutional amendments, call for a vote of confidence on the prime minister, and make suggestions on foreign and domestic policy. The Council of the Republic has the power to select various government officials, conduct an impeachment trial of the president, and accept or reject the bills passed by the House of Representatives. Each chamber has the ability to veto any law passed by local officials if it is contrary to the constitution.

The government includes a Council of Ministers, headed by the prime minister and five deputy prime ministers. The members of this council need not be members of the legislature and are appointed by the president. The judiciary comprises the Supreme Court and specialized courts such as the Constitutional Court, which deals with specific issues related to constitutional and business law. The judges of national courts are appointed by the president and confirmed by the Council of the Republic. For criminal cases, the highest court of appeal is the Supreme Court. The Belarusian Constitution forbids the use of special extrajudicial courts.

Belarus is divided into six regions, which are named after the cities that serve as their administrative centers. Each region has a provincial legislative authority, called a region council, which is elected by its residents, and a provincial executive authority called a region administration, whose chairman is appointed by the president. Regions are further subdivided into districts. Each district has its own legislative authority, or district council, elected by its residents, and an executive authority or district administration appointed by higher executive powers. As of 2002, there are six regions, 118 districts, 102 towns, and 108 urbanized settlements. The city of Minsk is split into nine districts and enjoys special status as the nation's capital. It is run by an executive committee and has been granted a charter of self-rule.

Most of the Belarusian economy remains state-controlled and has been described as "Soviet-style." Thus, 51.2% of Belarusians are employed by state-controlled companies, 47.4% are employed by private companies (of which 5.7% are partially foreign-owned), and 1.4% are employed by foreign companies. The country relies on Russia for various imports, including petroleum. Important agricultural products include potatoes and cattle byproducts, including meat. In 1994, Belarus's main exports included heavy machinery (especially tractors), agricultural products, and energy products.

Historically, textiles and wood processing have constituted a large part of industrial activity.[130] At the time of the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, Belarus was one of the world's most industrially developed states by percentage of GDP as well as the richest CIS member-state. Economically, Belarus involved itself in the CIS, Eurasian Economic Community, and Union with Russia.

The labor force consists of more than four million people, among whom women hold slightly more jobs than men. In 2005, nearly a quarter of the population was employed by industrial factories. Employment is also high in agriculture, manufacturing sales, trading goods, and education. The unemployment rate, according to government statistics, was 1.5% in 2005. There were 679,000 unemployed Belarusians, two-thirds of whom were women. The unemployment rate has been in decline since 2003, and the overall rate of employment is the highest since statistics were first compiled in 1995.

According to the 2009 census, the population is 9,503,807. Ethnic Belarusians constitute 83.7% of Belarus' total population. The next largest ethnic groups are: Russians (8.3%), Poles (3.1%), and Ukrainians (1.7%). Belarus' two official languages are Russian and Belarusian; Russian is the main language, used by 72% of the population, while Belarusian, the second official language, is only used by 11.9%. Minorities also speak Polish, Ukrainian and Eastern Yiddish.

Belarus has a population density of about 50 people per square kilometer (127 per sq mi); 70% of its total population is concentrated in urban areas. Minsk, the nation's capital and largest city, was home to 1,836,808 residents in 2009. Gomel, with a population of 481,000, is the second-largest city and serves as the capital of the Homiel Voblast. Other large cities are Mogilev (365,100), Vitebsk (342,400), Hrodna (314,800) and Brest (298,300).

Belarusian literature began with 11th- to 13th-century religious scripture, such as the 12th-century poetry of Cyril of Turaw. By the 16th century, Polotsk resident Francysk Skaryna translated the Bible into Belarusian. It was published in Prague and Vilnius sometime between 1517 and 1525, making it the first book printed in Belarus or anywhere in Eastern Europe. The modern era of Belarusian literature began in the late 19th century; one prominent writer was Yanka Kupala. Many Belarusian writers of the time, such as Uładzimir Žyłka, Kazimir Svayak, Yakub Kolas, Źmitrok Biadula, and Maksim Haretski, wrote for Nasha Niva, a Belarusian-language paper published in Vilnius.

In the 19th century, Polish composer Stanisław Moniuszko composed operas and chamber music pieces while living in Minsk. During his stay, he worked with Belarusian poet Vintsent Dunin-Martsinkyevich and created the opera Sialanka (Peasant Woman). At the end of the 19th century, major Belarusian cities formed their own opera and ballet companies. The ballet Nightingale by M. Kroshner was composed during the Soviet era and became the first Belarusian ballet showcased at the National Academic Vialiki Ballet Theatre in Minsk.

The Belarusian government sponsors annual cultural festivals such as the Slavianski Bazaar in Vitebsk, which showcases Belarusian performers, artists, writers, musicians, and actors. Several state holidays, such as Independence Day and Victory Day, draw big crowds and often include displays such as fireworks and military parades, especially in Vitebsk and Minsk. The government's Ministry of Culture finances events promoting Belarusian arts and culture both inside and outside the country.

Belarus has four World Heritage Sites: the Mir Castle Complex, the Nesvizh Castle, the Belovezhskaya Pushcha (shared with Poland), and the Struve Geodetic Arc (shared with nine other countries)