

## Doing Business in Belarus | Belarusian Social and Business Culture

### A Belarusian Culture Overview

#### Fact File

- **Official name** – Republic of Belarus
- **Population** – 9,577,552\*
- **Official Languages** – Russian and Belarusian
- **Currency** – Belarusian Ruble (BYR)
- **Capital city** – Minsk
- **GDP (purchasing power parity)** – \$131.2 billion
- **GDP Per Capita** – \$13,600\*



#### Overview

Belarus is a land-locked country located in eastern Europe and borders Russia, the Ukraine, Poland, Latvia and Lithuania. In the past, Belarus has been claimed by Russians, Lithuanians and Poles. As a result of the Russian Revolution, Belarus became a founding constituent republic of the Soviet Union and was renamed as the Byelorussian SSR becoming one of the most prosperous parts of the USSR, Belarus gained its independence in 1991. Many have attributed this to the political movement in the 1980s commonly known as ‘perestroika’, which aimed to improve the efficiency of communism in the Soviet Union but only heightened resistance and national identity amongst its individual republics. Belarus’ complicated history and Russian roots have created a unique social and business culture that anyone doing business in Belarus must understand to be effective.

#### Belarusian Culture - Key Concepts and Values

**Family** – Although families in Belarus tend to be small, the connection between family generations is strong. A large number of Belarusians live in urban areas and more often than not in small flats. It is not uncommon for a family to live in confined spaces and often you will find three generations living under the same roof. Children will usually have their elderly parents live with them instead of sending them to retirement houses. As a result, you may find close bonds between grandparents and their grandchildren. Falling birth rates in Belarus have recently prompted the government to encourage families to have at least three children.

**Hospitality** – At first, Belarusians may appear reserved and cold, however, beyond this initial reserve you will discover that they are very giving, kind-hearted individuals who try hard to look after their guests. Sometimes their eagerness to please their foreign guests may appear over-friendly and very unusual to foreigners. People do not smile as much and do not greet unfamiliar people so while this may seem rude or impolite, it is their normal behaviour. Belarusians are keen to show the positive side of their life and culture and will go to great effort to make their visitors feel welcome, happy and impressed.

**Collective and Individual Dichotomy** - Belarus’s troubled political background has instilled a collectivistic mentality in the Belarusian people. The combination of limited physical space and

the political history and current state control have created a real sense of group in the country. Family always comes first in Belarus. Outside the family network Belarusians tend to have a more individualistic perspective and are increasingly free to show preference to individual interests and tastes before that of the group.

### **Doing Business in Belarus**

Most of Belarus's economy remains state-controlled but privatisation has recently increased. Belarus boasts historically important industries in wood and textiles and has an abundance of cultural and historical sites. Belarus is a highly industrialised country and relies on Russia for its energy and raw materials. Foreign investment has not been popular historically, however Belarus is increasingly involved in greater trade with Europe, exporting goods to places like Russia and the UK. Before doing business in Belarus, it is essential to be aware of the unique Belarusian business culture and the historical and political context which influences it.

### **Belarusian Business Part 1 – Working in Belarus**

- **Working practices in Belarus**
  - Belarusians tend to prefer business meetings that are fairly unpretentious and modest, however they do appreciate formality so make sure that you dress smartly.
  - Negotiations and decision-making can be a slower process in Belarus than what you find in more western societies. Be patient when doing business in Belarus as rushing them might slow down and negatively impact business negotiations.
- **Structure and hierarchy in Belarusian companies**
  - Bear in mind that Belarusian business systems tend to be quite hierarchical so always respect the different levels within an organisation.
  - In Belarusian business culture, the highest individual in authority still tends to be the final decision-maker.
  - Belarusian business structure makes clear divisions in hierarchical rank and status. As such, you may encounter a significant level of bureaucracy in more traditional organisations.
- **Working relationships in Belarus**
  - It is important to spend time building relationships with your Belarusian counterparts. Don't expect to make significant business progress if you are not prepared to take the time to build trust and mutual respect.
  - Avoid addressing your Belarusian counterparts by his or her first name until you are invited to do so.

- Belarusians don't usually mix their professional and private spheres so avoid asking your counterparts personal questions in business settings.
- Bear in mind that being excessively friendly can be interpreted negatively by your Belarusian counterparts so try to maintain a more reserved approach in first meetings.
- Indirect communication is common in Belarusian culture so pay special attention to your Belarusian counterparts' non-verbal gestures as they can add significant meaning to a conversation.
- Belarusians will usually centre their social events around food. If you are invited to dinner it's polite to bring a gift of food or drink.
- It is very common to offer foreign guests lots of drinks during dinner and sometimes it is difficult to say no without offending the Belarusian side. Foreigners are sometimes invited to a Russian Banya, a completely unique experience and great opportunity to build relationships so accept the invitation if possible.
- Belarusians tend to stand quite close to one another so don't be offended if there is only a small distance between you and them.

## **Belarusian Business Part 2 - Doing Business in Belarus**

### ○ **Greeting practices in Belarus**

- In formal business situations, Belarusians tend to introduce themselves with their first name, patronymic name and last name. A patronymic name is a type of middle name that stems from the paternal side of the family. When greeting your Belarusian counterparts make sure you respect this custom.
- In business settings, greet your Belarusian counterparts with a firm handshake and maintain good eye contact. You might find that your Belarusian counterparts also repeat their names while shaking hands.
- Once a relationship has been established and a friendship has been formed this formality may be replaced by a hug and a kiss. A kiss is normal among old friends but hardly ever among colleagues, unless they have known each other for years.
- It is customary to greet each person on arrival and say goodbye to each person individually as you leave. Be careful to maintain good eye contact throughout.
- Make sure that you arrive in Belarus with a selection of small gifts. Offering gifts like small souvenirs is appreciated and seen as a sign of hospitality.
- When addressing your Belarusian counterparts, don't feel obliged to use professional titles in business environments. If a title is used at all, it is more likely that you will hear academic titles being used rather than professional ones.

### **Belarusian Business Etiquette (Do's and Don'ts)**

- ✓ DO translate one side of your business card into Russian when doing business in Belarus
- ✓ DO maintain eye contact when you are greeting your Belarusian colleagues
- ✓ DO physically show concern and interest in topics raised during meetings
- ✗ DON'T interrupt your Belarusian colleagues
- ✗ DON'T sit with your legs apart
- ✗ DON'T use the OK sign (thumb and forefinger forming a circle) as this can be offensive

### **Belarusian Culture Quiz - True or False**

1. Whistling inside a building brings bad luck.
2. Putting your feet on seats will demonstrate your hierarchical status and is a sign of distinction.
3. During meetings or parties, men are introduced before women.
4. It is common for elderly parents to live with their children.
5. It is rude to refuse food or drinks when socialising when Belarusian counterparts.

### **Belarusian Culture Quiz - Answers**

1. True.
2. False, putting your feet on a seat or table is considered impolite.
3. False, women are introduced before men and generally older individuals are introduced before the younger members of the group.
4. True.
5. True.

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\* Source: CIA World Factbook 2011

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