

Belarus

**Period of democratic transition: 1989–1991**

**Pro-democracy civic movement: not present**

Belarussians suffered greatly as an ethnic minority under the Polish government in the years following World War I and under Communist rule after World War II. Belarussian culture and language were suppressed under Stalin's intense "Russification," while the opposition was met with imprisonment, intimidation, and deportation.

The 1986 Chernobyl accident and the 1988 discovery of mass graves containing 250,000 victims of Stalinism swelled public discontent and led to the October 1988 demonstration of about 10,000 people. Political apathy was such, however, that the majority of the population continued to support the Soviet government in the belief that such activism would make no difference. A small civic movement, the Belarussian Popular Front (BPF), did emerge in 1988, pressing first for liberalization and autonomy and later for democracy and statehood. While the BPF united small independent labor unions and cultural, human rights, and civic organizations, it never achieved significant nationwide mass support. The coalition's influence was felt mainly in the capital, with moderate support in other urban centers. With the collapse of the August 1991 coup by Soviet hard-liners, pro-democracy civic groups pressed in vain for a petition drive to force early elections. Stanislau Shushkevich, head of the country's Parliament (elected in 1990, under Soviet rule), was a moderate reformer who pressed successfully for the orderly dissolution of the USSR and secured Belarus's independence. Yet he and the democratic forces were too weak to secure the resignation of a government headed by hard-line representatives of the old order.

In the first years of independent Belarus, the media and civil society were weak as former Communist hard-liners maintained a firm grip. After the new constitution went into effect in 1994, voters made Alexander Lukashenka Belarus's first post-Soviet president. Since then, Lukashenka has maintained his power through flawed and controversial elections, making it impossible for genuine democracy to take hold.