

INTRODUCTION

The Republic of Belarus, which became independent from the Soviet Union in 1991, established diplomatic relations with most European countries, including Hungary, in the early 1990s. The quarter-century of independence has provided the Belarusian nation with new opportunities and challenges. Belarus, which has a different economic model from that of other Central and Eastern European countries (officially a socially-oriented market economy), has recently made efforts to break out of its earlier isolation in Europe and has participated in the EU's Eastern Partnership since 2009. Since 2014, Minsk has been a hub of international diplomacy, and Hungary's Eastern Opening policy has also targeted Belarus. The strategic significance of the country is growing, but even now Belarus is barely known to most European citizens. Many people outside the country have misconceptions about its domestic socio-economic conditions. A certain amount of controversy surrounds Belarus, and there are divergent views among academics and politicians. All this constitutes a challenge for researchers striving for objectivity.

For these reasons (and with a view to meeting the above challenge), the Geographical Institute of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences decided to devote a volume in its "in Maps" series to Belarus. Initiated in 2005 under the editorship of Acad. Károly Kocsis, the series comprises the following volumes: *South Eastern Europe in Maps* (2005, 2007), *Ukraine in Maps* (2008) and *Hungary in Maps* (2009, 2011). The present volume is thus the fourth in the series.

Belarus in Maps was created in cooperation with researchers and teaching staff at the Faculty of Geography, Belarusian State University, and the Institute for Nature Management, National Academy of Sciences of Belarus. Special thanks are due to these fellow geographers in Belarus, in view of their professional contributions and their constructive advice. Special thanks are due to Prof. Ivan Pirozhnik and Prof. Dmitry Ivanov, deans of the Faculty of Geography of the

Belarusian State University, for their invaluable scientific help and support during the preparatory period and the realization of the present atlas. I also express special thanks – for the review comments – to Prof. Ferenc Probáld, my former PhD supervisor and professor emeritus of Eötvös Loránd University, and to fellow geographers at Brest University (Belarus). I would like to express my gratitude also to the Embassy of the Republic of Belarus in Hungary, and to His Excellency Ambassador Aliaksandr Khainouski for technical support and suggestions. Special thanks go also to Anatol Palyn, teacher of the high school in Lielčycy and to his son, Sasha for their efforts and help during my field research in Paliessie between 2007 and 2015.

The coordination work took place in Budapest, with three of the Hungarian authors representing the Geographical Institute, Hungarian Academy of Sciences and one the Institute of Geography and Earth Sciences, Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest. Since 2010 we have been developing professional ties with geographers in Belarus, benefitting from the effective support of Prof. Ivan Pirozhnik, former dean of the Belarusian State University, and Prof. Ekaterina Antipova. At their request, Acad. Vladimir Loginov also gave his support to the project, offering his invaluable experience and expertise. After a period of extended consultation – which gave rise to several preliminary Belarusian-Hungarian projects (e.g. EastMig, 2012–2014, funded by the International Visegrad Fund), publications (e.g. Jeney and Karácsonyi eds. 2015, Minsk and Budapest, the two capital cities), and an exchange project between the MTA and the NASB (2012–2015) – detailed technical work on the atlas commenced in 2015.

Unlike earlier volumes in the series, *Belarus in Maps* began as a grassroots initiative. The atlas came into being due in large part to the lobbying and support of Acad. Károly Kocsis, general editor of the series. Funding for the publication of the atlas was finally received from the MTA's

2016 grant fund. *Belarus in Maps* is thus being published eight years after the previous English-language atlas, *Hungary in Maps*. It is a small wonder that the Reader now has access to this latest volume in the series! Despite the difficulties that have arisen during the preparation of this atlas, we are committed to continuing the “in Maps” series, which has already become an important cornerstone of **regional geography** – (*stranovedeniye* (Rus.), *krainaznaïstva* (Bel.) – in Hungary.

Drawing from our experience in preparing the previous atlases, we have introduced several innovations. Consequently, *Belarus in Maps* differs in terms of its structure from the earlier atlases. In a departure from the traditional descriptive approach, we have sought to present Belarus by focusing on specific issues. Alongside the general parts, the atlas thus contains chapters, case studies that are specific to the country. These chapters summarize the findings of research conducted during the past decade. The subject-matters covered include: the change of the Belarusian nation and language use; the societal effects of the Chernobyl disaster; and issues relating to the country’s distinctive economic model. The atlas has been supplemented with chapters on regional geography and regional politics, and there is also a separate chapter on the role of geography in education and research. Text boxes have been used to present additional issues in greater detail. In addition to almost a hundred maps and diagrams, the atlas is also illustrated with photographs on a geographical theme.

The **data sources** are indicated after each table and diagram. Socio-economic data provided by *BelStat* (National Statistic Committee of the Republic of Belarus) was used for the regional and raion-based maps. The thematic maps of Lielčycy (*Figure 4.3*), Chojniki raions (*Figure 4.4*) and Minsk city (*Figure 6.7*) are based on fieldwork and data collection by the authors. Some of the thematic layers were prepared by *Belkartografija* under an agreement with Belarusian chapter authors.

The **spelling of geographical names** gave rise to several issues. Even the name of the country is sometimes unclear: alongside Belarus, such other forms as Biełarus, Byelorussia or indeed White Russia can be found in other works. In this atlas, the country’s official name – Belarus – is used (see *Box 1.1*). An exception is made when referring to older names for the country (e.g.

Byelorussian SSR), which were used in earlier historical periods.

Both Belarusian and Russian are official languages in Belarus. Having consulted with the Belarusian contributors to the atlas, we decided that it was important to use the Belarusian versions of geographical names (see *Appendix 1*). Like Russian geographical names, Belarusian geographical names can be transliterated (Romanized) in accordance with the British Standard, which was adopted in 1979 by both the United States Board on Geographic Names and the Permanent Committee on Geographical Names for British Official Use (e.g. Homyel’, Vitsyebsk, Rahachow, Iwye). An additional method of transliteration (Romanization) is derived from the Łacinka of the 19th century and was elaborated in 2000; it can seem rather alien (e.g. Homieł, Viciebsk, Rahačoŭ, Iŭje) in an English-language setting. This script is similar to but not identical with the Latin transcription of Slavic texts in Cyrillic lettering that was elaborated in the 19th century using the scholarly system and was based on Czech.

We decided to use the Łacinka-derived version because it was adopted in 2007 at the Ninth United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names, which issued an “Instruction on transliteration of Belarusian geographical names with letters of Latin script”. Moreover, this has been the official international Romanization of Belarusian geographical names since 2013. It should be noted, however, that when referring to the country’s name, we have used the official name in English (Belarus) rather than the Romanized version of the country’s name in Belarusian (i.e. Biełaruś). Similarly, we use the word Russia rather than the Romanized version of the country’s name in Russian (i.e. Rossiya). The appendix contains a table with the various forms of the main geographical names appearing in the atlas.

The official Romanization of geographical names in the neighbouring countries of Ukraine and Russia (Ukrainian National Transliteration and the GOST standard) follows far more closely the British Standard (e.g. Chernihiv, Smolensk). We have indicated on the maps the names of geographical objects in the official transliterated versions that are used in the given country [e.g. Dnepr (Rus.), Dniapro (Bel.), Dnipro (Ukr.)]

or we have used their official versions in the countries that existed in the past (e.g. Gomel, Viťebsk). In the case of ordinary words that are Russian rather than Belarusian, we have adhered to the British Standard (e.g. dacha, elektrichka).

To enhance readability, the Belarusian terms for administrative units and their English counterparts have been used as synonyms (e.g. voblasć – region, raion – district). Further, when using Belarusian terms, we have omitted inflections (e.g. Homieĺ voblasć instead of Homieĺskaja voblasć).

When providing English versions of various Belarusian geographical areas or features, we have used either the uninflected forms of proper nouns (e.g. Niomanskaja nizina – Nioman Lowland) or, where possible, a full translation (e.g. Bielaruskaja hrada – Belarusian Range). It should be noted that in Belarusian there are often significant differences between the inflected and uninflected forms of proper nouns (e.g. Aršanskaje ŭzvyyšša – Orša Hills). Where the cardinal directions (or their derivatives) are included in geographical names they have not been translated into English (e.g. Zachodnaja Dzvina rather than Western Dzvina). Belarusian inflections have been retained where both parts are proper nouns or both parts are in Belarusian (e.g. Mazyrskaje Paliessie, Bielaviežskaja Pušča – Bielavieža Forest). Some geographical names cannot be rendered exactly in English. Thus “Prydniaproŭskaja nizina”, which

literally means “Lowland along the Dniapro [river]”, is shown as Dniapro Lowland rather than as Prydniapro Lowland.

Readers may be interested to know that we had many positive experiences during our time in Belarus. We found the Belarusians to be a hospitable, open, and helpful people. Despite the difficulties, any hurdles to our professional cooperation were quickly overcome. We warmly recommend that readers not only look at maps of the country but also visit Belarus! This little-known European country is rich in natural beauty and cultural heritage.

Our goal in publishing this latest volume in the “in Maps” series is to offer a regional geography of Belarus – a country that forms part of the European Union’s neighbourhood – and to present issues relating to the Belarusian nation, society, and spatial economic development. It is our sincere belief that the work will foster mutual knowledge and understanding among the nations of the region, contribute to a cultural and scientific dialogue, and strengthen economic and social ties. We warmly recommend the publication – which is richly illustrated with maps – both to geographers, economists and political scientists as well as to diplomats, politicians and investors. It will also be of interest to the broader public, both to the west and east of the River Buh.

Budapest, March 14, 2017

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Track precinct, the historical core of Minsk with Afghanistan War Memorial on the shore of the River Svislač. (Photo: Konkoly-Thege, G. 2013)