1. BELARUS IN EUROPE

Geographic setting

The territory of the Republic of Belarus is situated in the western part of Eastern Europe, between latitudes 51°16′N and 56°10′N and longitudes 23°11′E and 32°47′E (*Figure 1.1*). The length of the country is 560 km from north to south and 650 km from west to east. Geographic extreme points are Lake Asvieja (Viciebsk voblasć) in the north, the town of Kamaryn (Homieĺ voblasć) in the south, the town of Vysokae (Brest voblasć) in the west and the town of Chocimsk (Mahilioŭ voblasć) in the east.

Belarus is a medium-sized European country with an **area** of about 207,600 square kilometres. Sverdlovsk Oblast (Russia), Kansas (United States), the main island of Great Britain and Hunan Province (China) are of similar size. Belarus is slightly smaller than Laos, half the site of Paraguay, and slightly smaller than Victoria (Australia).

In terms of **population**, Belarus (9.5 million inhabitants, 2016) is in a group of middle-ranked European countries which includes Switzerland, Austria, Hungary and Sweden (*Table 1.1*). Together with Azerbaijan, it ranks in the middle

Fig. 1.1 **BELARUS IN EUROPE**

Cartography: Farkas, Z., Keresztesi, Z. MTA CSFK Geographical Institute, Budapest, 2017

Table 1.1 *Belarus among 45 selected European and CIS countries*

	Population number			GDP, Purchasing Power Parity (PPP)			Human Development Index (HDI)			Per capita GDP, PPP		
Rank	Country	Thousand, 2015	Rank	Country	Billion dollar, 2015	Rank	Country	2014	Rank	Country	Current international dollar, 2015
1	Russia	143,457	1	Germany	3,841	1	Norway	0.944	1	Luxembourg	98,987
2	Germany	80,689	2	Russia	3,718	2	Switzerland	0.930	2	Norway	68,430
3	Turkey	78,666	3	United Kingdom	2,679	3	Denmark	0.923	3	Switzerland	58,551
4	United Kingdom	64,716	4	France	2,647	4	Netherlands	0.922	4	Ireland	55,533
5	France	64,395	5	Italy	2,171	5	Germany	0.916	5	Netherlands	49,166
6	Italy	59,798	6	Spain	1,615	6	Ireland	0.916	6	Sweden	47,922
7	Spain	46,122	7	Turkey	1,589	7	Sweden	0.907	7	Austria	47,250
8	Ukraine	44,824	8	Poland	1,005	8	United Kingdom	0.907	8	Germany	46,893
9	Poland	38,612	9	Netherlands	833	9	Iceland	0.899	9	Iceland	46,097
10	Romania	19,511	10	Belgium	494	10	Luxembourg	0.892	10	Denmark	45,709
11	Kazakhstan	17,625	11	Switzerland	482	11	Belgium	0.890	11	Belgium	43,585
12	Netherlands	16,925	12	Sweden	473	12	France	0.888	12	France	41,181
13	Belgium	11,299	13	Kazakhstan	429	13	Austria	0.885	13	United Kingdom	41,159
14	Greece	10,955	14	Romania	414	14	Finland	0.883	14	Finland	41,120
15	Czechia	10,543	15	Austria	404	15	Slovenia	0.88	15	Malta	36,005
16	Portugal	10,350	16	Norway	356	16	Spain	0.876	16	Italy	35,708
17	Hungary	9,855	17	Ukraine	339	17	Italy	0.873	17	Spain	34,819
18	Sweden	9,779	18	Czechia	332	18	Czechia	0.870	18	Cyprus	32,785
19	Azerbaijan	9,754	19	Portugal	290	19	Greece	0.865	19	Czechia	31,549
20	**Belarus**	9,496	20	Greece	286	20	Estonia	0.861	20	Slovenia	31,007
21	Serbia	8,851	21	Denmark	259	21	Cyprus	0.850	21	Slovakia	29,720
22	Austria	8,545	22	Hungary	258	22	Slovakia	0.844	22	Estonia	28,592
23	Switzerland	8,299	23	Ireland	257	23	Poland	0.843	23	Lithuania	28,359
24	Bulgaria	7,150	24	Finland	225	24	Lithuania	0.839	24	Portugal	27,835
25	Denmark	5,669	25	Azerbaijan	169	25	Malta	0.839	25	Poland	26,455
26	Finland	5,503	26	**Belarus**	168	26	Portugal	0.830	26	Greece	26,449
27	Slovakia	5,426	27	Slovakia	161	27	Hungary	0.828	27	Hungary	26,222
28	Norway	5,211	28	Bulgaria	137	28	Latvia	0.819	28	Russia	25,411
29	Ireland	4,688	29	Serbia	98	29	Croatia	0.818	29	Latvia	24,712
30	Croatia	4,240	30	Croatia	91	30	Montenegro	0.802	30	Kazakhstan	24,268
31	Moldova	4,069	31	Lithuania	82	31	**Belarus**	0.798	31	Croatia	21,581
32	Georgia	4,000	32	Slovenia	64	32	Russia	0.798	32	Romania	20,787
33	Bosnia-H	3,810	33	Luxembourg	56	33	Romania	0.793	33	Turkey	20,438
34	Armenia	3,018	34	Latvia	49	34	Kazakhstan	0.788	34	Bulgaria	19,097
35	Albania	2,897	35	Bosnia-H	41	35	Bulgaria	0.782	35	Azerbaijan	17,993

Table 1.1 continued

Rank	Population number Country	Thousand, 2015	GDP, Purchasing Power Parity (PPP) Rank	Country	Billion dollar, 2015	Human Development Index (HDI) Rank	Country	2014	Per capita GDP, PPP Rank	Country	Current international dollar, 2015
36	Lithuania	2,878	36	Estonia	38	36	Serbia	0.771	36	**Belarus**	17,654
37	Macedonia	2,078	37	Georgia	36	37	Turkey	0.761	37	Montenegro	16,123
38	Slovenia	2,068	38	Albania	33	38	Georgia	0.754	38	Macedonia	14,009
39	Latvia	1,971	39	Macedonia	29	39	Azerbaijan	0.751	39	Serbia	13,671
40	Estonia	1,313	40	Cyprus	28	40	Macedonia	0.747	40	Albania	11,301
41	Cyprus	1,165	41	Armenia	25	41	Ukraine	0.747	41	Bosnia-H	10,492
42	Montenegro	626	42	Moldova	18	42	Albania	0.733	42	Georgia	9,630
43	Luxembourg	567	43	Malta	15	43	Armenia	0.733	43	Armenia	8,468
44	Malta	419	44	Iceland	15	44	Bosnia-H	0.733	44	Ukraine	7,971
45	Iceland	329	45	Montenegro	10	45	Moldova	0.693	45	Moldova	5,006

Sources: hdr.undp.org.data.worldbank.org, UN World Population Prospects

among the post-Soviet countries. Belarus's population is about the same as that of a medium-sized East Coast state in the United States (e.g. New Jersey, Georgia, North Carolina) or that of a "minor" Chinese urban agglomeration (e.g. Harbin or Zhengzhou). The country has barely half the population of Taiwan or Australia.

The **population density** of Belarus (46 persons/km^2) is low in European (and global) terms but relatively high among the post-Soviet countries. Its population density is significantly higher than that of the Baltic countries or the United States but lower than that of Ukraine, Moldova or Bulgaria. Based on population density, it can be grouped with Iran, South Africa or one of the more densely populated oblasts of Russia's Central Federal District (e.g. Tula, Vladimir, Belgorod, Voronezh, but not Moscow Oblast).

Although Belarus is a **landlocked country**, its ridges rising above the East European Plain are the source area of many major rivers that flow towards the Baltic Sea or the Black Sea (Nioman, and, in part, Dzvina, Dniapro). For centuries, therefore, the territory of present-day Belarus has been a meeting point of north-south and east-west transport corridors and trade routes. In the course of history, its gateway role was sometimes strengthened (for instance, at the time of the Varangians – Swedish Vikings – who advanced along the rivers between the Baltic and Black seas, and later when the territory formed the core area of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania). However, in other periods (e.g. during Napoleon's campaign and the Second World War), the region's role as a gateway between Europe and Russia / Soviet Union on the Berlin-Warsaw-Minsk-Smolensk-Moscow army route brought destruction.

At present, Belarus forms the gateway between the EU and Russia. Without a doubt, the country lies at a geopolitical focal point of Europe. It is this strategic position that gives Belarus its significance. Strategically, it is a far more important European country than one might suppose based on its economy, area or population. Belarus is seeking to turn this factor to its advantage.

Belarus lies in the western part of the East European Plain, a large physical geographical unit, which occupies a major part of Eastern Europe. Almost the whole territory

of Belarus consists of different types of plains. After Denmark (and excluding Malta and the Vatican City), Belarus is Europe's second "flattest" country.

The difference in elevation between the highest point (Dziaržynskaja, 345 m) and the lowest point (the Nioman Lowland, 78 m) is 267 metres, which is less than the difference in elevation observed in the Baltic states (e.g. Lithuania, 294 m) or in the Netherlands (329 m). Most of Belarus's terrain was formed by glaciers and subsequently altered by the post-glacial processes. Thus, despite the small difference in elevation, the Belarusian landscape is gently undulating with a remarkable diversity of natural conditions. The flat relief and the relatively fertile soils that overlay the moraine and fluvioglacial sediments provide favourable conditions for agriculture, forestry, industry, residential housing and infrastructure development.

State territory

The first states on the present-day territory of Belarus arose between the 10th and 13th centuries (*Figure 1.2*). These states were the Principality of Polotsk (today Polack) in the Dzvina valley and Turovian principalities in the Prypiać lowlands. In the 14th and 15th centuries, these areas became constituent parts of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. By the mid-15th century, the Grand Duchy of Lithuania had become Europe's largest state, occupying a vast area between the Black Sea and the Baltic Sea.

After the Union of Krewo (Kreva) in 1385, the **Grand Duchy** of **Lithuania** (including the Belarusian lands) became attached to the Kingdom of Poland in the form of a personal union (through the marriage of Grand Duke Jogaila (Jagaila, Bel.) to Queen Jadwiga of Poland). The two countries were joined as the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (the Rzeczpospolita) in the Union of Lublin of 1569. This entity existed for more than two centuries until the Partitions of Poland (1772, 1793, 1795) when the country was divided between the Russian Empire, the Kingdom of Prussia and Habsburg Austria. The north-eastern part of present-day Belarus became a part of the Russian Empire in 1772, as did the central part in 1793 and the western part in

1795. These areas remained a part of the Russian Empire until its collapse in 1917 (*Figure 1.3*).

Towards the end of the First World War, the independence of the Belarusian People's Republic (BPR, under German military occupation) was declared (March 25, 1918). This occurred only weeks after the signing of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk (today Brest) (March 3, 1918), a peace treaty between Soviet Russia and the Central Powers. The BPR had an area of around 300,000 square kilometres.

After the withdrawal of German troops, in early 1919 the Bolsheviks proclaimed (in Smolensk) the Soviet Socialist Republic of Belarus (SSRB), the territory of which was mostly incorporated – in February 1919 – into the Soviet puppet state of the Lithuanian-Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic (*Litbel*), which existed for about five months.

As a consequence of the Peace of Riga (March 18, 1921), which concluded the Polish-Soviet war of 1919–1921, the western areas of present-day Belarus were ceded to Poland. In the central areas, a new Soviet republic was established: the Byelorussian (or Belarusian) Soviet Socialist Republic (BSSR) (*Box 1.1*). Further territory (the eastern regions between Polack and Homieĺ) was added to this entity in 1924 and in 1926. The boundary established at that time marks the current border between Belarus and Russia.

Following the outbreak of the Second World War and the German-Soviet invasion of Poland (September 1939), the western areas of present-day Belarus and the Białystok area of Poland were attached to the BSSR. During the German occupation (1941–1944), the western areas (under the name of *Generalbezirk Weissruthenien*) formed a part of the *Reichskommissariat "Ostland"*, while the southern areas were included in the *Reichskommissariat "Ukraine"*.

The territorial area of present-day Belarus was established in August 1945 in the aftermath of the Second World War. At that time, the borders of the BSSR prior to the June 1941 German attack were essentially restored, the only difference being the return of the Białystok area to Polish sovereignty. Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the proclamation of Belarusian independence, the name of the new state has been the Republic of Belarus.

Box 1.1 Belarus, Byelorussia or White Russia?

The name Belarus stems from *Belaja* Rus', which means White Rus'. The term Rus' refers to the Kievan Rus' of the 9th to 12th centuries, to the successor (Eastern Slavic) principalities, and to the people (*Rusy*) who lived under their authority. Ruthenia, the Latin name for the Kievan Rus', gave rise to the name White Ruthenia. The western areas of present-day Belarus formed part of historical Black Ruthenia, whereas Galicia constituted Red Ruthenia. Among the three Eastern Slavic nations, it is only in the name Belarus that the reference to the former Rus' has remained.

The Moscow-centric Russian state, Muscovy (or the Grand Duchy of Moscow), introduced the title Grand Duchy of all Rus' in the late 15th century during the reign of Ivan the Great. The term "Russia", or the Tsardom of Russia, appeared at the time of Ivan the Terrible, who, in 1547, had himself crowned Tsar of All Rus' (*Tsar vseya Rusy*), in a clear reference to the former Kievan Rus'. With the establishment of the Russian Empire in 1727 during the reign of Peter the Great, the term Tsar was forged with that of Emperor of All Russians (*Imperator Vserossiyskiy*). The English word "Russian" can be translated in two different ways into Russian: "*Rossiysky*" was used to designate an inhabitant or subject of the Russian Empire, while "*Rusky*" or "*Ruskye*" designates ethnic Russians.

The terms White Rus' (*Belaja* Rus') and White Russia stem from the 17th century and were used by the Russian tsars to refer to areas of the country acquired from the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. Meanwhile, the term Little Russia was used for areas inhabited by ethnic Ukrainians and the term Great Russia for areas inhabited by ethnic Russians (*Rusky*). The term White Russia [Belorussia, Byelorussia or *Weißrussland* (Ger.)] has a pejorative meaning for Belarusians, in the same way as Little Russia does for Ukrainians. This is because Rus' refers to the ancient Kievan Rus' and its subjects rather than to the Russian ethnic group (*Rusky*), which emerged much later in areas that were under the Mongol yoke for a lengthy period and thus became culturally different.

Byelorussia, or the Byelorussian SSR, became the official name of the country in the Soviet era, which was then changed to the Republic of Belarus in 1991. Today, Russians also use the official name Belarus in place of Byelorussia.

Ethnic territory

The core Belarusian ethnic area coincides with the territories controlled in the 8th and 9th centuries by Slavic tribal unions (the Dregovich, Krivich and Radimich tribes). These groups inhabited the upper basins of the Zach. Dzvina, Nioman and Dniapro rivers. The Dregovich tribe inhabited the south-western part, the Krivich tribe the northern part and the Radimich tribe the eastern part of modern-day Belarus. The Belarusian ethnos formed gradually at the time of the multi-ethnic Grand Duchy of Lithuania and the subsequent Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth.

The Belarusian ethnic space, which was formed in areas inhabited by the cited East Slavic tribes, seems to have changed little until the 20th century. For centuries, the Belarusian-Russian ethno-linguistic boundary lay along what had been, in the 16th and 17th centuries, the frontier between the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and Russia (between Velikiye Luki, Rzhev, Vyazma and Bryansk). Meanwhile, in the north-west, the Belarusian ethnic area extended roughly as far as present-day Belarus's border with Lithuania and Latvia. In the south, the ethnic boundary lay between Białystok and Pinsk and along the River Prypiać. During the 20th century, owing to mass migration and natural assimilation, the Belarusian ethnic boundary retreated in the north and east towards the Belarusian-Russian frontier (and thus to the Russians' favour). In contrast, in the south, the ethnic boundary advanced towards the Belarusian-Ukrainian frontier (and thus to the
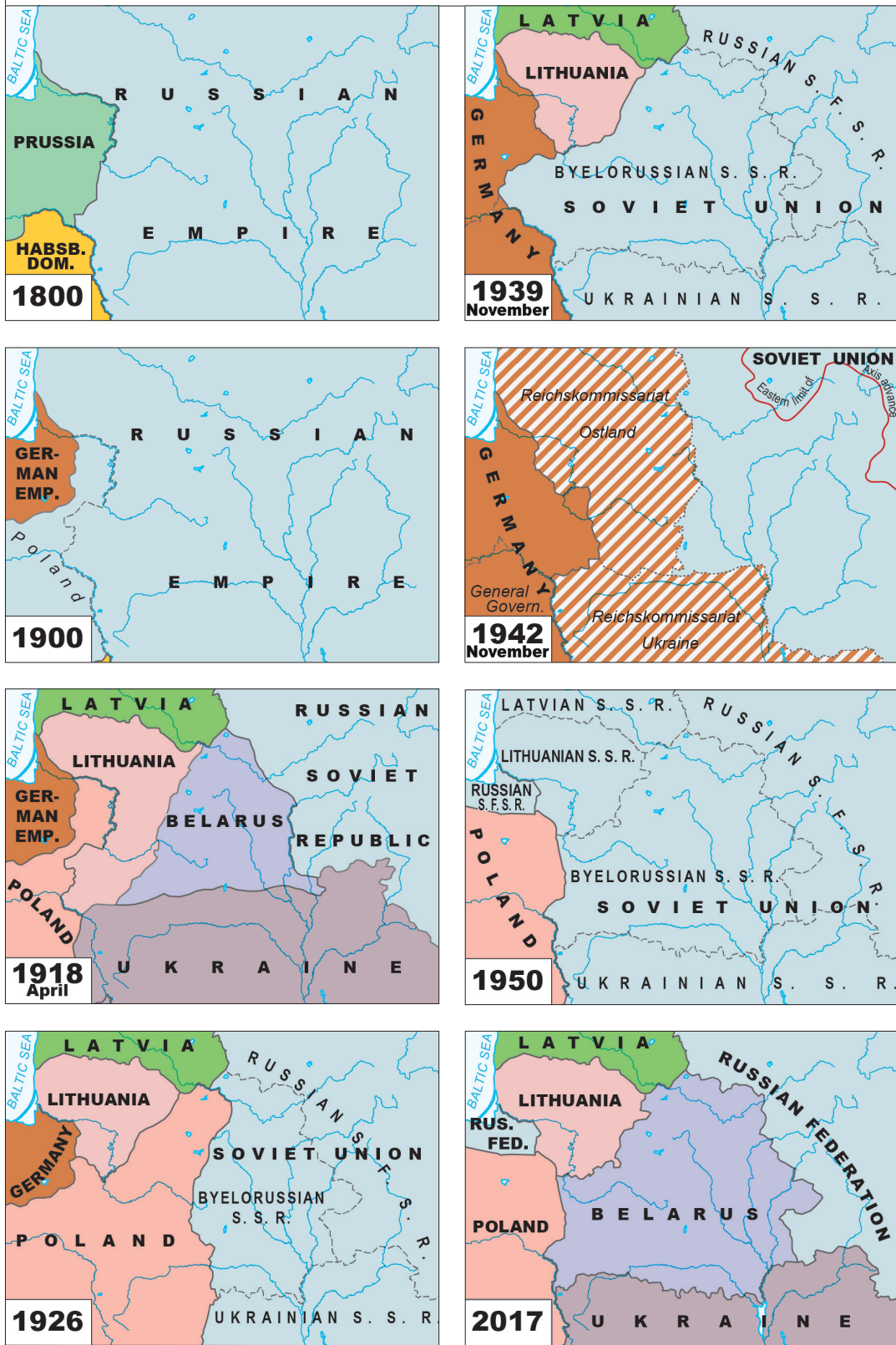
STATES ON THE PRESENT TERRITORY OF BELARUS (1000–1700)
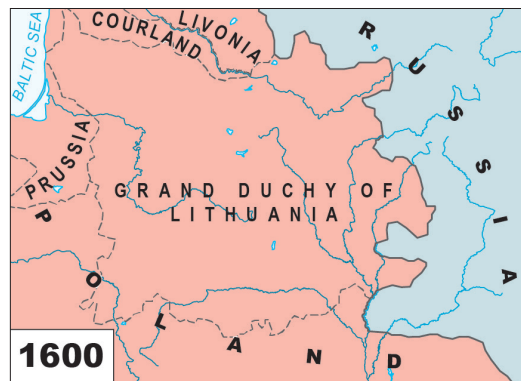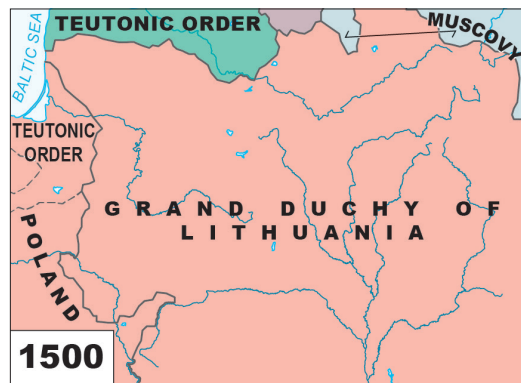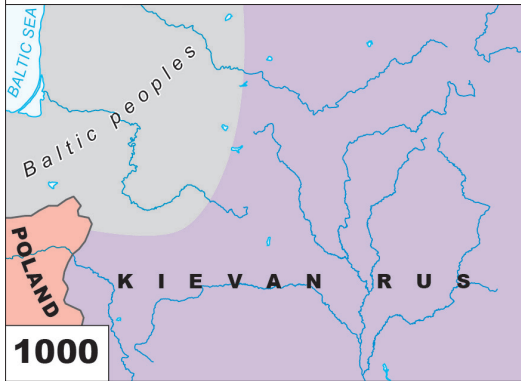
Author: Kocsis, K. MTA CSFK
Geographical Insitute, Budapest, 2017
Cartography: ©SZÁM-TÉR-KÉP

STATES ON THE PRESENT TERRITORY OF BELARUS (1800–2017)

Fig. 1.3

Author: Kocsis, K. MTA CSFK
Geographical Insitute, Budapest, 2017
Cartography: ©SZÁM-TÉR-KÉP

Belarusians' favour). In the north west, the population of the region (which formed part of Poland in the period 1922–1939 and now lies alongside Belarus's border with Lithuania and Latvia) became extremely mixed. In earlier decades, it constituted a Polish ethnic buffer zone, but this has now become fragmented.

It was not only in the border areas that the population of the Belarusian ethnic area was mixed. This was also true of the urbanised areas and in the major towns, with the Jews forming large communities in earlier centuries and the ethnic Russians doing so in the 20th century. In the area that is now Belarus, the Jewish population decreased from 911,000 (14% of the total population) in 1897 to 150,000 (1.9%) in 1959. This decrease was the result of the Holocaust (1941–1944) and of emigration. During the same period, the ethnic Russian population, which was also concentrated in urban areas, increased from 224,000 (3.5% of the total population) to 659,000 (8.2%) in consequence of Soviet colonisation and identity shifts (Eberhardt, P. 1996).

In recent decades, the boundaries of the Belarusian ethnic area have become analogous with the Russian, Ukrainian and Polish frontiers in the north-east, east, south and south-west of the country. In the north-west, the ethnic boundary has moved ever closer towards the Polish and Lithuanian borders. This development is reflected in the decrease in the ethnic Polish population – from 539,000 in 1959 to 295,000 in 2009.
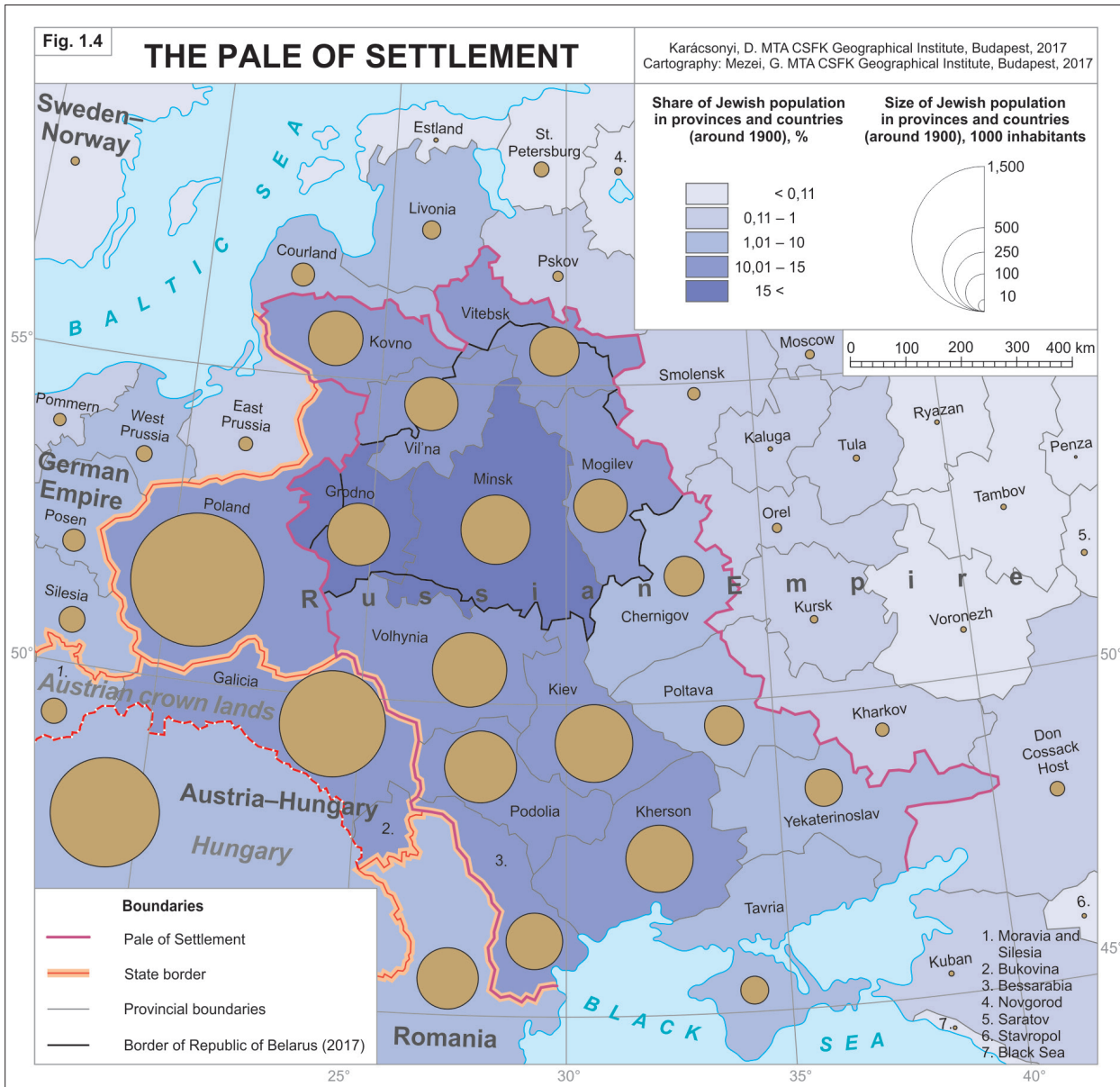
The largest **Belarusian diaspora** population – with a significant number of adherents to Judaism (*Box 1.2*) – is to be found in the United States (600–800,000), with the largest communities in New York, New Jersey, Cleveland and Chicago. A similar number of Belarusians (521,000 in 2010) live in Russia, where they form two groups: a diaspora established in the 19th century and under Soviet rule and concentrated in the Moscow and St. Petersburg agglomerations, and an autochthonous Belarusian population in the border areas [in Smolensk Oblast (Smalensk, Bel.), in the western part of Bryansk Oblast (Bransk, Bel.) and in the southern part of Pskov Oblast (Pskoŭ, Bel.)]. Significant allochthonous Belarusian minority populations are to be found in Kaliningrad Oblast, in the Kuban lowlands, in SW Siberia and in Karelia. Other than in the Kuban lowlands and SW Siberia, these populations can be traced back to the large-scale Soviet settlement programmes. Industrial workers comprise the largest Belarusian communities in Ukraine (276,000 in 2001); they mainly inhabit the Donetsk and Dnipropetrovsk regions. In Latvia, the Belarusians (68,000 in 2011) live mainly in the Latgalia (Latgale) region (South-East Latvia), which includes the city of Daugavpils (Dzvinsk, Bel.). In Lithuania, the Belarusians (36,000 in 2011) reside mainly in Vilnius (ViĺNia, Bel.) and in the surrounding area. When the Baltic countries gained their independence (in 1991), many ethnic Belarusians – as in the case of ethnic Russians – were denied an automatic right to citizenship in Latvia and Estonia (Lithuania was the exception). In Poland, an autochthonous Belarusian population (47,000 in 2011) can be found in the Polish-Belarusian border area, east of Białystok (Bielastok, Bel.).

Box 1.2 History of Jews in Belarus

Belarus had a sizable Jewish population prior to the Holocaust. Several leading Israeli politicians, including the first president of the Jewish state Chaim Weizmann, prime ministers Menachem Begin and Shimon Peres, were born here. Today Belarus was also the birthplace of Eliezer Ben-Yehuda who had launched the revival of the Hebrew language. The Belarusian lands formed the core area of the **Pale of Settlement** or **The Pale** (*Myaža aselasci*, Bel.,*Cherta osedlosti*, Rus.) within the Russian Empire. Established in 1791 by a decree of Catherine the Great, the Pale became increasingly important after the Second Partition of Poland (1793), when mass of Jews became subjects of the Empire. The decree was purposed to restrict the free movement of Jews within the country (Magocsi, P. R. 1993).

Five million Jews – nearly half of world Jewry – lived in the Pale in the late 19th century. In 1897, 910,000 of them resided within today's boundaries of Belarus (*Figure 1.4*). Prior to the Second

Fig. 1.4 THE PALE OF SETTLEMENT

Karácsonyi, D. MTA CSFK Geographical Institute, Budapest, 2017
Cartography: Mezei, G. MTA CSFK Geographical Institute, Budapest, 2017

Share of Jewish population in provinces and countries (around 1900), %

< 0,11
0,11 – 1
1,01 – 10
10,01 – 15
15 <

Size of Jewish population in provinces and countries (around 1900), 1000 inhabitants

1,500
500
250
100
10

Boundaries

Pale of Settlement
State border
Provincial boundaries
Border of Republic of Belarus (2017)

1. Moravia and Silesia
2. Bukovina
3. Bessarabia
4. Novgorod
5. Saratov
6. Stavropol
7. Black Sea

An official letter issued by Academy of Sciences of BSSR in 1940 (displayed by permanent exhibition in Niasviž museum) showing the multicultural Soviet-Belarus: the heading is in Belarusian, Russian, Yiddish and Polish. Just five years after that letter the Jewish and Polish population almost disappeared from the ethnic map of Belarus because of the Holocaust and ethnic cleansing. (Photo: Karácsonyi, D. 2012)

World War, Jews accounted for 40% of the urban population and 14% of the total population of the Byelorussian SSR. According to the census of 1897, Minsk, Mahilioŭ (*Molew*, Yid.), Homieĺ (*Homl*), Viciebsk (*Witebsk*), Babrujsk (*Babroysk*) (60%), Polack (*Polotsk*) (61%), Brest (*Brisk*, Yid.) (66%) and Pinsk (77%) were predominantly Jewish cities (Magocsi, P.R. 1993). In the Tsarist Empire, other than Berdychiv (*Berditschew*) and Białistok (*Byalistok*), all the cites with a Jewish population share of more than 60% were in what is now Belarus (Magocsi, P.R. 1993).

The mainly Orthodox Ashkenazi Jews (Magocsi, P.R. 1993) lived in smaller cities, townships, and local market places – the so-called *shtetl*s or *shtetlekh* (plural form). In Belarus, typical former shtetls are Slonim (78% Jewish in 1897), Iŭje/*Eyvye*, Davyd-Haradok/*David-Horodok*, or Antopal/*Antipolie*. Jews were prohibited from working in agriculture and from living in smaller settlements (i.e. villages). Jewish people usually lived apart, in separate streets or quarters within towns, often in poverty. Many of them were merchants, craftsmen and tailors, but theirs elite were artists (e.g. Marc Chagall), scientists or teachers. The bitter life of Jewry in the Pale was portrayed in *Fiddler on the Roof*, the famous American musical comedy-drama, a good manifestation of Jewish plight and humour.

The Jewish communities of the Pale had frequently suffered from the pogroms. The major waves of pogroms (Odessa in 1871; Kiev, Warsaw and Odessa in 1881–1884; Kishinev and Odessa in 1903–1906) affected Jewish communities in the Ukrainian, Bessarabian and Polish areas, where antisemitism was most militant. The pogroms and persecutions led to the emigration of 2.4 million Jews from the Pale to the United States between 1880 and 1914. In 1910, one in two immigrants from the Russian Empire to the United States was Jewish (Magocsi, P.R. 1993).

After the tsarism was overthrown by the February Revolution of 1917, the newly established Russian provisional government abolished the Pale. State-sanctioned antisemitism ceased with the end of the monarchy. Jews were granted political and civil rights with free movement and settlement within the country (Bemporad, E. 2013). Even so, during the civil war and at the time of the Polish occupation of Minsk, Jews once again suffered from pogroms. Thus they welcomed the Bolshevik Red Army when it entered the city in July 1920 (Bemporad, E. 2013). Later, during the early years of **Soviet rule**, many local Jews attained high positions in the Bolshevik bureaucracy of Soviet Belarus (including, on one occasion, the post of first secretary of the party). Nevertheless, with the advent of communist internationalism and atheism in the 1920s, non-communist Jewish organizations (especially Zionist groups) were banned, as was also the use of the Hebrew language. Further, many synagogues were closed (Bemporad, E. 2013). Yiddish, the vernacular language among Ashkenazi Jews at the time, came to the fore. Along with Belarusian, Russian and Polish, it had become an official language of the newly established Byelorussian SSR. The period also saw the establishment of a Belarusian State Jewish Theatre in Minsk. Indeed, the largest Yiddish newspaper of the Soviet Union, "*Der Shtern*", was also published in Minsk. It is telling that the magazine was renamed "*Oktyabr*" in 1924. The last edition of the newspaper was published in June 1941. With the wave of **Stalinist Russification** of Belarus, Yiddish-speaking schools (similar to the Belarusian-speaking ones) were closed, and Jews were forced to use Russian from 1937. However, unlike in Germany or in Poland, antisemitism was considered a crime in the Soviet Union (Bemporad, E. 2013).

The **Holocaust** terminated the era of *shtetl*s and their Jewish residents perished. Around 40% of the Soviet Union's Jewish population – between 700,000 and 1.2 million people – fell victim to ethnic cleansing by the Nazis between 1941 and 1944 (Magocsi, P.R. 1993). According to the Polish (1931) and Soviet (1939) censuses, there were around 800,000 Jews in Belarus before June 1941. In 1959, at the time of the first post-war Soviet census, only 150,000 remained.

Large death camps, such as Sobibór and Majdanek, were situated on the Polish side of today's Polish-Belarusian border. Most of the local Jewish population was massacred by the so-called *Einsatzkommando*s (special SS killing squadrons) in the aftermath of the German invasion of the Soviet Union (Operation Barbarossa, June 1941). The largest massacre site was Bronna Mount (*Bronnaja Hara*) in the Brest voblaśc; around 50,000 Jews, mainly from Brest, Turaŭ and Kobryn, were killed there. Ghettos were established by the Nazis in every major city of today's Belarus,

where members of the Belarusian auxiliary police (*Hilfspolizei* Ger., *Bieĺaruskaja dapamožnaja palicyja* Bel.) helped to collect together – and often brutalize and kill – Jewish people. The population of the largest one, the ghetto of Minsk, reached 100,000 people. Minsk itself was home of 50,000 to 70,000 Jews, who made up 40% of the city's population in the interwar period (Bemporad, E. 2013). They were killed in the death camp established on the outskirts of the city at *Maly Trascjaniec*. From the pre-war Jewish population of Minsk, only 2,500 survived (Bemporad, E. 2013). Several of the Holocaust survivors left Belarus immediately after Second World War. They migrated to the newly established Jewish state of Israel or moved to other republics of the Soviet Union.

The only Holocaust monument in the Soviet Union in the Yiddish language and explicitly mentioning the Jewishness of the victims was erected in Minsk in 1945 (www.yivoencyclopedia.org). According to Bemporad (Bemporad, E. 2013), in contrast to the pre-war period, antisemitism started to be encouraged by the Soviets from the 1950s. This was in accordance with the Sovietisation of Belarus, whereby the objective was to erase the **memory of "Jewish" Minsk** and transform the city into a large Soviet worker metropolis (*Box 6.1*). This policy resulted in the emigration wave (*Aliyah*) during the 1970s, when more than 10,000 Jews left the Byelorussian SSR after receiving passports to leave the Soviet Union. At the time of the decline of the Soviet Union and its disintegration in the late 1980s and early 1990s, an even larger wave of emigration resulted in the exodus of 100,000 thousand Jews from Belarus. Many of these people emigrated to Israel, the United States or Germany. By 1999, the Jewish population of Belarus had fallen to 27,000.

In 2009, half of the remaining 12,000 Belarusian Jews were living in Minsk. Nowadays Jewish cultural life is undergoing a revival and links are being forged with Belarusian Jewish emigrés. Jewish periodicals are being published in Minsk once again, and a Jewish centre was opened in 2001. Minsk now has three synagogues, and there are in total 12 synagogues in Belarus.

Boundaries

The present-day borders of Belarus (2,969 km in length) were established in the period 1919–1945, during the first half of the Soviet Union's existence. The boundaries of the BSSR were inherited by the Republic of Belarus in 1991 after the disintegration of the Soviet Union.

The Belarusian-Russian border (1,283 km in length) acquired its current form in 1924 and 1926. In 2011, border controls were abolished along this stretch of the border – an action taken under the framework of the Union State of Russia and Belarus (a politico-economic union). The Belarusian-Ukrainian border (1,084 km in length) was established, in the east, in the period 1920–1926 and, in the west, in 1939–1940. In 1993, Belarus, Ukraine and Russia recognized the inviolability of their respective common borders. The present-day Belarusian-Latvian border (173 km in length) was established in 1924 and in 1939 and then finalized in 1994, after the two countries had won their independence. The Belarusian-Lithuanian border (nearly 679 km in length) was established in 1940, as the result of the Belarusian-Lithuanian negotiations that followed the German-Soviet invasion and partition of Poland in September 1939. In 1995, Belarus and Lithuania mutually recognized this border. Unlike the above borders, which were internal Soviet borders at the time of the Soviet Union, the present-day Belarusian-Polish border (nearly 399 km in length) has been a recognized international border since August 16, 1945.

Administrative divisions

In the early 20th century (in the era of Imperial Russia), the first-level administrative units were the *gubernia*s (provinces), which were subdivided into *uyezd*s (*paviet*s, districts). In 1924, the Soviet government established a new administrative unit called the *okrug* (region). Such regions were established in the BSSR and then subdivided into *raion*s (districts). The western areas of present-day Belarus formed part of Poland from 1920 until 1939; they were divided into voivodeships (provinces) and further subdivided into *powiat*s (districts). In 1938, the okrugs were abolished in the BSSR and replaced by a voblasć system (oblasts, regions). Since then, the region (voblasć)

has constituted the main subnational unit of administrative division. Between 1954 and 1960, the number of such regions was reduced from twelve to six, which is the current number of regions.

According to its constitution, which was adopted in 1994, the Republic of Belarus is a unitary state. The country is divided into seven first-level administrative territorial units (*Figure 1.5*): six *voblaśćs* (*oblast*s in Rus., regions: Brest, Homieĺ, Hrodna, Mahilioŭ, Viciebsk, Minsk) and the capital city Minsk as an independent unit.

Belarus's second-level administrative divisions include 118 *raion*s (districts) and 11 cities of state or voblaść subordination, most of which

have more than 50,000 inhabitants. There are 5 voblaść centres in this category.

At the third administrative level, there are towns of raion (district) subordination, townships and *selsoviet*s (rural or village councils). Overall, there are 24,591 entities at this level: 113 towns, 90 urban-type settlements (*pasiolak*, townships), 1,159 rural councils (*selsoviets*) and 23,229 rural localities (villages).

The current system of administrative division was established in 1966. At that time, there were 117 districts. An additional raion – Drybin raion – was established in 1989. Thus, the total number of raions increased to 118.

Fig. 1.5 ADMINISTRATIVE DIVISIONS

Belarus in the European pattern of economic development

Belarus, a country of almost 10 million inhabitants, counts – in terms of **total GDP** based on PPP – as a small to medium economy in Europe and in the post-Soviet space (*Figures 1.6, 1.7, 1.8, 1.9*). Its economy is larger than Slovakia's or that of Bulgaria, which has a similar population, but it is considerably smaller than Hungary's or Czechia's economy. Evidently, it is far smaller than the economies of Poland, Romania and Ukraine (*Table 1.1*).

The independent, Belarus has taken an economic path different from that of Russia or Ukraine. Except for a short period during the chaotic aftermath of gaining independence (early 1990s), Belarus essentially avoided the transition crisis. Since 1993, in terms of GDP (PPP), Belarus has advanced at roughly the same pace as for example Slovakia (*Figures 1.6, 1.7, 1.8, 1.9*). It is noteworthy that until the 2010s, the economic performance of Belarus (its GDP growth) was no worse than that of Slovakia, which became independent at around the same time. While Slovakia adhered strictly to the neoliberal school for much of the economic transition, and even adopted the euro, Belarus followed its own path and the shock therapy model was firmly rejected. However, similar to Slovakia, industrial output (especially engineering) has been the main contributor to GDP growth in Belarus too. Slovakia attracted significant amounts of capital investment from Germany, and received financial support by means of the EU structural and cohesion funds. On the other hand Belarus enjoyed hidden economic support in the form of Russian hydrocarbon exports which enabled the country to avoid the transitional crisis. Indeed, in the mid-2000s, GDP growth in Belarus – reaching an annual rate of around 8–10% between 2004 and 2008 – was among the highest in Europe according to World Bank data. And until 2010, it seemed the country would be only marginally affected by the effects of the 2008 global crisis (see *Box 7.1* for more details).
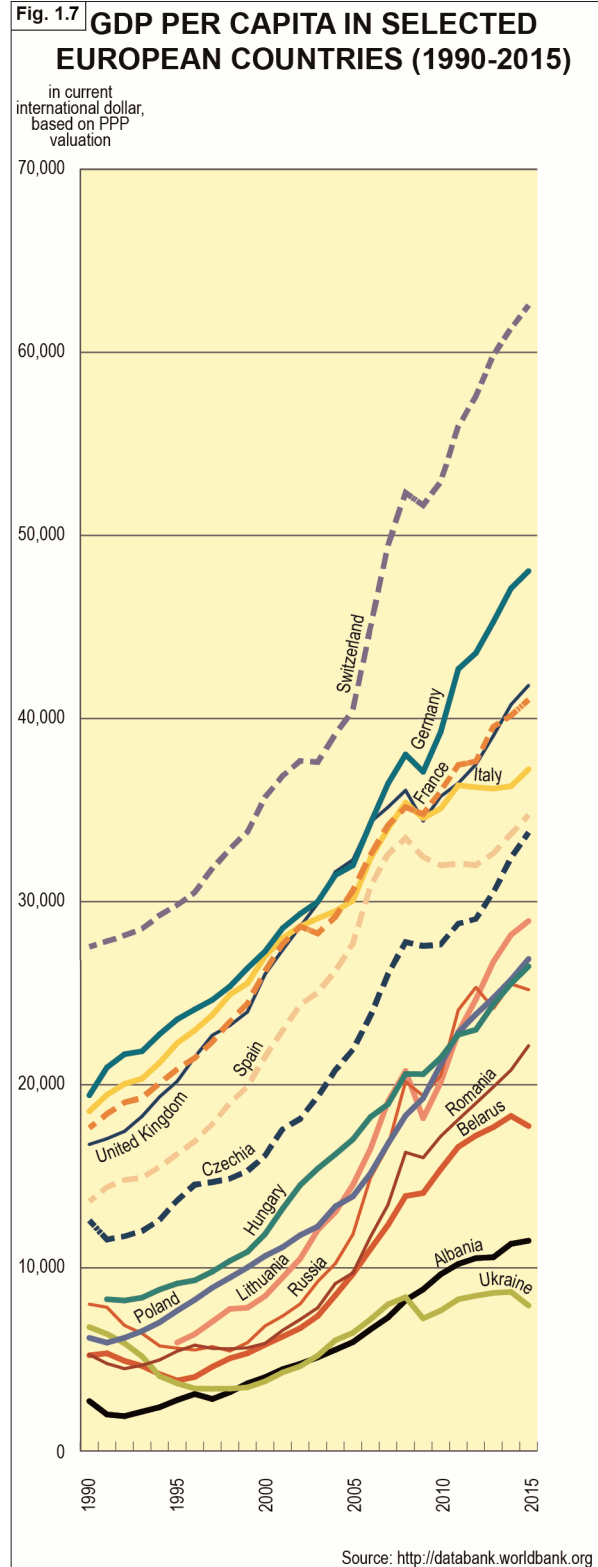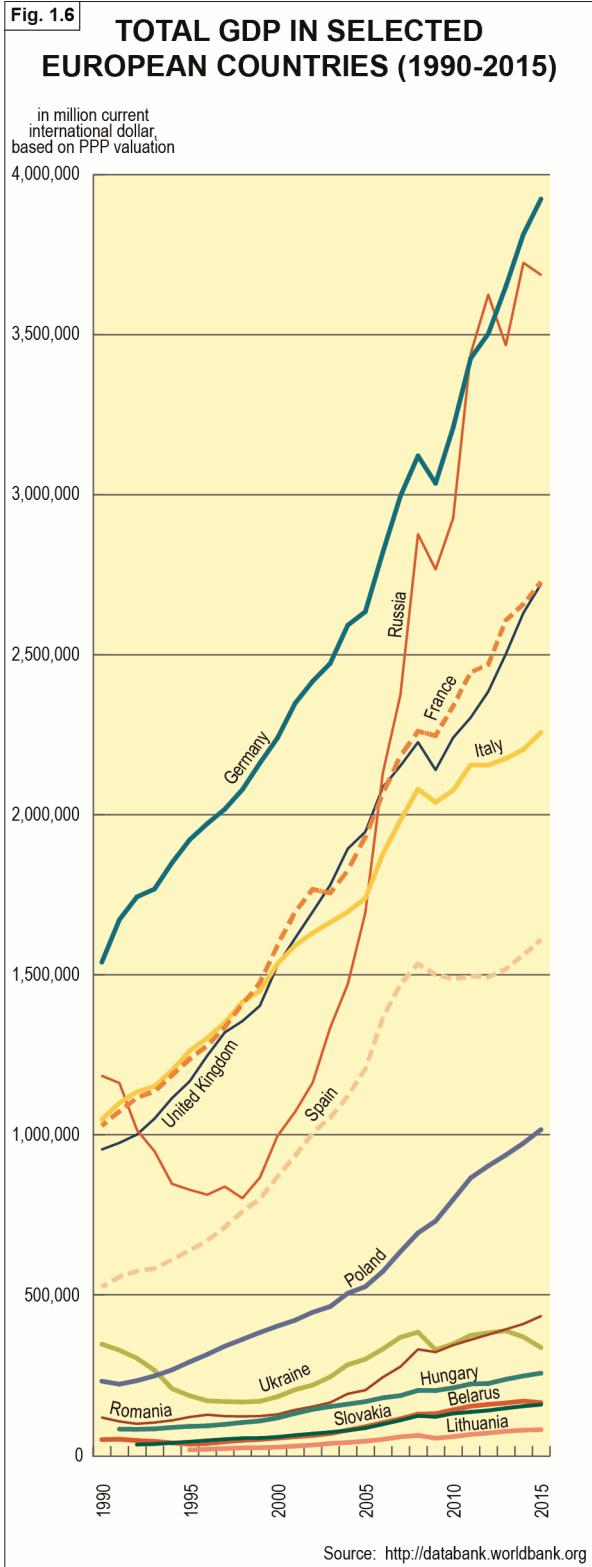
Having avoided the transition crisis and wild capitalist marketization of the 1990s, the Belarusian economy – with a dominant state sector and a lack of structural turbulence – could take full advantage of global economic growth in the first half of the 2000s. The country's unfavourable economic structure did not become an acute problem against the backdrop of a buoyant world economy. Even so, the unsustainable nature of the Belarusian model in budgetary terms has increasingly been on the agenda particularly because in the 2010s Belarus was compelled to take loans (from the IMF, Russia and China) in order to keep on financing the economic system. The GDP growth dropped to a mere 1% after 2010 and it has been on the decrease (–3.9%) since 2015. Despite this fact, the public external debt as a percentage of GDP is still lower than in Poland or Lithuania, two of Belarus's neighbours, albeit it is increasing at a faster rate (*Table 1.2*). The slowdown in the world economy – and the crisis in Russia due to low oil prices – has increasingly surfaced Belarus's structural problems. Hence, an important issue in the future will be how the country addresses the increasing debt burden under conditions of slower economic growth or decline.

In terms of **per capita GDP** (*Figure 1.7*), Belarus, having left Ukraine, Moldova and other former Soviet republics behind, managed to keep pace – until the 2010s – with the growth rates seen in the transition economies of Central Europe (the only exception being its western neighbour Poland, which, having emerged from the crisis of the 1980s, achieved an even higher rate of economic growth). By 2000, Belarusian GDP had exceeded the 1990 level. This had barely been achieved by Ukraine and Moldova even a decade later. In both 1990 and 2010, Belarus was at roughly the same level of economic development as Romania, and yet the latter had adhered to liberal market economics ever since 1990. More recently, however, Belarus has tended – in terms of economic growth – to fall behind the Central European and Baltic regions which have already undergone market reforms.

An economic comparison of Belarus with its neighbours (*Table 1.2*) essentially reflects the general European macro-regional trends and the east-west gradient. Thus, areas to the west and north west of Belarus tend to be more developed, while regions to the south and east are generally less developed (Ioffe, G. 2006). However, unlike Ukraine or Moldova, which are less developed than both their western and eastern neighbours, Belarus is not the typical crisis-ridden buffer country between east and west. Rather, it is an

TOTAL GDP IN SELECTED EUROPEAN COUNTRIES (1990-2015)

in million current
international dollar,
based on PPP valuation

Source: http://databank.worldbank.org

GDP PER CAPITA IN SELECTED EUROPEAN COUNTRIES (1990-2015)

in current
international dollar,
based on PPP
valuation

Source: http://databank.worldbank.org

integral part of the Russia-dominated eastern economic space.

In terms of the **Human Development Index** (HDI), which is a far more complex indicator of

social development than GDP, Belarus is the frontrunner in the post-Soviet area (excluding the Baltic countries). It lies far ahead of such countries as Bulgaria, Romania or Turkey, all

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of which have a similar level of per capita GDP (PPP based) (*Table 1.1*). The more favourable HDI ranking (relative to per capita GDP) reflects the fact that Belarusian society was not forced to pay the price of shock therapy and rapid economic transition and has largely avoided the problem of internal economic inequality. Social inequality (based on the Gini coefficient) is relatively low in Belarus, and the percentage of people living below the poverty line is lower than in its neigh-
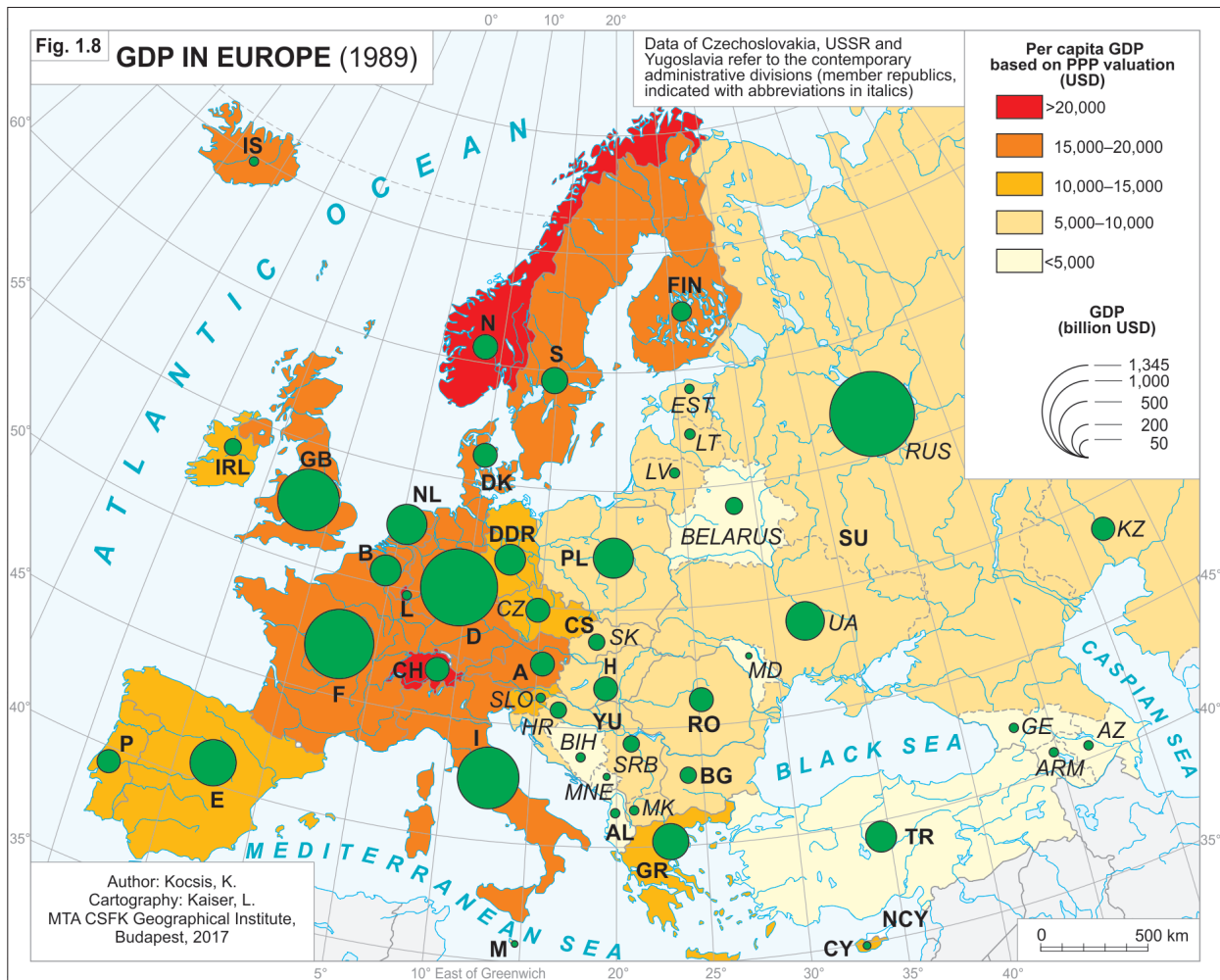
bours (*Table 1.2*), albeit methodological differences may influence the comparability of these data. For similar reasons, the data for unemployment and employment should be treated with caution, too.

As for subjective metrics, it should be mentioned that Belarus is apparently a better organized and maintained country than Russia or Ukraine, as far as general conditions are concerned. Streets are clean, crime is minimal, waste management is organized, road network

Indicator	Country	2000	2005	2010	2014
*Table 1.2 **Development indicators of Belarus and some selected countries***					
GDP per capita (current USD)	Belarus	1,273	3,126	5,819	8,025
	Poland	4,493	7,976	12,597	14,337
	Lithuania	3,297	7,863	11,989	16,490
	Russia	1,772	5,323	10,675	13,902
	Ukraine	636	1,829	2,974	3,065
Human Development Index (HDI)	Belarus	0.683	0.723	0.786	0.798
	Poland	0.786	0.805	0.829	0.843
	Lithuania	0.754	0.806	0.827	0.839
	Russia	0.717	0.75	0.783	0.798
	Ukraine	0.668	0.713	0.732	0.747
Gini coefficient	Belarus	29.72	27.78	27.72	–
	Poland	–	33.00	35.86	33.22
	Lithuania	–	31.67	35.30	33.76
	Russia	–	37.09	41.37	40.94
	Ukraine	–	29.02	24.82	24.55
Life expectancy at birth (years)	Belarus	68.9	68.9	70.4	73.0
	Poland	73.8	75.0	76.3	77.3
	Lithuania	72.0	71.3	73.3	74.0
	Russia	65.3	65.5	68.9	70.4
	Ukraine	67.9	68.0	70.3	71.2
Internet users (per 100 people)	Belarus	2	–	32	59
	Poland	7	39	62	67
	Lithuania	6	36	62	72
	Russia	2	15	43	71
	Ukraine	1	4	23	43
CO_2 emissions (metric tons per capita)	Belarus	5.3	6.1	6.6	–
	Poland	7.8	7.9	8.3	–
	Lithuania	3.5	4.2	4.3	–
	Russia	10.6	11.3	12.2	–
	Ukraine	6.5	7.1	6.6	–
Central government debt (% of GDP)	Belarus	15.0	6.6	19.6	29
	Poland	36.3	46.8	51.0	50.5
	Lithuania	–	–	40.6	40.7
	Russia	62.1	16.7	9.1	–
	Ukraine	45.3	–	29.9	–
Poverty ratio at national poverty lines (% of population)	Belarus	41.9	12.7	5.2	4.8
	Poland	14.8	19.1	17.7	–
	Lithuania	–	20	19.2	–
	Russia	–	17.8	12.5	11.2
	Ukraine	–	–	8.6	–
Sources: hdr.undp.org data.worldbank.org					

Fig. 1.8 **GDP IN EUROPE** (1989)

Data of Czechoslovakia, USSR and Yugoslavia refer to the contemporary administrative divisions (member republics, indicated with abbreviations in italics)

Per capita GDP based on PPP valuation (USD)
>20,000
15,000–20,000
10,000–15,000
5,000–10,000
<5,000

GDP (billion USD)
1,345
1,000
500
200
50

Author: Kocsis, K.
Cartography: Kaiser, L.
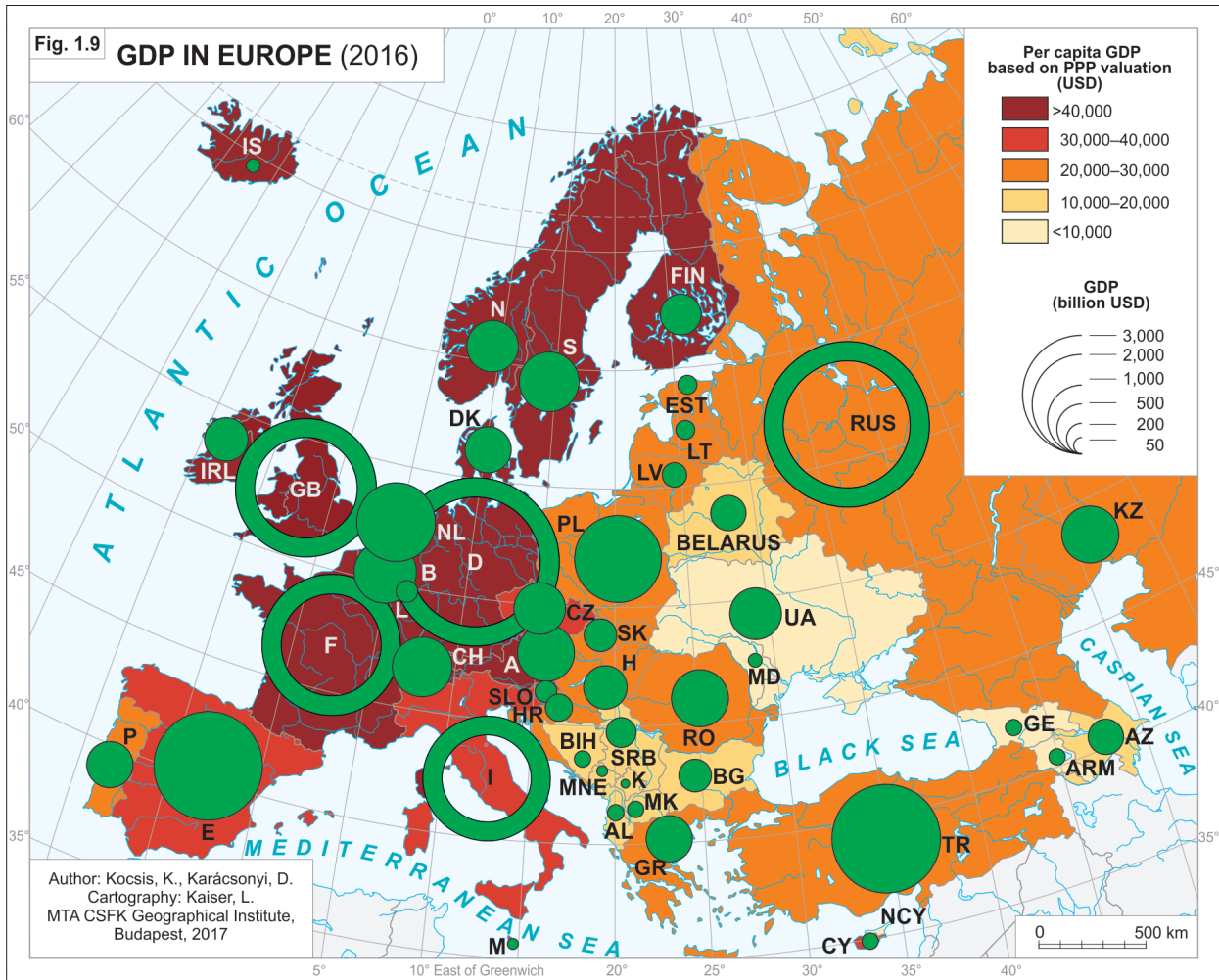MTA CSFK Geographical Institute, Budapest, 2017

0   500 km

is well-maintained, there are significant highway development, housing construction and rehabilitation, governmental and social services are well-organized, traffic police and border guard are well-trained and polite, there is a lack of everyday corruption etc. Social gap between poor and rich is almost invisible. Unlike in Moscow or in Kiev, one can rarely see luxurious jeeps in Minsk, on the other hand former Soviet-made cars (e.g. *Zhiguli*, *Zaporozhets*, *Moskvitch*) have also disappeared from the streets even in the countryside. Not only the development of Minsk is impressive but also the countryside benefited a lot from the economic growth of the 2000s (new supermarkets, housing developments and government-constructed resorts for local people). These are the striking features of Belarusian "socially oriented market economy" for a western traveller, who not only get informed by the media.

Belarus and the European and Eurasian international organisations

Belarus was – together with Russia and Ukraine – a founder member of the **Soviet Union** on December 30, 1922 (Union Treaty, Moscow) (*Figure 1.10*). On December 8, 1991, the leaders of the three founding members signed the Belavezha Accords, an agreement that declared the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The agreement was signed in Belarus (Viskuli, Bielaviežskaja Pušča), and it was here that the decision was taken to establish the **Commonwealth of Independent States** (CIS). In the spirit of decentralization, Minsk (rather than Moscow) was chosen as the capital of the CIS. By the end of the 2000s, the CIS, which had functioned as an umbrella organisation for the post-Soviet space, had declined in significance. This decline could not be effectively counterbalanced by the establish-

Fig. 1.9 **GDP IN EUROPE** (2016)

Per capita GDP based on PPP valuation (USD)
- >40,000
- 30,000–40,000
- 20,000–30,000
- 10,000–20,000
- <10,000

GDP (billion USD)
- 3,000
- 2,000
- 1,000
- 500
- 200
- 50

Author: Kocsis, K., Karácsonyi, D.
Cartography: Kaiser, L.
MTA CSFK Geographical Institute,
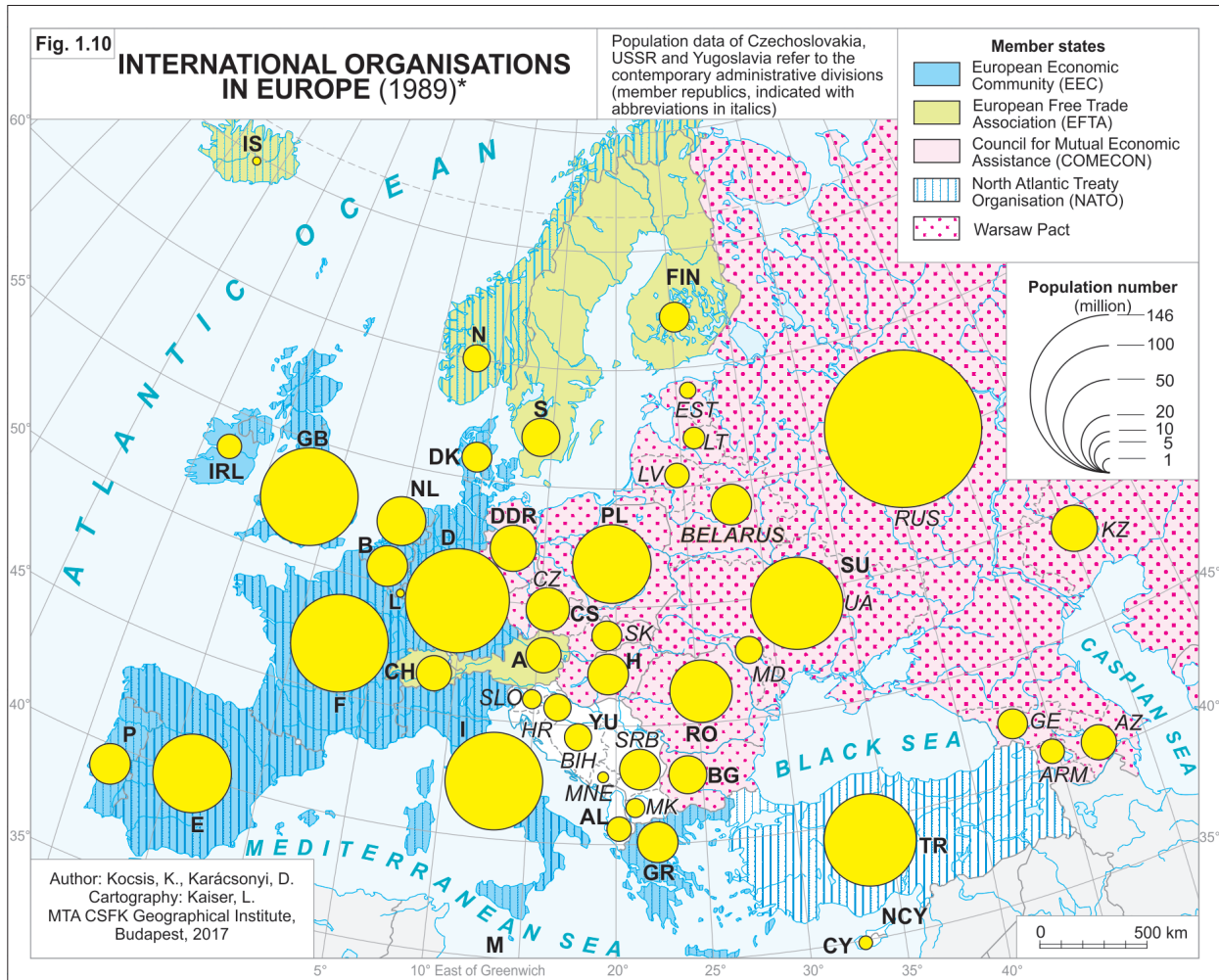Budapest, 2017

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ment, in 2012, of the CISFTA (Commonwealth of Independent States Free Trade Area).

Alongside the politico-economic community, in 1994 nine former Soviet republics, among them Belarus, established the CSTO (Collective Security Treaty Organization) (*Figure 1.11*). The CSTO constitutes the most important body for military cooperation in the post-Soviet space, even though Ukraine, Moldova and Turkmenistan never joined and Azerbaijan, Georgia and Uzbekistan left the organization in 1999.

Belarus has shared a border with NATO since 1999 and with the European Union since 2004. Even so, unlike its southern neighbour Ukraine, Belarus had never aspired – as part of its foreign policy – to accede to either of the two bodies. Nevertheless, until the mid-1990s, Belarus took part in the EU's TACIS programme (Technical Aid to the CIS) and since 1994 it has participated in NATO's Partnership for Peace Programme.

Further, signalling an improvement in relations between the West and Belarus, the country has been a member – alongside Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan – of the EU's Eastern Partnership since its foundation in 2009.

Unlike Ukraine or Moldova (which have traditionally been torn between East and West), Belarus committed itself in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union to far closer relations with Russia. It did so on the basis of its historical and economic links with Russia. In 1996, the two countries agreed to establish the Commonwealth of Belarus and Russia, which became – in 1997 – the Union State of Belarus and Russia (abbreviated form: Union State). The signing of further agreements in 1998 and 1999 strengthened the Union State, which has been functioning in its present from since 2000. The process of integration advanced more slowly in the 2000s. The momentum of integration only picked up in the

Fig. 1.10
INTERNATIONAL ORGANISATIONS IN EUROPE (1989)*

Population data of Czechoslovakia, USSR and Yugoslavia refer to the contemporary administrative divisions (member republics, indicated with abbreviations in italics)

Member states
- European Economic Community (EEC)
- European Free Trade Association (EFTA)
- Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (COMECON)
- North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO)
- Warsaw Pact

Population number (million) 146 / 100 / 50 / 20 / 10 / 5 / 1

Author: Kocsis, K., Karácsonyi, D.
Cartography: Kaiser, L.
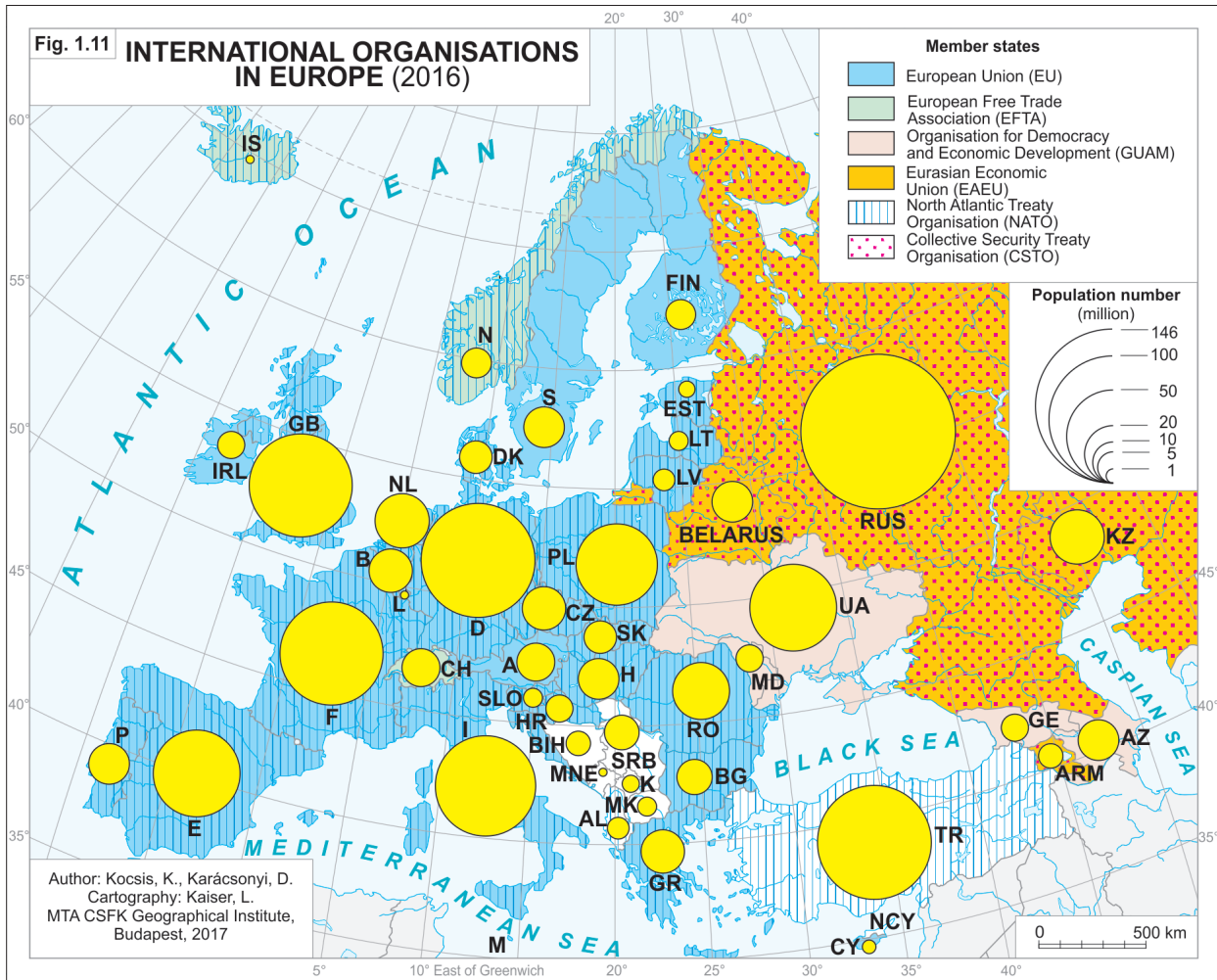MTA CSFK Geographical Institute, Budapest, 2017

0   500 km

2010s with the formation of the Eurasian Union. Among other factors, this was a consequence of Belarus's unfavourable external economic environment and its weak competitiveness, which, in turn, stemmed from internal structural problems. One of the stated objectives – the introduction of a common currency – had not been realized, but freedom of movement of goods and labour has been established.

In addition to the Eurasian Economic Community (EURASEC), whose members are Belarus, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan (with Uzbekistan being a member until 2008) and which represents a market of 200 million people, there also exists the Eurasian Customs Union, which was formed in 2010 when Kazakhstan joined the customs union between Belarus and Russia. In 2012, the customs union was transformed into the Eurasian Economic Space, where in principle the free flow of goods,

capital, services and labour has been realized in full, albeit corruption and bureaucracy remain major obstacles.

Within the framework of the new "post" post-Soviet (Buckler, J. 2009) geopolitical situation that has been evolving since 2008 and was crystallized during the Ukraine conflict of 2014, the complex Eastern, Eurasian integration structures became more simplified with the formation, on January 1, 2015, of the **Eurasian Economic Union**, a successor organization to the EURASEC. In addition to Belarus, Russia and Kazakhstan, this new organization also included Armenia and Kyrgyzstan as members. At present, the Eurasian Economic Union is – alongside the Union State – the organization pursuing the closest economic integration in the post-Soviet space.

In the spirit of eastern integration efforts, since 2015 Belarus has had observer status at the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO),

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Fig. 1.11 INTERNATIONAL ORGANISATIONS IN EUROPE (2016)

Member states
- European Union (EU)
- European Free Trade Association (EFTA)
- Organisation for Democracy and Economic Development (GUAM)
- Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU)
- North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO)
- Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO)

Population number (million)
146
100
50
20
10
5
1

Author: Kocsis, K., Karácsonyi, D.
Cartography: Kaiser, L.
MTA CSFK Geographical Institute,
Budapest, 2017

0 500 km

which is dominated by China and Russia. Belarus aspires – uniquely among the fully European countries – to become a member of the SCO. Belarus is the only European member (since 1998) of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), established in 1961 in Belgrade, hallmarked in the past by Tito's Yugoslavia, Sukarno's Indonesia, Nasser's Egypt, Nehru's India, influenced by anti-imperialism, anti-colonialism and anti-racism as well as by anti-block politics. Belarus had also close ties to Venezuela until the early 2010s.
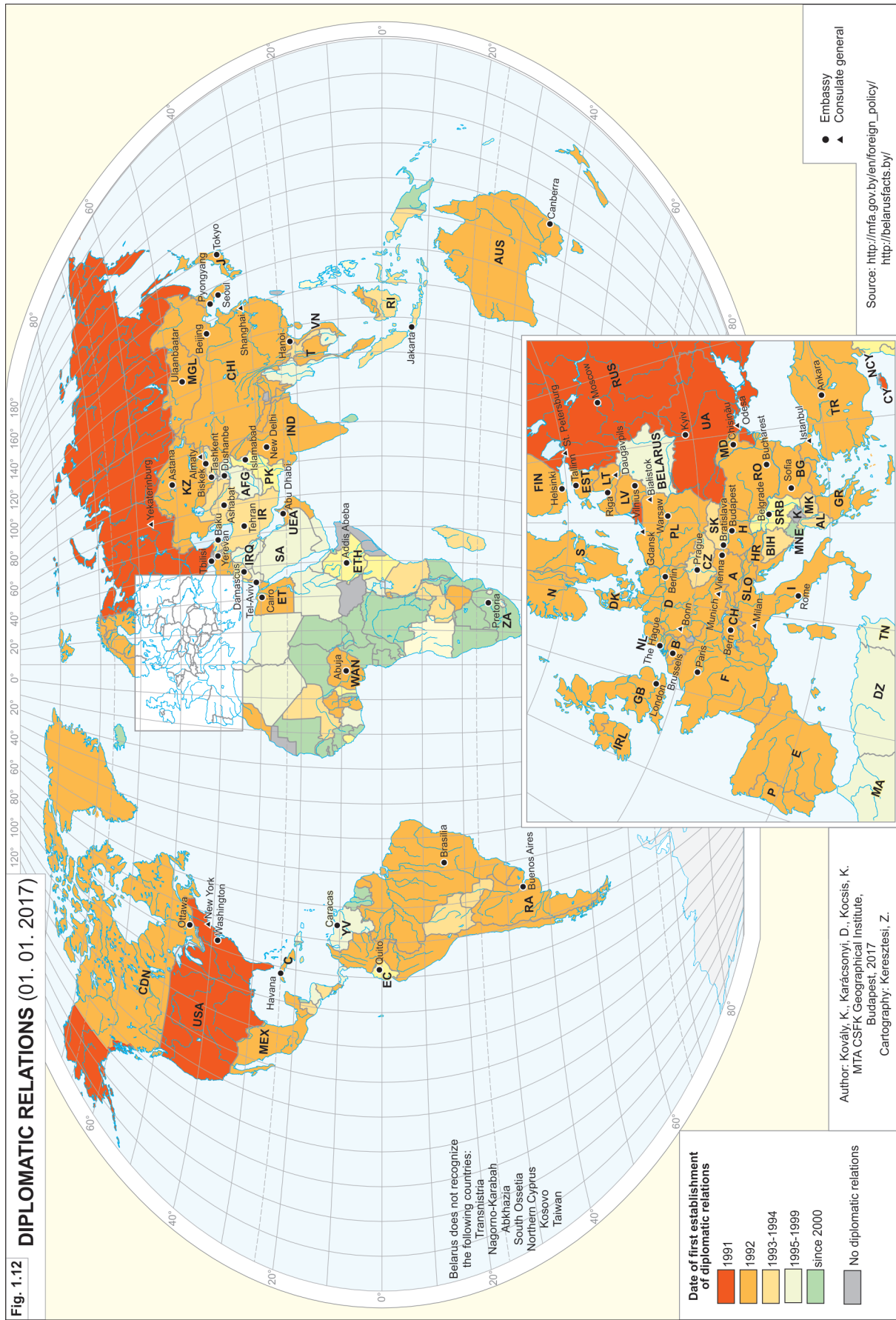
Alongside the eastern orientation, Belarus was diplomatically isolated in the late 1990s and in the 2000s compared with other countries in Europe. At that time, the Western media often labelled Belarus as "Europe's last dictatorship". Since 1993, the country has sought membership of the Council of Europe, which includes all the European countries as well as Russia and Turkey. However, in 1997, even its observer status was

withdrawn. Almost uniquely in Europe (Serbia, Bosnia-Herzegovina and various mini-states are the other exceptions), Belarus is not a member of the World Trade Organization (WTO), which includes Ukraine (since 2008) and Russia (since 2012). Belarus merely has observer status at the WTO, which it acquired in 1993. Democratization and human rights iterated by Western countries versus interference in domestic affairs repeated by the Belarusian government have given rise to diplomatic spats, which have, on occasion, resulted in deterioration of relations with the United States and with the European Union. A critical point was reached in 2012, with the reciprocal closure of the Swedish and Belarusian diplomatic missions (it was reopened several years later). Recently the relationship with the EU and the US has partly been normalized (Freedom House 2017). The 1994 constitution proclaimed that Belarus is a democratic social state, a presidential multiparty par-

Fig. 1.12 DIPLOMATIC RELATIONS (01. 01. 2017)

Date of first establishment of diplomatic relations

- 1991
- 1992
- 1993–1994
- 1995–1999
- since 2000

No diplomatic relations

Belarus does not recognize the following countries:
Transnistria
Nagorno-Karabah
Abkhazia
South Ossetia
Northern Cyprus
Kosovo
Taiwan

● Embassy
▲ Consulate general

Source: http://mfa.gov.by/en/foreign_policy/
http://belarusfacts.by/

Author: Kovály, K., Karácsonyi, D., Kocsis, K.
MTA CSFK Geographical Institute,
Budapest, 2017
Cartography: Keresztesi, Z.

liamentary democracy, with secret and universal suffrage and with elections. On the other hand, according to the US government funded Freedom House it is an "authoritarian regime". The view of the West on Belarus has always been influenced by political-ideological issues, however, because of changing geopolitical patterns, their attitude recently became more pragmatic.

Like Ukraine, Belarus has been an independent member of the United Nations since 1945, but its UN membership had merely formal significance during the Soviet era. In 1992, it inherited participation in the OSCE (Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe) from the Soviet Union. After independence (1991), most countries immediately recognized Belarus and reciprocal diplomatic relations were estab-

lished (*Figure 1.12*). In terms of its diplomacy, Belarus has been consistent in its refusal to recognize countries that do not have UN recognition, such as the de facto states of the post-Soviet space, as well as Northern Cyprus, Kosovo and Taiwan. In 2008, Belarus chose not to join Russia in recognizing Abkhazia and South Ossetia. When the Russian-Ukrainian conflict broke out in 2014, Belarus played a neutral and mediatory role, keeping its distance from Russia, its military ally. Belarus has not recognized Crimea as *de jure* Russian territory after its Russian annexation in 2014. The increasing foreign political activity of Belarus since 2014 has – even if only temporarily – transformed Minsk into a hub of international diplomacy.

"We Belarusians!" – Street advertisement in HomieĹ for strengthening national identity. (Photo: Karácsonyi, D. 2015)