

LESSON 7. My second home – Belarus

Communicative area: speaking about Belarusian national character

1. a) Brainstorm a list of character traits typical of Belarusian national character. Justify your choice.

b) Do you think people visiting Belarus could make a similar or a different list? Discuss with your partner. Compare your answers with another pair.

2. a) In pairs read one of the texts below. Each of you will read a different text (A or B). Make a list of character traits as mentioned by the writers. Compare with your list. What makes you proud? What hurts you?

b) Read the text again and complete the table.

Character traits	Key words
hospitable	Invite into a house for dinner
...	...

Group A

I am a British citizen and have lived in Belarus for many years. My wife is Belarusian and our children have both been educated here. Over the years I have visited all of the country's major cities and many of its towns, villages and smaller settlements. Of course people are individuals and have their own traits but I have found, at the risk of generalisation, that Belarusians have many characteristics in common.

In my experience, such as it is, Belarusians are extremely sociable both amongst themselves and with visitors. I remember meeting a man who travelled throughout the world for the Ford Motor Company and visited Belarus frequently. He told me that Belarusians were the most hospitable people he had

encountered. Very often, as a stranger, I have visited a village and spontaneously been invited into a house for dinner which was always generous.

Compared to the people in many western countries Belarusian are not materialistic. This is not to say that they do not want a car, good clothes and a nice apartment. Certainly younger people, and many of their elders, have embraced new technology and have up to date cell phones and computers but consumerism does not come close in scale to what is found, say, in Europe or the States. Not many people think of shopping as a leisure activity. Over time though, this may change as the market economy develops.

One thing that always impresses foreign visitors to Belarus is the strong sense of community. Belarus is a country that, throughout its history has suffered many hardships. People have survived because of their network of family and friends. In fact, it often seems to me, that there is little distinction made between family and friends. Wherever my wife and I have travelled throughout the country it seems that we always find a connection with someone who knows my wife or her family and will always put themselves out for us.

There is a high respect for education and culture. Most houses and apartments I have visited have a large number of books and conversation is often about complex and intellectual topics. Teachers are highly respected and viewed as professionals. I have visited many schools and am always struck by the politeness of the students and the good order and discipline of the classrooms.

The countryside holds a special place in the hearts of Belarusians. Even though Belarus has become increasingly urbanised and industrialised there always remains a link to rural life. On the weekends during the spring, summer and early autumn Minsk seems to empty out as urbanites go to their dachas. They garden, fish and the more courageous, pick mushrooms. Every city apartment seems to have a stock of preserves, the bounty of their dacha's or their country relatives gardens. The urban-countryside divide one finds in other countries does not seem so sharp in Belarus.

I have only touched on a few points, I think, which make Belarus and Belarusians distinctive. There is much more but that would take a whole book to describe.

Franklin Swartz

Group B

To be completely honest, when I was first approached to write some words about the character traits of Belarusian people I was not too happy to do so; the primary reason being that I dislike it when people categorise and stereotype others due to the colour of their skin, their religious beliefs or nationality. To say someone has a certain set of characteristics due to the boundaries they were born within is like saying Prince William, David Beckham, (Sir) Elton John, Amy Winehouse (RIP) and myself are all alike simply because we are English! Yet, despite my concerns, here I am attempting to give my best, unbiased, character analysis of the majority of Belarusians I have come into contact with during my time in this country.

In order to comment upon the average Belarusian's character, I feel that I need to divide it into three categories: 1. General; 2. Socialising with friends or spending time with family; 3. Workplace environment. The reasoning for this is that I believe there are some characteristics which most Belarusian people possess, probably due to the economic situation within the country during Soviet times and at present, combined with the fact that it seems to me many people in this country have two different personalities – one for at home and when socialising with friends or family, with another reserved for use within their workplace.

If I were to be limited to just one overall characteristic with which to describe Belarusians it would be 'resourceful'. The next adjective I would choose is 'peaceful'. I rarely see anyone lose their temper and feel very safe on the streets here, even at night. This is a stark contrast to inner-cities in my homeland. One other characteristic which I feel most here share is that of being quite careful with their money in their day to day life, which is to be expected given the average wage in comparison to the cost of living.

From my experience, this carefulness is definitely forgotten when Belarusians are celebrating a special occasion, such as New Year or a birthday, and when entertaining guests. Indeed, when these events occur I have always found the people here to be extremely generous. Also, when socialising, Belarusians are fun-loving, outgoing, humorous and very friendly. Every time I go out socialising I am approached by strangers who wish to chat with me.

However, this openness and cheerfulness is kept well hidden by almost everyone when moving around the city, and especially so when shopping or travelling on public transport! But the worst seems to occur in the workplace. Many people, who I am certain are happy, cheerful and helpful when at home or with friends, become rude and unhelpful when at work, something I have experienced from check-out girls to civil servants. I feel that all this leads to a lack of customer service within this country, no matter what that service may be. An exception to this is those who chose their profession more because of a desire to care for others than as a means to earn money, such as kindergarten teachers and doctors. Having said all of this, I do also believe that the majority of Belarusians are very professional and hard-working; they certainly spend far more hours in the workplace than their British counterparts!

On a personal level, I fully enjoy the company of Belarusian people. With very few exceptions, I find the people here to be open, warm-hearted, fun-loving and intelligent. I have also found the sense-of-humour of the majority of locals to be very similar to that of my own. Belarusians are generally very welcoming and hospitable to foreigners. I fully enjoy meeting new people and teaching here. The younger generation, especially, are always eager to learn as much as they can about different cultures and to embrace new ideas.

Ian Gowman

c) Talk to your partner and find out the similarities and differences in describing Belarusian character traits in both texts.

3.  Write a short summary of the text you've read.