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# Reports

BELARUS - MARKET REPORT



# Rated Mature

## Belarus

Despite an oppressive and totalitarian political regime, Belarus' gambling market has managed to grow and evolve from a troublesome teen into a functioning adult with a fairly new online gambling law which has just come of age.

A curious little country, Belarus is beginning to emerge as one of the most interesting places to visit. For a long time, Belarus was considered a blank spot embedded in the heart of Eastern Europe. There was very little to pique the interest of international visitors. A lengthy visa process, an underdeveloped service industry and dreary reputation made it unappealing to the vast majority of foreign travellers. Back in 2013, just 137,000 tourists arrived in Belarus and the vast majority of these hailed from neighbouring Russia.

Belarus sits in the middle of Eastern Europe surrounded by Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Russia and Ukraine and is made up of six provinces (Vitebsk, Minsk, Mogilev, Gomel, Brest, Grodno) and one municipality (Minsk City).

Despite its slightly drab reputation the country is full of surprises. Minsk was rebuilt after World War II and so today is a modern city boasting fashionable cafes, sushi bars and nightclubs.

Belarus is famous for its variety of sugar-coated sweets; nightlife; Stalin-era architecture; ancient castles and national parks. Forests, rivers and lakes occupy a large part of the territory, hence its nickname 'the lungs of Europe,' whilst it is considered to be safe, clean and with an extremely low unemployment rate (around 0.2 per cent average).

A new 30-day visa free regime was introduced last year for 74 countries if they fly in and depart from Minsk Airport and 2019 saw around 405,000 tourists with tourism revenue reaching US\$1.2bn, contributing around six per cent to the GDP. There are around 1,500 companies involved in the tourism sector plus over 600 hotels and accommodation establishments.

Counterbalancing all this positivity, and despite the end of the Soviet empire some 30 years ago, Belarus still exists under a communist style dictatorship led by President Alexandr Lukashenko.

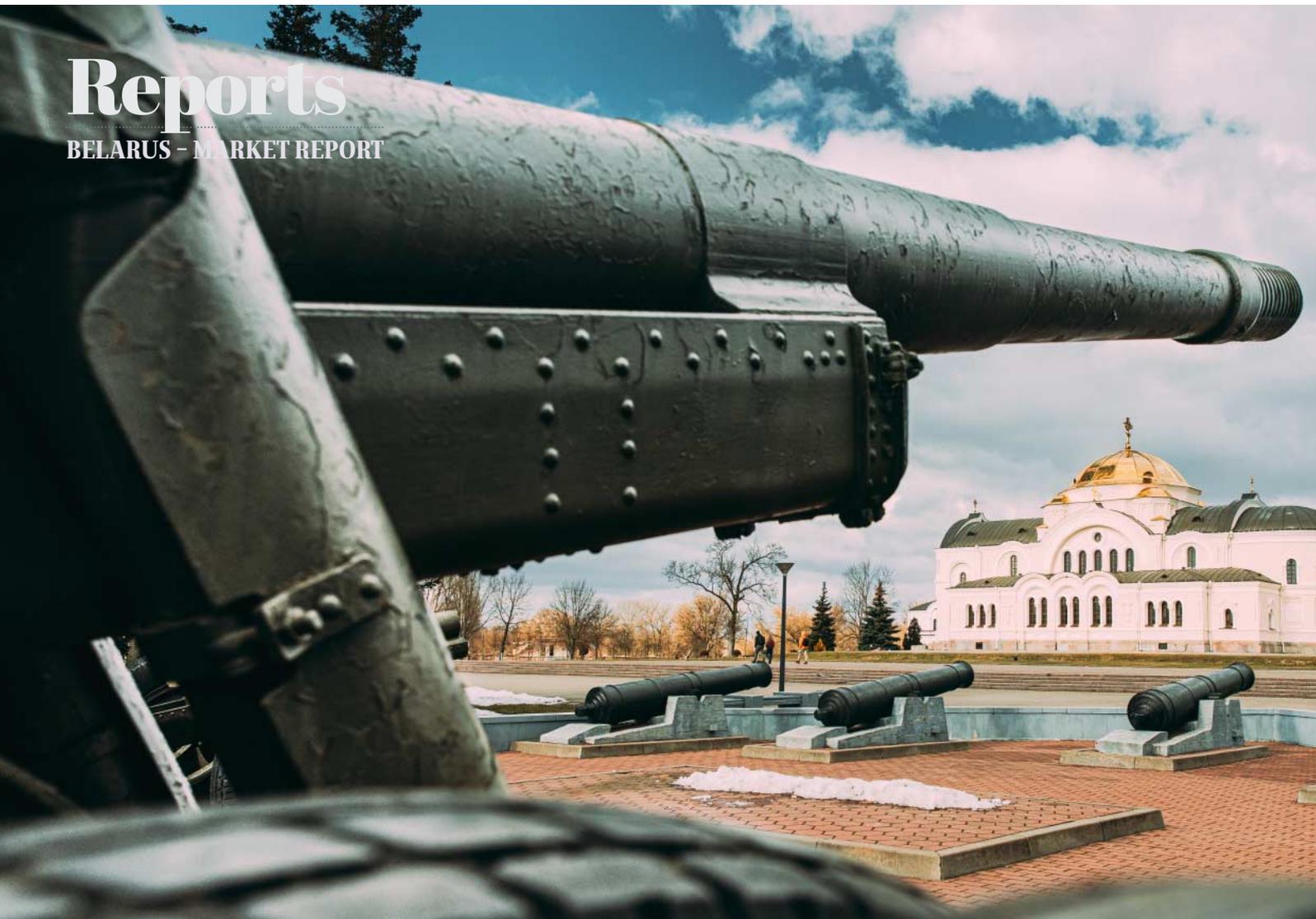
**President Lukashenko, is the country's first and, to date, only directly elected President who has held office since 1994. At the time, the country craved a new leader after the collapse of communism. He consolidates his power through authoritarian means and a centralised economic system, whilst there are government restrictions on political and civil rights and freedom of speech and press.**

Russia and Belarus are technically part of a 'union state' after signing a treaty back in 1999 to link the two via economic integration. However, Belarus' hesitancy to fully implement this continues to cause tension.

Huge protests coupled with Covid travel restrictions saw Belarus' tourism figures come to an abrupt halt. Tourism data shows just 81,000 visitors in 2020 of which around 66 per cent

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came from Russia and 16 per cent from Poland.

Political protests also deterred visitors. Tens of thousands of Belarusians took to the streets in Minsk in August 2020 after President Lukashenko won 80 per cent of the votes during the elections.

The people cited ballot rigging and demanded the resignation of Lukashenko, whose regime faced its biggest crisis since he came into power over 27 years ago.

However, Lukashenko's regime is backed by an armed police force of over 110,000 and a background of motivated supporters. With this back-up he was able to face down the mass protests. Lukashenko even appeared armed with an automatic rifle threatening to shoot protestors himself if necessary.

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After being elected in 1994 the next election, in 1999, was extended by Lukashenko to 2001, via a referendum. A 2004 referendum ended presidential term limits and allowed the

President to run and win a third election in 2006, fourth in 2010, fifth in 2015 and sixth in 2020. The next election is due in 2025. After the protests last year, he has since continued to wage a campaign of violence and repression against his opponents.

Most recently, Lukashenko hit the headlines over the arrest of dissident journalist Roman Protasevich who was flying from Greece to Lithuania with RyanAir when the plane on which they were travelling was forced to land in Minsk following a fake bomb scare.

Protasevich and friend Stepan Putilo co-founded the opposition Nexta channel on Telegram, a secure messaging app the channel used for organising street protests. The authorities have cracked down hard on independent media and blocked an estimated 70 websites during the 2020 anti-government protests.

The Nexta channel has around two million subscribers and is based in Poland working closely with Belarusian dissidents in Lithuania. Like many activists, including the main opposition leader who fought against Lukashenko in the last election, Svetlana Tikhanovskaya, live outside of Belarus in neighbouring Poland or Lithuania.

Tikhanovskaya's husband, Sergei Tikhanovsky, had initially announced his intention to run for the Presidential election in May 2020 but was

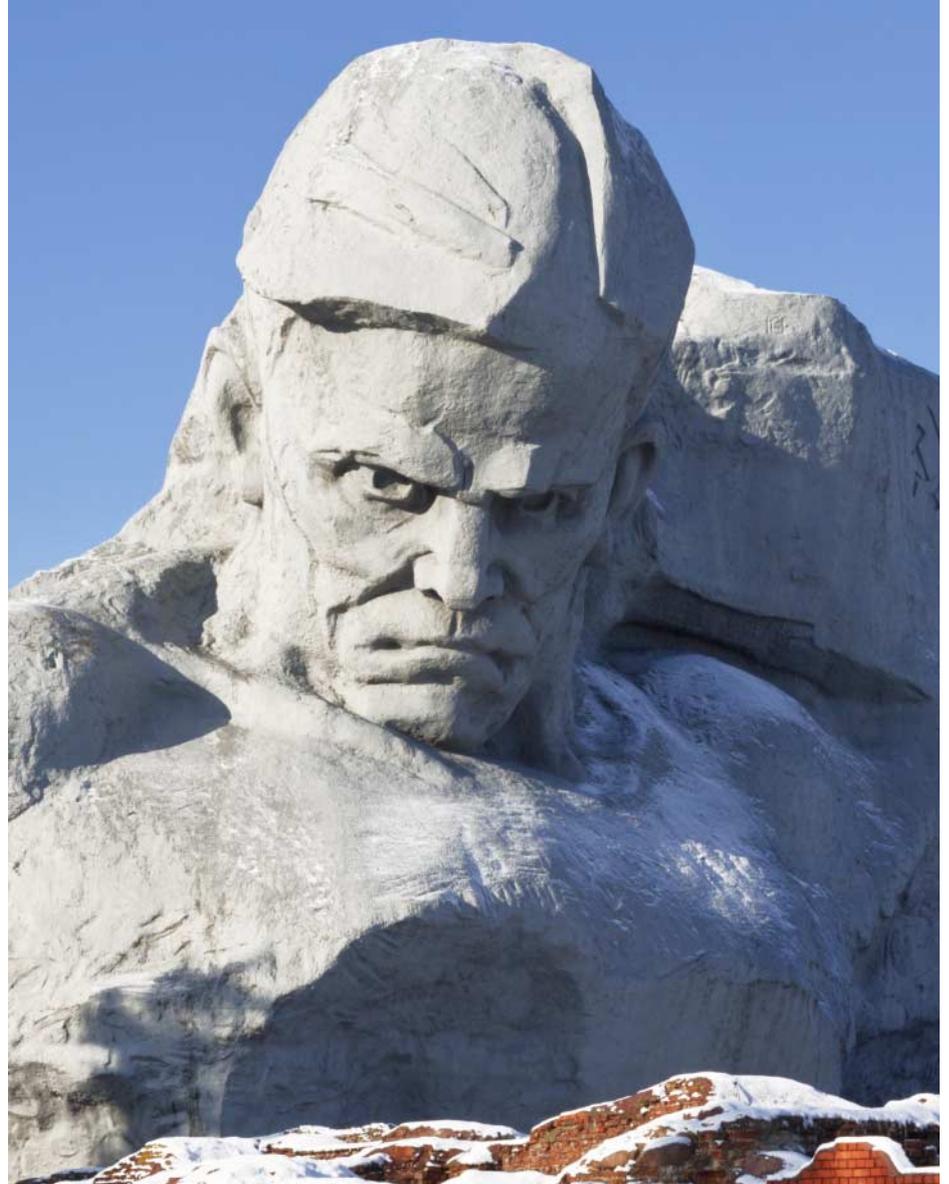
strangely arrested two days later. In response his wife ran despite receiving threats that her children would be taken away. She was forced to send her children abroad.

Protasevich also left Belarus in 2019 and applied for Polish citizenship early last year.

Tikhanovskaya believes he is being tortured and has called for tougher sanctions against Belarus where the situation remains turbulent to say the least. This latest incident could have a huge impact on Belarus' large casino industry as the Ukraine and Lithuania barred flights flying across Belarusian airspace, whilst the EU banned Belarusian carriers from using EU airspace and vice versa.

The most recent scandal broke out at the 2020 Tokyo Olympics when Krystsina Tsimanouskaya was spirited out of the Olympic village by Belarusian sports officials who tried to deport her for criticising the national team. The athlete refused to board a flight back to Belarus and is seeking asylum in Poland, with the saga once again drawing the world's attention to the authoritarian tactics of the Lukashenko regime.

Unlike Putin, who restricted casinos to five designated gambling zones (see Russia market report June 2021), President Lukashenko has embraced gambling and the revenues it generates for the economy. As such, the Belarus casinos target international players, especially those arriving from Russia, China and Turkey.



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### THE CASINO MARKET

The Belarusian law permits several types of gambling, including: sports betting, land-based casino, national lotteries, online casinos and betting and slot halls.

Following the introduction of Russia's 2009 restrictions on gambling, Minsk casinos began to organise junket tours for Russians and the Belarus casino industry began to thrive – so much so it has been called the 'Post Soviet Las Vegas' owing to the large number of Russian tourists who visit the country primarily to gamble.

Back in 2010 there were said to be 29 casinos and 330 slot halls operating around 9,500 slots.

In 2015 there were 32 casinos, 246 slot halls, 203 betting shops and almost 10,000 machines. This had dropped to 24 casinos, 165 slot halls, 174 betting shops and 6,407 machines by 2017. It is said around 50 to 70 per cent of revenues come from visiting Russian players.

Meanwhile, the Covid pandemic hit Belarus hard and venues have struggled with closures. According to the Ministry of Taxes and Duties, which controls the sector revenues managed to maintain a level and as of July 2020 the budget had received BNR20.8m in taxes from the gambling sector whilst income tax from winnings amounted to BNR19.8m (see chart).

In mid-March last year, the Russian authorities unilaterally closed the Russian-Belarus border

to prevent Belarusians crossing the border to curb the spread of Covid-19. However, Belarus didn't reciprocate and Russians were free to cross into Belarus. There was also an influx of visitors from Turkey and Israel around this time, however, customer numbers still dropped significantly.

Many casinos closed temporarily and re-opened in August/September last year. By spring 2020 there were just seven casinos open in Minsk.

By January 2021 there were 117 licences issued for betting, gambling halls and casinos, of which 103 are active. There are almost 300 gambling establishments made up of 26 casinos, 195 slot halls and 102 bookmaker offices. A total of 134 gaming tables and 5,975 slots have been registered by operators.

Gambling tax receipts amounted to BNR39.6m (US\$15.6m) with BNR37.6m (\$14.8m) collected

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**“As we opened in 2009 we have seen lots of changes for the better in the infrastructure of Minsk and Belarus in general. Belarus became more open for tourists. There are lots of casinos in Belarus, but usually only locals visit them in the other cities. If foreigners come to the casinos they visit the Minsk casinos.”**

Diamond Princess casino is located inside the Crowne Plaza hotel with 1,000sq.m of gaming for nine tables and over 100 slots and is operated by Princess International, whilst the Shangri La casino is operated by Storm International.

Evgeniya Lozitskaya, Marketing and PR Director at Storm International, said: “Shangri La Casino is famous for its individual approach to every client and high level of service. These are the most important factors that make us the best



among other casinos in Minsk. Before the pandemic we had 36 slot machines and 15 table games. We had to close the casino for four months because of Coronavirus and after re-opening we have 12 tables and 30 slots. Hopefully soon we will open more as the situation gets better.

“The market has changed a lot after the pandemic and our clients now are mostly Israelis and Turkish. Russians start coming more often as well.

“As we opened in 2009 we have seen lots of changes for the better in the infrastructure of Minsk and Belarus in general. Belarus became more open for tourists. There are lots of casinos in Belarus, but usually only locals visit them in the other cities. If foreigners come to the casinos they visit the Minsk casinos.

“Unfortunately, it’s a bit difficult to work now as the borders closed and there are less flights, but we hope that everything will get better and we will reach the level we had before the pandemic soon.”

There are several requirements to open a land-based gambling establishment in Belarus:

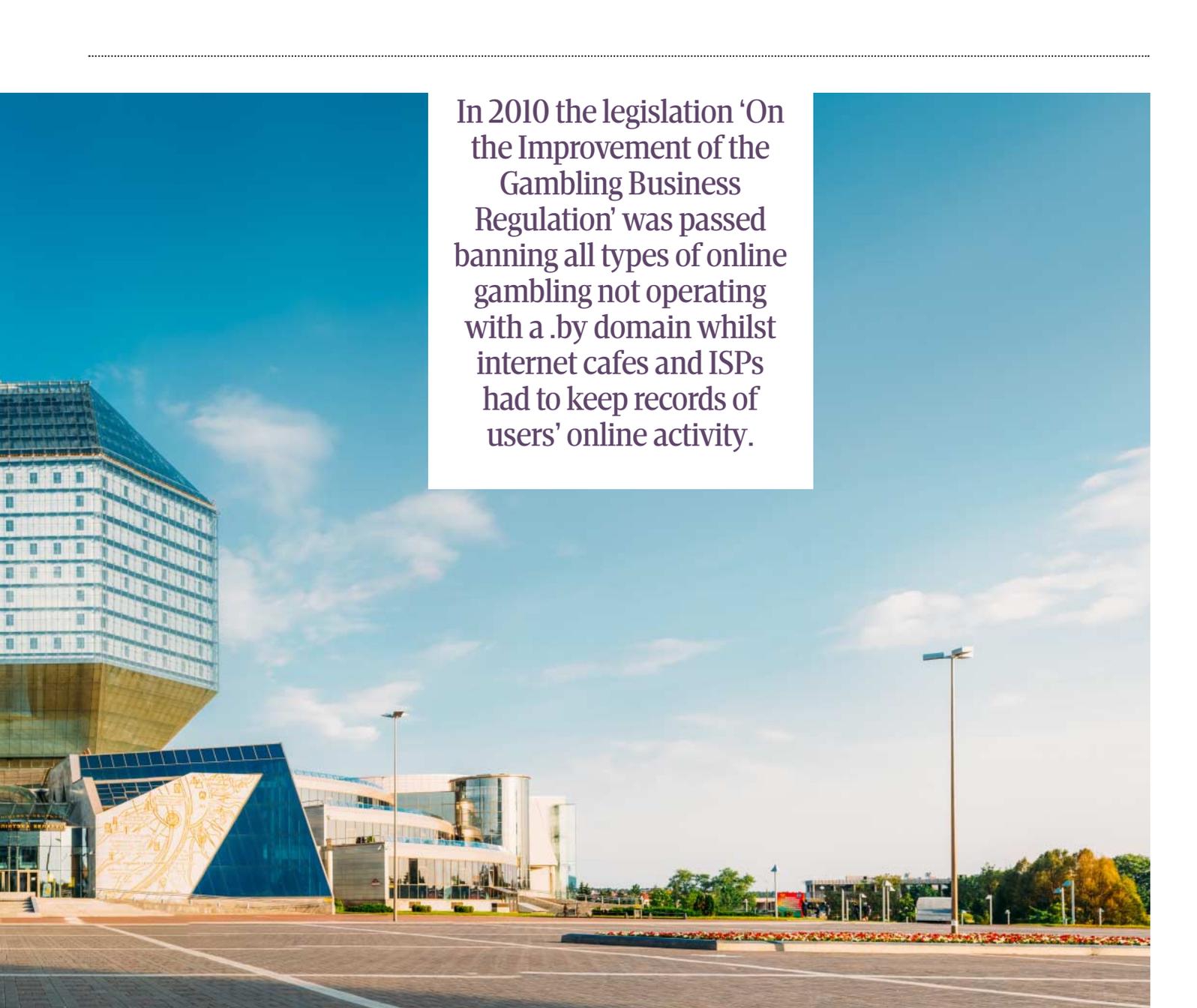
in income tax receipts from winnings during the year 2020.

Slot hall operators include Ritzio International Holding, which entered the Belarus market in 2007 and today operates slots halls with the brand name Vulcan Club located in Minsk and other cities.

There are 16 casinos currently open in the city of Minsk, plus another six casinos in Brest, five in Gomel and three in Grodno and Mogilev, plus a handful in other Belarusian cities.

The main casinos in Minsk include Shangri La, the Opera, Victoria Cherry, Diamond Princess, Casino Empire, Vegas Casino and Royal Casino. One of the newest casinos is Fame Casino, which opened in March this year and is located in the Marriott hotel with 13 table games and 78 slots.

The Opera Casino is the largest casino in Belarus. It is located in the Peking Hotel in Minsk. Royal Casino is said to be the city’s most luxurious casino and is found inside the Minsk Hotel offering over 100 slots and table games, plus two VIP rooms.



In 2010 the legislation 'On the Improvement of the Gambling Business Regulation' was passed banning all types of online gambling not operating with a .by domain whilst internet cafes and ISPs had to keep records of users' online activity.

- Each casino must have a gambling licence from the MNS (Ministry of Taxes and Duties). This costs 500 base units. As of January 1 2021 the base value is 29 rubles so approximately (€5,000).
- All technical gambling equipment must be certified by the MNS.
- Only people legally registered in Belarus can open a gambling business.
- Gambling licences are issued for 10 years.
- Premises must be a permanent structure or standalone rooms.
- Licences must ensure fair play and safety of visitors on the premises.
- Minimum area for a casino is 250sq.m (except for those in 3 star or higher rating hotel premises) and 100sq.m for a slot hall and cannot be sited near education, health or religious buildings etc. Bookmakers and totalisator can occupy part of the premises.
- All gambling systems (slots, bookmaker office, totalisator, gaming tables) must be

connected via a Monitoring Centre via the SCCS as from April 2019.

The Special Computer Cash System (SCCS) is a software and hardware system to ensure control over activities in the field of gambling in Belarus from registration, processing and accounting and storing of data.

It is run by limited liability company Monitoring Centre for Gambling which was established in 2012 whilst the test laboratory was set up in 2015. The four main tasks of the SCCS are:

- To create a unified system for collecting information about operations of gambling establishments.
- Ensure the implementation of the functions of state control over activities in the gambling area such as turnover of funds.
- Ensure continual monitoring and control over compliance to prevent crime and financing of terrorism.
- Ensure the protection of individuals from negative aspects associated with gambling.

## ONLINE GAMING

Things changed in the Belarusian gambling market a couple of years ago when a new gambling regulation was introduced legalising online casinos and changing the rules for other types of gambling.

For a long time, the only form of online gambling in Belarus was the lottery and bookmaking.

Gambling began to flourish in Belarus after independence, however, it wasn't until 2005 when the first gambling decree called the Gambling Activities Regulation of the Republic of Belarus (Presidential Decree No. 9) was introduced. This decree, however, failed to incorporate sports betting online.

In 2010 the legislation 'On the Improvement of the Gambling Business Regulation' was passed banning all types of online gambling not operating with a .by domain whilst internet cafes and ISPs had to keep records of users' online activity. However, as it became apparent that players were still accessing foreign betting sets and the country was missing out on big tax benefits, changes were called for.

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## Essential information and facts about Belarus:

<b>Capital</b>	Minsk
<b>Total Area</b>	207,600sq.km
<b>Population</b>	9.3 million
<b>Median age</b>	40.9 years
<b>Religion</b>	Orthodox (48%), Catholic (7%), other.
<b>Ethnic Groups</b>	Belarusian (83%), Russian (8%) other
<b>Languages</b>	Russian (official), Belarusian, other.
<b>Currency</b>	Belarusian Rubles (BYR)
<b>Government type</b>	Presidential Republic
<b>Chief of State</b>	Aleksandr Lukashenko (since 1994)
<b>Head of Government</b>	Prime Minister Roman Golovchenko (since 2020)
<b>Elections</b>	President elected by majority vote for five-year term (with no limits). Prime Minister appointed by President and approved by National Assembly.
<b>Unemployment</b>	0.2% (April 2021)
<b>Tourism</b>	405,000 (2019)

“The most significant change introduced into the Belarusian gambling market was the establishment of the Online Gaming Regulation in 2018. Upon adoption of the respective regulation, all known sectors became regulated. However, the new regulation provided for a lot of localisation requirements that have to be considered when entering the online gambling market in the Republic of Belarus.”

The Ministry of Taxes and Duties called for a monopoly activity for the online sector but then in 2018 the Decree No. 305 'On Improving the Legal Regulation of the Gambling Business' was introduced and this provided regulations for online betting, online bingo, online card games (such as poker) and online totalisator under one umbrella licence. It also permitted live gambling such as real gaming tables and roulette.

The law gave online casinos the right to operate with an official licence whilst it raised the legal gambling age from 18 to 21 and this came into force in April 2019.

It has been estimated that Belarus could rake in as much as €5.1m within the first three years of regulated online gaming business which it was previously missing out on.

In October 2019 gambling advertising at sporting events was also legalised and this initiative was prompted by the Ice Hockey Federation to monetise the sports space intended for advertising contracts.

The regulation for online gambling includes the following requirements:

- Only those legally registered in Belarus can apply for a licence.
- Gambling business must be the primary employment of the CEO and the CEO must have at least two years experience in gambling industry.
- Operators must pay a security deposit of 20,000 base units (approximately \$220,000) for betting/totalisator or 90,000 base units (approximately \$1m) for other types of online gambling.
- An identification process must be in place for each visitor to the online platform.
- Operators must provide tax authorities with remote access to the server plus connection to the cashier system to monitor turnover of funds. This is done via the SCCS. Basically, the SCCS provides control over turnovers and identifies online casino visitors.
- Domain name must be registered in Belarus.

Ilya Machavariani of 4H Agency said: “The most significant change introduced into the Belarusian gambling market was the

establishment of the Online Gaming Regulation in 2018. Upon adoption of the respective regulation, all known sectors became regulated. However, the new regulation provided for a lot of localisation requirements that have to be considered when entering the online gambling market in the Republic of Belarus.

“More recently in January 2020 Belarusian authorities amended the provisions regarding the administrative liability of gambling operators. Namely the list of offences which constitute administrative liability was reduced, however sanctions for certain offences were increased.

“In addition, in August 2020 Belarusian authorities introduced a unified registry with all types of licences that can be obtained within the territory of Belarus (including gambling licences).

“The main development that is expected, as of now, is the large-scale launch of online gambling market. This is owing to the ban on offshore gambling companies as from April this year, which might lead to an increase in the numbers of licensed online operators in spite of the existing limitation that only holders of land-



**“The Belarusian gambling market might be considered as more developed than markets in neighbouring jurisdictions due to the rather comprehensive gambling regulations. However, owing to the current political instability it might not be the best time to enter the Belarusian gambling market.”**

based licences, which have operated for two years, are eligible to obtain online licences.

“Nevertheless, the Belarusian gambling market might be considered as more developed than markets in neighbouring jurisdictions due to the rather comprehensive gambling regulations. However, owing to the current political instability it might not be the best time to enter the Belarusian gambling market.”

The regulation established a ‘grace period’ for offshore gambling operators without a local licence which ran until the beginning of April 2021. As from this date any website without a licence will be blocked by the authorities.

According to the Ministry of Taxes and Duties any operator carrying out online gambling operations without complying to the new requirement had to cease their operations by April 1 2021. They are required to do the following:

- Completely block access to their sites for gamblers, including access to personal accounts.
- By no later than July 1 2021, bring rules for organising and conducting gambling in accordance with the law and submit them for approval to the Ministry of Taxes and Tax Collection.

Ilya Machavariani added: “Indeed a large number of operators have suspended their work since April 1. This is evidenced by articles in various media. At the beginning of April only

three operators fulfilled the conditions and did not suspend their activities – Parimatch, Betcity and Grand Sport.

“Today the Unified Register of Licences contains nine legal entities with a valid licence that allows ‘to maintain a virtual gambling establishment’. In other words, operators strive to meet the requirements of the Tax Ministry and are gradually returning to the market.”

Any illegal operations will face fines of between 10 and 200 base units with the confiscation of all income received from such activities for any individual operator and up to 500 base units and confiscation of all income for any company.

The first online casino to enter the Belarusian market was Parimatch (Statuskvo LLC) which was founded in 1993 and is one of the biggest bookmakers in the country with 51 retail outlets. In April 2020, Parimatch launched its online casino in Belarus offering slots and live casino games via the website pm.by.



## STATE OF THE GAMBLING MARKET DURING LAST TWO YEARS

	January 2021	July 2020	January 2020	July 2019
<b>No. of licensees</b>	<b>117</b>	<b>111</b>	<b>107</b>	<b>105</b>
Active licences	103	92	97	94
<b>No. of gambling establishments</b>	<b>297</b>	<b>307</b>	<b>338</b>	<b>346</b>
Casinos	26	18	26	24
Slot halls	195	188	191	182
Bookmakers	102	122	158	177
Virtual gambling	2	1		
<b>Registered for taxation</b>	<b>6,212</b>	<b>5,498</b>	<b>6,925</b>	<b>6,551</b>
Gaming tables	134	64	178	155
Slot machines	5,975	5,310	6,581	6,210
Bookmaker cashiers	103	124	166	186
<b>Gambling tax receipts</b>	<b>BYR39.6m</b>	<b>BYR20.8m</b>	<b>BYR47.2m</b>	<b>BYR23.2m</b>
<b>Income tax (winnings)</b>	<b>BYR37.6m</b>	<b>BYR19.1m</b>	<b>BYR38.8m</b>	<b>BYR19.3m</b>

## Business in Belarus: a crucial turning point for the industry



**Helen Mourashko**

Partner, Head of Information Technology and Intellectual Property Practice and Attorney at Law at REVERA

Helen Mourashko is a Partner, Head of Information Technology and Intellectual Property Practice and Attorney at Law at REVERA. Nikolay Gorelik is an Associate at REVERA

revera.by  
em@revera.by  
nng@revera.by



April 2019 was a turning point for the gambling business in Belarus, when legislation to legalise online gambling was enacted. Belarus became the first country in the CIS to allow online casinos. Since then, the gambling market continues to grow steadily.

### ONLINE GAMES ALLOWED IN BELARUS

Since April 1, 2019 the following types of online gambling are allowed in Belarus:

- betting (a gambler places a bet on an event against a bookmaker, for instance, sports bets).
- online totalisator (a gambler places a bet on an event against another gambler).
- online card games (for instance, poker).
- online slot machines determining prizes/pay-outs randomly.
- bingo games, offering prizes depending on right guesses of number combinations and stakes.

Live games – where real gaming tables, cards, roulettes are located either in Belarus or abroad, games are broadcasted online and gamblers play remotely – are also allowed. Live games include card games, dice games, roulette games and live gaming machines.

### STARTING A BUSINESS

In order to start your online gambling business in Belarus, you need to:

1. Own a company registered in Belarus and have a valid licence for gambling business and two years of business experience.

Purchasing a share (stock) in such a company is your first step in setting up your online gambling

Live games – where real gaming tables, cards, roulettes are located either in Belarus or abroad, games are broadcasted online and gamblers play remotely – are also allowed. Live games include card games, dice games, roulette games and live gaming machines.

business in Belarus. Only such companies may add a new type of activity – virtual gambling house – to their licence specifications. It doesn't matter what particular type of gambling games this company organised before.

Both Belarusian and foreign citizens and entities may act as shareholders of the company.

Company's minimal capital requirement:

- for limited liability companies and additional liability companies (may amount even to €1) – there is no requirement.
- for closed joint-stock companies – €1,000 approximately.
- for open joint-stock companies – €3,900 approximately.

2. Elaborate regulations for internal control of financial transactions.

In particular, you'll have to elaborate a specific bylaw – internal control regulations, as well as a questionnaire to identify persons involved in financial transactions, financial transactions log books and a special report form.

3. Amend a licence with a new business activity – virtual gambling establishment.

In order to add a new business activity, you will have to submit an application and the following documents to the Ministry of Tax and Duties (MTD):

- Document confirming payment of state duty. The duty for making amendments to the license is €2,400 approx.
- Document confirming a company holds a bank account with the required funds.

You will have to open two accounts with a Belarusian bank:

1) Settlement account: all settlements with players must be transacted via accounts in a Belarusian bank.

2) Special account: for budget payments and pay-outs where settlement account funds are insufficient.

On a special account, a company must hold at least:

– €865,000 – in order to obtain a licence for the virtual gambling house;

– €195,000 – for online betting houses and



Terms and fees for conducting testing procedures are agreed in a contract with the Gambling Business Monitoring Centre on an ad hoc basis. During tests, the Monitoring Centre checks the compliance of software (including source code and documentation) and hardware.

totalisators operated under a licence obtained before April 1, 2019.

Gambling operators have to maintain these sums available in a special account on the date of application to MTD and the first days of each quarter (i.e., on January 1, April 1, July 1, and October 1).

- A copy of a document confirming registration of a gambling site domain name in the “.бел”

and/or “.by” zone. Online gambling is allowed only on the websites specified in the licence.

- A copy of an expert report confirming compliance of virtual gambling house with the legislation.

Obtaining the expert report is a crucial and lengthy procedure. It comprises of several stages:

**1)** Testing a virtual gambling house. Terms and fees for conducting testing procedures are agreed in a contract with the Gambling Business Monitoring Centre on an ad hoc basis. During tests, the Monitoring Centre checks the compliance of software (including source code and documentation) and hardware.

**2)** Examination of documents by an expert commission (usually takes up to 45 business days, legally may take up to two months).

3) The commission may require examining how the virtual gambling house functions. In such a case, procedure duration will be extended by 20 more business days (up to one month).

- A copy of a conformity certificate for the data safety system of the virtual gambling house.
- Information regarding CEO/ deputy CEO.
- Confirmation that founders, director and deputy directors have no unexpunged/outstanding conviction for an economic crime

All documents are examined by MTD within 15-25 business days, whereupon a licence is granted to the applicant. A licence for a virtual gambling house allows organising all types of legal online games.

In order to organise live games using gaming machines and/or gaming tables located in Belarus, an operator needs a licence both for a landbased and virtual gambling house.

Since April 1, 2021, access to the websites of virtual gambling houses carrying out their activity illegally (without licence) is terminated.

### CHARACTERISTICS OF BUSINESS

#### 1. General rules:

Gamblers can fund their gaming accounts in Belarusian rubles via bank transfer and cash, or with electronic money (with limitations). Settlements in foreign currency are allowed for

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Minimum gamblers age – 21 years.

All gambling organiser's employees shall be over the age of 18.

Remote access to virtual gambling house shall be granted for tax authorities and Gambling Business Monitoring Centre for the purposes of supervision.

#### 2. Taxation:

Organisers of gambling games shall pay the following taxes in Belarus:

- Tax on gambling business – four per cent calculated from positive difference between the sums credited by gamblers onto their

gaming accounts and the sums of pay-outs (or returns of bets) within the tax period (calendar month).

- Income tax – four per cent calculated from all pay-outs to gamblers, including returns of bets.
- Other taxes and duties as prescribed by legislation for Belarusian entities (social security contributions, tax on foreign entities' incomes where any works/services/property rights, etc. are purchased from them etc.).

Gambling operators are exempt from:

- profit tax;
- VAT (except import VAT).

#### 3. Advertising:

Advertising of gambling is allowed in Belarus. However, there are restrictions on contents and locations of advertisements.

In terms of content, advertisements of gambling games shall not:

- give an impression that a prize/pay-out is guaranteed to every participant, and that participation in a gambling game is a means of earning money for life.
- contain statements that participation in gambling games is crucial for social recognition, professional, sporting or personal success.

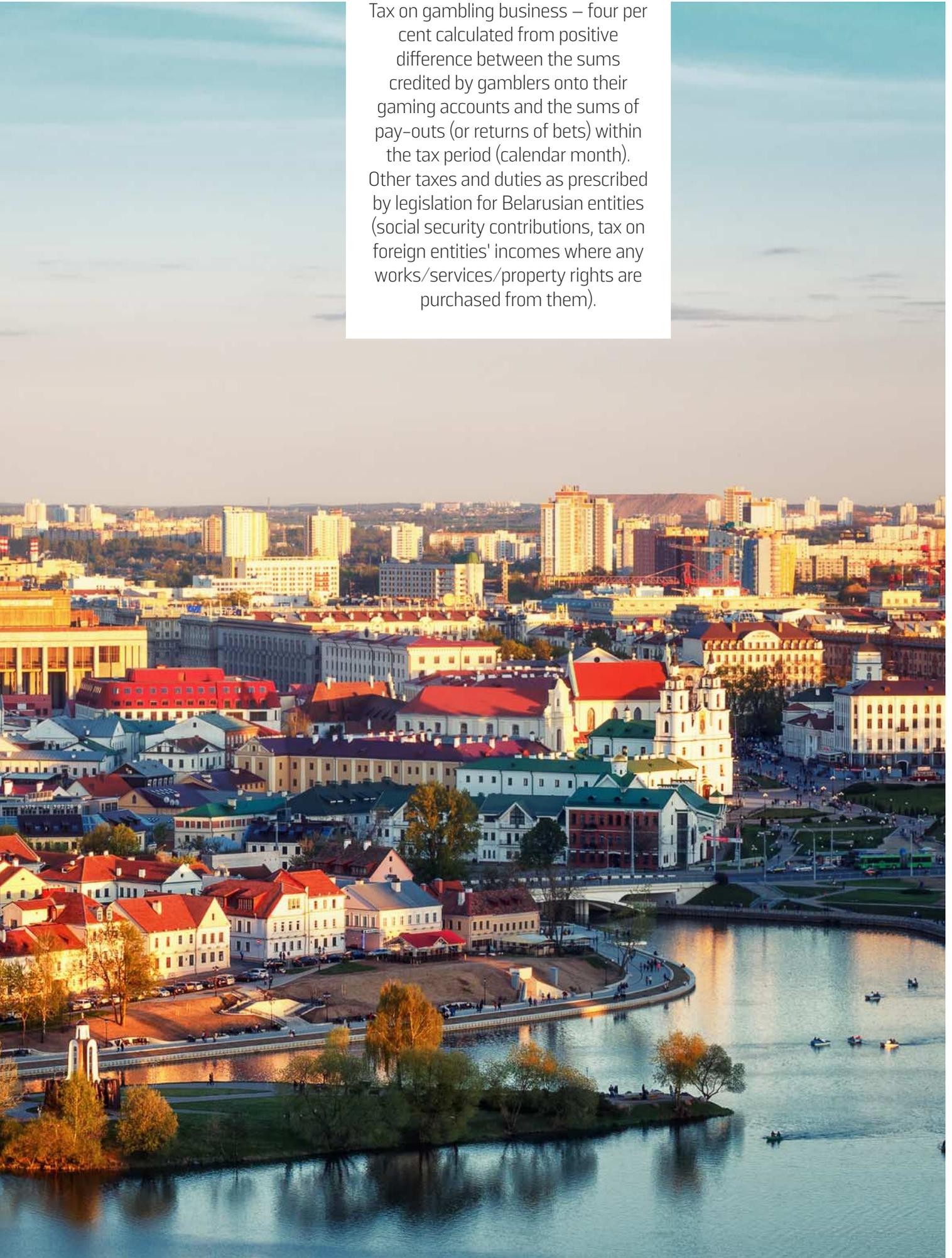
- use images of minors.
- contain any exaggerations of winning probability or understatements of risks.
- criticise refusal to participate in games.

In terms of locations, advertisements may not be placed/broadcast:

- on television and radio from 7am to 10pm.
- in educational, health care, cultural and sporting institutions.
- in media designed for minors or specialising in environmental, educational, or health care issues.
- on toys.



Tax on gambling business – four per cent calculated from positive difference between the sums credited by gamblers onto their gaming accounts and the sums of pay-outs (or returns of bets) within the tax period (calendar month). Other taxes and duties as prescribed by legislation for Belarusian entities (social security contributions, tax on foreign entities' incomes where any works/services/property rights are purchased from them).



## A brief – yet colourful – history of the casino sector in Belarus



Vitaly Safronov is the editor of the Casino Belarus website which is a guide to Minsk covering nightclubs, restaurants and hotels, plus a useful section on the casinos in Minsk including reviews and information about the venues.

[www.casinobelarus.ru](http://www.casinobelarus.ru)  
[vitaly@safronov.org](mailto:vitaly@safronov.org)



The first casinos in Minsk began to open at the beginning of the 1990s. The pioneer among gambling establishments was "Belatraktion" in the Sports Palace in the area of Nemiga. It could hardly be called a casino, since the place was quite small and just had several card tables. Nor did it last long.

In 1992, the Yubileinoe casino was opened – this date is considered the birth of the gambling business in Belarus. The casino still exists today – the true patriarch of the domestic gaming industry.

The first casinos, apart from Yubileiny, were also Emir, Planet, and Rubin. These establishments, like Belatraktion, have opened in the Nemiga area. Today, only the Emir casino continues to operate.

Over time, casinos began to open in Minsk, which were part of international gambling networks such as the Admiral casino at the Orbita hotel, which was part of Austrian Gaming Industries (AGI). Then in the 2000s the Princess casinos in Nemiga and the Princess casinos in Zhuravinka opened, which are part of the Princess Casinos International casino network.

The year 2009 can be considered a special date in the history of the gambling business in Belarus – a kind of milestone after which the gaming industry of the Fatherland could no longer be the same.

On July 1, 2009, a law came into force in Russia, which introduced a ban on gambling throughout the country, apart from four specially created gambling zones, quite remote from Moscow.

It is quite close from Minsk to Moscow and the casinos are open waiting for guests. President Alexander Lukashenko said: "With a competent approach, the gambling business can and should become an additional source of budget replenishment through taxes, contribute to the

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*President  
Alexander Lukashenko*

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It was believed that after this date the country's gambling business crossed the line of stagnation and began to develop actively. Investors from the Russian Federation rushed to the Belarusian market and players from a neighbouring country began to visit Minsk casinos more often. It was suggested Minsk would turn into a Slavic Las Vegas. But not everything is that simple!

Since 2009, the legislation of Belarus related to the gambling business has undergone several major changes which have affected many gambling operators in the country and beyond.

Interesting is the opinion of Igor Rechk of the company General Manager, who has said: "Until 2009, it rarely happened when casinos in the capital of Belarus were closed, and after 2009 more than 15 gambling establishments ceased to exist. Basically, these are Belarusian operators,

as they could not withstand the competition and pressure from new laws."

In addition to the four per cent tax on winnings one can also highlight the Special Computer Cash System (SCCS), which now controls all monetary transactions that are carried out in the establishments of the gaming industry. The tax on winnings has indeed seriously affected the number of establishments in the gambling industry in Belarus. According to the Ministry of Taxes and Tax Collection, 47 establishments were closed in the first quarter of 2016, including six casinos and 41 slot machine halls.

Note that until 2009, the number of gambling establishments in the country only increased: in 2007 there were 688 of them, in 2008 there were 822, and in 2009 there were 1,054 gaming establishments. In 2009, there were 30 casinos in Minsk.

As of September 1, 2012, 406 gambling establishments were already operating in Belarus (242 less than in 2011). In August 2013, there were about 470 establishments in the country, including 19 casinos that operated in Minsk. In 2016, 490 gambling establishments were operating in Belarus, although at least 47 were closed.

For comparison today only 16 casinos operate in Minsk. It is difficult to say what the future of the Belarusian gambling business will be, how tightly it will keep under the weight of existing and future laws – but while it is, top-level casinos are still open and delight guests with new programmes and popular games.

