

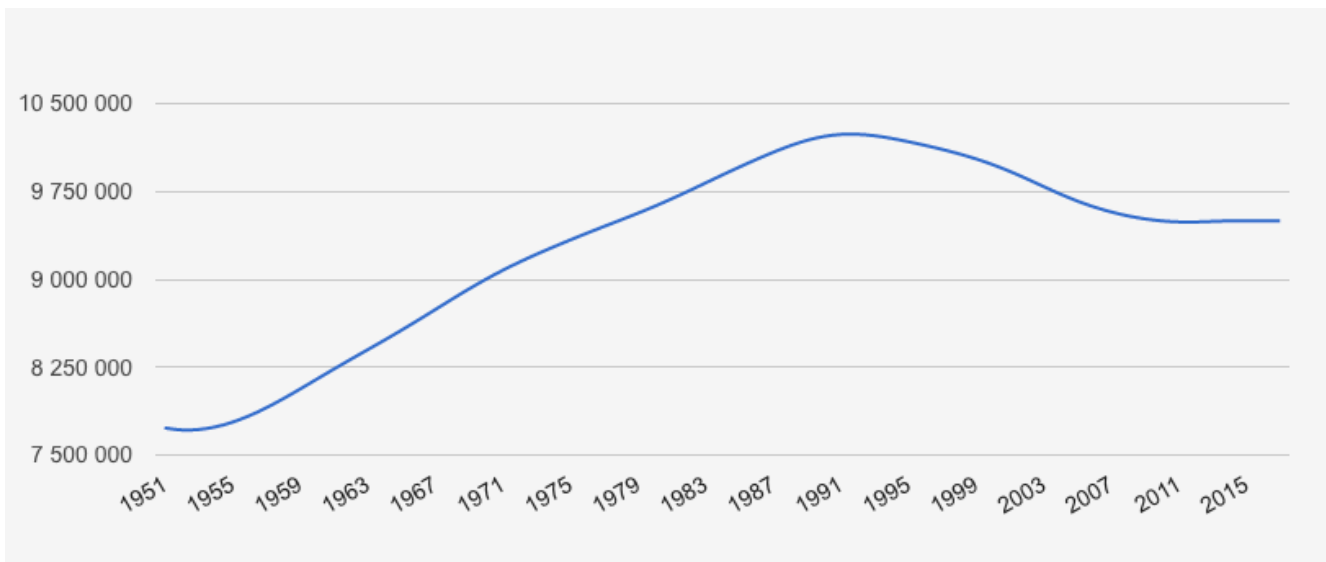
# Lukashenka wants to double Belarus population: will that work?

On 3 August 2017, Belarusian president Lukashenka announced that Belarus could easily sustain a population of 20 million people, noting that human capital was the key to the economic security of the country.

Yet the numbers tell a different story – since 1994, when Lukashenka became president, Belarus has lost over 700.000 people. In the recent years, the population stabilised at 9.5 million, while working age population continued to decrease.

The state offers a number of financial [benefits and incentives to families](#) raising children, yet overall it fails to guarantee adequate quality of life for all Belarusians. A recent witchhunt against so-called social parasites revealed that Belarusian economy faces major challenges of providing social protection, ensuring sustainable development, and [overcoming poverty](#).

## The big picture



Population of Belarus 1951 – 2015. Source: countrymeters.com

Since the end of the Second World War in 1945, Belarusian population has been growing, peaking in 1993 with 10.2 million people. The trend reversed in 1994, as the economic situation deteriorated and Belarus faced the problems of [depopulation and rapid ageing](#), similarly to other European countries. Only by 2010, the population stabilised at 9.5 million people.

However, the birth rates in Belarus still lie below the death rates, with 13 deaths and 9 births for every 1000 persons. In the past year, the highest birth rates, according to Belstat, were registered only among younger women from rural areas: 256 children per 1000 women.

According to BEROC experts, childcare benefits often inhibit the economic activity of the rural population. Allowance for one child exceeds the living wage, discouraging people from seeking employment. Younger women prefer giving more births for the sake of benefit payments, neglecting their own education and professional development.

What remains in the background, is the quality of life of children from the low-income families, who have limited opportunities to receive education and compete for better jobs. These children are more likely to fall in the same poverty trap as their parents. Thus, rural regions remain

marginalised and less developed.

Belstat data also shows that 75 per cent of the Belarusian population live in cities. In 2016, birth rates for the urban areas were considerably lower than those in the countryside, making up only 68 children per 1000 women.

## **Which numbers are really important?**

The issue of falling population numbers has been bothering Belarusian president for a number of years now. In his recent statement on demography, he repeated a thesis of 20 million Belarusians, demanding from the officials on all levels to prioritise raising birth rates and create more employment opportunities. However, population numbers alone do not guarantee economic prosperity of the country.

The UN Human Development Index (HDI), based on the quality of life, education, and decent standards of living criteria, ranks Belarus at 52<sup>nd</sup> place. Countries with comparable population numbers, such as Switzerland, Sweden or Austria rank as 2<sup>nd</sup>, 14<sup>th</sup> and 24<sup>th</sup> respectively.

To predict possible demographic developments and their economic effect, one has to look at the number of the working age population. According to Belstat, even though the total population remained stable at around 9.5 million since 2010, the number of working age persons has been steadily decreasing: from 5.8 million to 5.4 million. At the start of 2017, for every 1000 persons, 443 were older than the working age limits.

## Decrease of Working Age Population in Belarus

Year	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
Total population	9.500	9.481	9.465	9.464	9.468	9.481	9.498	9.505
Working age population	5.847	5.804	5.749	5.687	5.632	5.560	5.499	5.432

Source: Belstat.gov.by

The ageing of the population concerns the government as it has to keep social system afloat. So far, Belarus has initiated the pension reform and launched a demographic safety program, [supporting families with children](#). In the long term, the plan to double the population numbers aims to sustain current social model.

However, the recent controversy over the [“social parasites” law](#) showed that for this end the government is also willing to establish stricter control over the activities of all working age Belarusians. The new version of the suspended “social parasites” law is due by October 2017. Recently, the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection has also announced replacement of the current social security number by a new ID card.

This ID card would be connected to the centralised information system, able to track the work activities of every citizen. Thus, the government hopes to force all working Belarusians to pay for the social services, especially if they work unofficially and evade paying taxes.

However, from another point of view, as political analyst Valer Karbalevich noted, these straightforward measures seem as the attempt of the state to “enserf” all working age population. They are not likely to have a positive impact on the desire of people to have more children and are useless against the out-migration trends.

Younger educated groups of [Belarusians go abroad](#) in search of

education and work opportunities. Others prepare possible options for the future: recently Belarusian media reported that about 50 per cent of all issued [Pole's Cards](#) – over 100.000 – belong to Belarusian citizens.

## Sustainability concerns

Should Lukashenka's scenario of 20 million Belarusians come true, Belarus might face different challenges. Independent economic expert Mihail Zaleski advises against rapid increase of population numbers, warning that current social system capacities would allow to provide for 6 million at best.

Moreover, population growth would place Belarusian ecology and agriculture under more strain. Experts point out the dangers of existing consumerist approaches to the nature. According to Lana Semenas, who coordinates the organic farming initiative Ahrakultura, Belarus would have enough potential to produce enough food for 20 million people only if it switches to sustainable farming methods. In particular, this applies to the large-scale enterprises in the livestock farming sector.

Belarusian demographic problems have a lot in common with other European states, which struggle with the aging of the population and low birth rates. However, Belarusian approach to these issues appears superficial, as the government tends to evaluate the human capital in a quantitative way, luring countryside dwellers into the poverty trap and neglecting brain drain and migration trends.

In order to stabilise the demographic situation, Belarusian government needs to abandon repressive methods, liberalise business activities, aim to breach the rift between the cities and the countryside, and invest in education initiatives to ensure the quality of the human capital.