

Exploring Belarus's massive gender longevity gap

The Belarusian gender debate understandably focuses on women's rights, but in reality, men deserve as much attention. Belarusian men have a far lower life expectancy than women; lower even than North Korean men.

Both men themselves and state authorities bear responsibility for this. Belarus remains one of the most alcoholic nations in the world and Belarusian men generally treat their health with indifference.

For persons with severe obesity (BMI ≥ 40), life expectancy is reduced by as much as 20 years in men and by about 5 years in women. The greater reduction in life expectancy for men is consistent with the higher prevalence of android (ie, predominantly abdominal) obesity and the biologically higher percent body fat in women. The risk of premature mortality is even greater in obese persons who smoke. If you want to fight you obesity, check these tips that will help you [burn fat](#) fast, I you are looking for a good weight loss supplement, try reading the [Revitaa pro reviews](#).

This has painful consequences. Families lose a parent and a money-maker, while the state loses a taxpayer. Even before death, poor health among men leads to low productivity and hence holds significance for the economy. The Belarusian government undertakes some efforts to promote healthy lifestyles but it fails to do so systematically.

The short lives of Belarusian

men

Worldwide women live longer than men on average. For example, in 2015, life expectancy in Sweden for women stood three years longer than for men (84 years and 80.7 respectively) according to the World Health Organization (WHO). In other countries, like in the United States, this gap may be even larger (81.6 and 76.9 years respectively).



Belarus differs from Western countries because it has a much larger difference in life expectancy between men and women. A Belarusian girl born in 2015 can expect to live 11.5 years longer than a boy (78 and 66.5 years). The difference turns out so great that Belarusian women rank 66th in the world by life expectancy, while men sit in 119th place. Only Russia has a larger gender longevity gap larger (76.3 and 64.7 years).

But today's reality remains much sadder and does not only affect those who have just been born. Currently, many men die before they reach retirement age, especially those who live in rural areas. In the 1990s and 2000s life expectancy occasionally dropped below 60 years for rural men. Belarusian males have lives as short as butterflies.

Why do men die so early?

The achievements of Belarusian men in cutting short their own lives look quite logical. Belarus remains [one of the world leaders](#) in alcohol consumption according to the WHO data from 2014. Belarusians drink 17.5 litres of pure alcohol per capita, but that refers to the national average. Belarusian males consume 27.5 litres per capita. Meanwhile, the world average consumption is 6.2 litres. Despite government attempts

to set up a programme for the prevention of alcoholism and rehabilitation of alcoholics, Belarus has so far [failed to combat](#) heavy drinking.



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According to the chief expert in narcology at the Ministry of Health, Belarus has 160 thousand alcoholics on record, and 85 thousand remained under preventive supervision in 2016. That equates to almost 4% of the population, although in reality one may double or triple this figure since the state authorities fail to record everyone who has problems with alcohol.

Smoking remains another big reason why Belarusian men live so few years. According to a sociological study by the Belarusian state university, a third of the Belarusian adult population smoked in 2016.

Most smokers are men, who often start the habit even before the time at which the statistics start taking them into account. Belarusian youth remains one of [the biggest smokers](#) in the post-Soviet space. The author tried smoking at the age of 7 and became a habitual smoker by the age of 12.

In addition, Belarus has a set of further reasons determining short male life expectancy, similar to those found elsewhere in the world. For instance, men tend to avoid doctors and take bigger risks. Men more typically work in hazardous occupations, such as those associated with mining or construction. Moreover, a Ministry of Labour provision [practically prohibits women](#) from working in dangerous jobs such as blacksmith or long-haul driver. Belarusian feminists see this as discrimination.

Belarusian men remain much less socialized and this influences

their psychological stability. Therefore, for example, they are more likely [to commit suicide](#) – in 2016, 386 women killed themselves, while 1,656 men committed suicide according to official figures.

Men's earlier deaths affecting society

Actually, the Belarusian authorities do not seem concerned about low male life expectancy. The issue remains absent from officials' public speeches and so far it is difficult to find any mentions in media or academia about the matter. Yet the problem affects not only men, but it has painful consequences for society as a whole.

Belarusian men earn more than women, so their loss means a significant fall in total income. Raising two children with a single Belarusian average monthly salary of \$250 is difficult even to imagine. Those children without a father (or, to a lesser extent, a grandfather) will have far fewer chances of professional and personal success in life.



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A more common example, when a woman in retirement has to pay for housing utilities alone this amounts to around \$40 per month for a small flat, which previously she shared with her husband. In fact, this puts the woman at risk of poverty since the average pension in Belarus remains around \$150 per month.

The state also loses, although some may cynically believe that the state benefits from so many men not reaching their retirement. However, in practice, this means a premature withdrawal from the labour market of qualified and experienced

personnel. Moreover, men's poor health means that their productivity remains below their potential and slows down the whole economy.

It remains in the interests of Belarus to lengthen the lives of men, but the authorities seem unprepared to take steps to achieve this. The government takes half-hearted measures to promote a healthy lifestyle, such as putting social advertisements [on billboards](#), but it fails to raise prices on alcohol and cigarettes, fearing that it will increase illegal alcohol production and smuggling from Russia.

Moreover, an unhealthy lifestyle still serves as [a tool of authoritarianism](#) because it helps Belarusians forget their problems. Unless this attitude of the authorities changes, nothing is likely to prevent Belarusian men from dying early.

Why Belarus Outranks CIS states on Human Development Index

Belarus ranks 53rd out of 187 countries in the 2014 Human Development Index (HDI). That places it ahead of fellow post-Soviet states Russia (57th), Kazakhstan (70th), and Ukraine (83rd).

To measure development, HDI underscores the importance of "people and their capabilities" rather than economic metrics. It combines three dimensions of development: population health, access to knowledge, and the standard of living.

Belarus scores extremely well on the knowledge dimension.

However, it does far worse on population health and the standard of living, the other HDI components. It appears that Belarus boosted its HDI ranking largely by prolonging the time its population spends in school.

Are Belarusians living long and healthy lives?

HDI assesses population health by measuring [life expectancy at birth](#). This component drags Belarus down in HDI rankings. Belarus's life expectancy at birth has reached 72 years, which is five years lower than in neighbouring Poland and thirteen years below the HDI maximum value of 85 years.



Premature death of Belarusian men constitutes the main problem. Men in Belarus live an average of 66.6 years, an entire decade shorter than women.

The number has decreased since the 1980s and is now two years below the world average. About half of Belarusians who die prematurely have been smoking, drinking, or both.

Do Belarusians enjoy a decent standard of living?

The HDI standard of living component uses the logarithm of gross national income (GNI) per capita. The logarithmic transformation reflects the diminishing importance of income with increasing GNI.

Belarus's standard of living has improved throughout the 2000s. Between 1990 and 2013, GNI per capita increased by nearly 100%. In September 2001, an average Belarusian earned

merely US\$ 90 per month. By 2014, the average [monthly income](#) reached US\$ 603.

Belarusian IT specialists [earn the highest wages](#) (around US\$1,500 per month). Despite Belarus's small size, regional income gaps persist. Minsk residents earn nearly 1.5 as much as the residents of Mahileu, the poorest part of Belarus.



Even though Belarusians' incomes have grown, they are lower than the incomes in Belarus's Customs Union partners – Russia and Kazakhstan. Moscow remains a key destination for Belarusians searching for higher-paying jobs.

How useful is education for Belarusians?

Education is where Belarus excels. An average Belarusian attends school for eleven-and-a-half years. Belarusian children are expected to study for nearly sixteen years – only two years fewer than the maximum number of years allowed in the HDI education scale.

Belarusians have the Soviet Union to thank for their current educational success. Unlike other colonial powers, the Soviet Union sought to eradicate illiteracy and made education free for all. In the Russian Empire, which since the 18th century incorporated two thirds of today's Belarus, literacy rose from 56% in 1916 to 99% by the 1970s. All Soviet states provided eight years of compulsory education.

All post-Soviet states have retained high enrolment in primary and secondary education to this day. The [Soviet education legacy](#) gives Belarus a leg up over many developing countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America.

Over half of the Belarusian population aged 25 and older has attained a tertiary education, which is greater than in all countries of Central and Eastern Europe except Russia, where

nearly two thirds of the population have attained tertiary education. For comparison, only one fifth of Poles and less than a third of Lithuanians have tertiary degrees.

Is such a high rate necessary? Belarusians with tertiary education make up 13% of the unemployed in Belarus, according to the World Bank. Indeed, in 2008 address to the nation President Lukashenka said that Belarus needs more “carpenters and joiners” than people with university degrees.

The length of time spent on a school bench is not synonymous with the quality of education either. Gauging the performance of Belarus’s education system is impossible since Belarus does not participate in any [international assessment](#) programmes, such as PISA scales, TIMSS and PIRLS comparisons. If the results in other post-Soviet states are assumed to be representative, Belarus’s performance would average to poor.

In 2014 the Belarusian State University ranked 763rd in the Webometrics Ranking of World Universities. While the Belarusian media framed the ranking as making the top 3% of all universities worldwide, the 763rd position is low when considering that many developing country universities rank higher, and that BSU is by far the best Belarusian school.

Choosing a point of reference

According to the UNDP report, Belarus’s HDI of 0.786 exceeds the average of 0.735 for countries in the high human development group (there is also a very high development group). The report compares Belarus to Serbia and Azerbaijan, countries with similar population size and in the same geographic region. Belarus’ rank of 53 indeed compares favourably with these countries’ respective rankings of 78 and 76.



The data clearly shows that Belarus outperformed all other post-Soviet states. But should Belarus set the bar so low? Were Belarus to look to its democratic neighbours to the west, a very different picture would emerge.

In 1991, Belarus and Poland had equal life expectancies. Today Poles live five years longer on average. In 1991, GNI per capita in Belarus was \$2,000 less than in Poland. Today the income gap is nearly three times greater.

Ironically, Belarusians flock to shop in Poland because many goods and products (excluding [cigarettes](#) and [alcohol](#)) cost less across the border.

Belarus has beaten Poland only in the expected years of education – Belarusians entering school today will be studying a few months longer than Poles. Of course, the quality of their education may not be any higher than that in Poland, since Belarus does not participate in any international education quality assessments.

While Belarusian sausage may contain no [toilet paper](#), Belarus still has a long way to go in terms of improving the lives of its people. And yet, because of the weights used in the HDI calculation, a country with maximum GNI per capita and life expectancy would rank lower than Belarus if its population were uneducated.

Because of the mathematics behind HDI calculation, a country with the highest GNI per capita and the longest life expectancy in the world would get a maximum score of 0.666 – or much lower than Belarus's 0.786 HDI – if its population were uneducated.

A more lasting solution for Belarus is to improve public health, reform the economy, and not least, equip students with the skills they need to succeed in the workforce, rather than just a degree.