

Belarus Censuses: Population Declines, National Identity Strengthens

Official population censuses in Belarus conducted in 1989, 1999 and 2009 reveal a number of interesting trends.

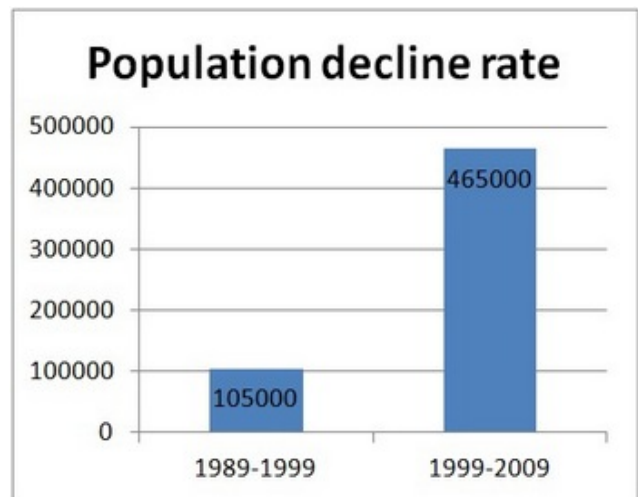
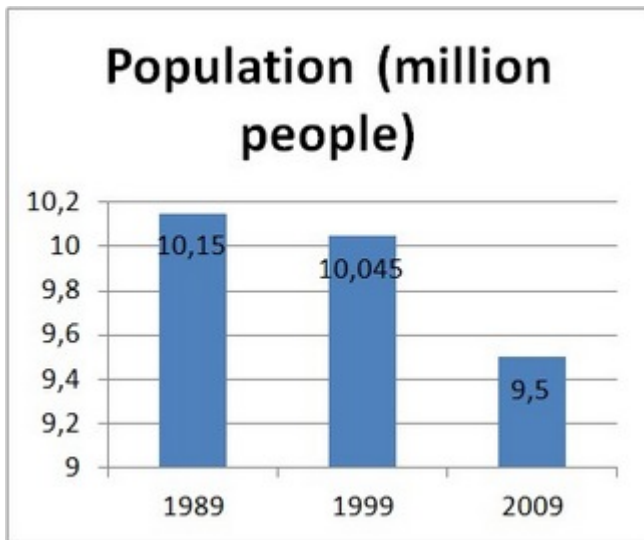
They show that the population is declining, the proportion of those who identify themselves as Belarusian is increasing and the role of the Belarusian language is weakening. The period of Lukashenka's rule has coincided with the sharpest decline of population since the collapse of the USSR.

The other important development is that the use of the Belarusian language has reduced dramatically, leading to the formation of a Russian-speaking Belarusian nation. It is remarkable that the largest share of Belarusian speakers is among those who identify themselves as Poles.

General Trend: Depopulation

Belarus, along with many other European countries, faces a problem of depopulation. The government seems to be aware of this, as they included statements on demographic security and policy in such important national documents as the Programmes of Social and Economic Development and Concept of National Security. However, the data from the censuses shows that the policies towards tackling demographic problems have been inconsistent and ineffective.

The total population decreased by 650,000 in 1989-2009. The main reason is natural ageing, observed in most European countries. Another major reason for depopulation is emigration – economic, and to a lesser extent, political.



While in the first decade (which was a stormy transitional period) the population decreased by 100,000, in the second decade, marked by consolidation of the authoritarian regime, the rate of population decline went up – to more than 500,000 between 1999 and 2009.

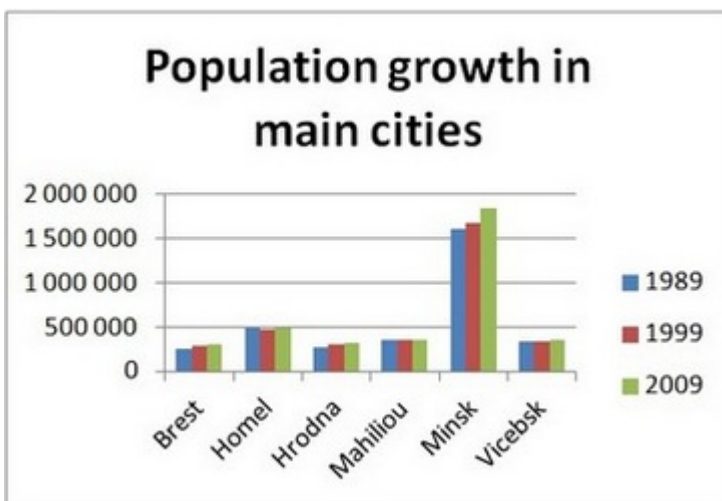
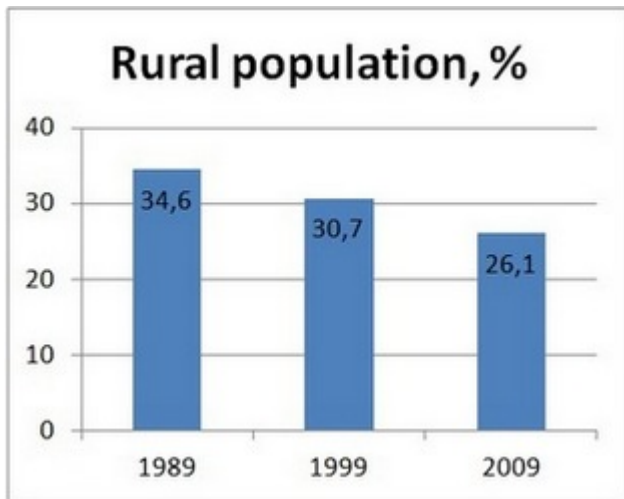
Of course, it would be wrong to assume that only changes in the political regime caused this. Rather, complex factors are involved. The obvious thing, however, is that the population of Belarus is still decreasing, indicating the failure of the demographic policy of Belarusian authorities.

Urbanisation: Soviet Legacy and Over-Centralization

The process of urbanisation continued throughout the period. The urban population reached 74 per cent in 2009.

Interestingly, the population of regional (voblasts) centres of Eastern Belarus increased only slightly or even decreased (as in Homel), while western cities, Hrodna and Brest, grew considerably (+ 50,000 each).

This is probably due to the fact that Eastern Belarus was incorporated into USSR twenty years earlier than its Western part. Hence, here Soviet industrialization, accompanied by urbanisation, was implemented earlier, while Western Belarus retained a considerable rural population.



Minsk, the capital, remains the most populated and fastest growing city of Belarus. As the main economic and educational centre, it attracts young people from all over the country. In terms of numbers, Minsk has grown by 230,000 in the last two decades. A fifth of the whole population lives there now.

Such over-concentration of resources in the capital along with regional decline poses serious problems, which any government regardless its political regime will have to face in future.

Migration: Low Immigration and Hidden Trends in Emigration

Unlike in western countries, in Belarus the decreasing native population is not replaced by an inflow of immigrants.

According to official statistics, only 39,000 immigrants came to Belarus in 2005-2009, which is not sufficient to balance the native population decline. Most of the immigrants to

Belarus originate from former soviet CIS countries (32,000) – predominantly from Russia, Ukraine, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan. The share of non-CIS citizens is insignificant and the biggest groups include Chinese, Lithuanians and Latvians.

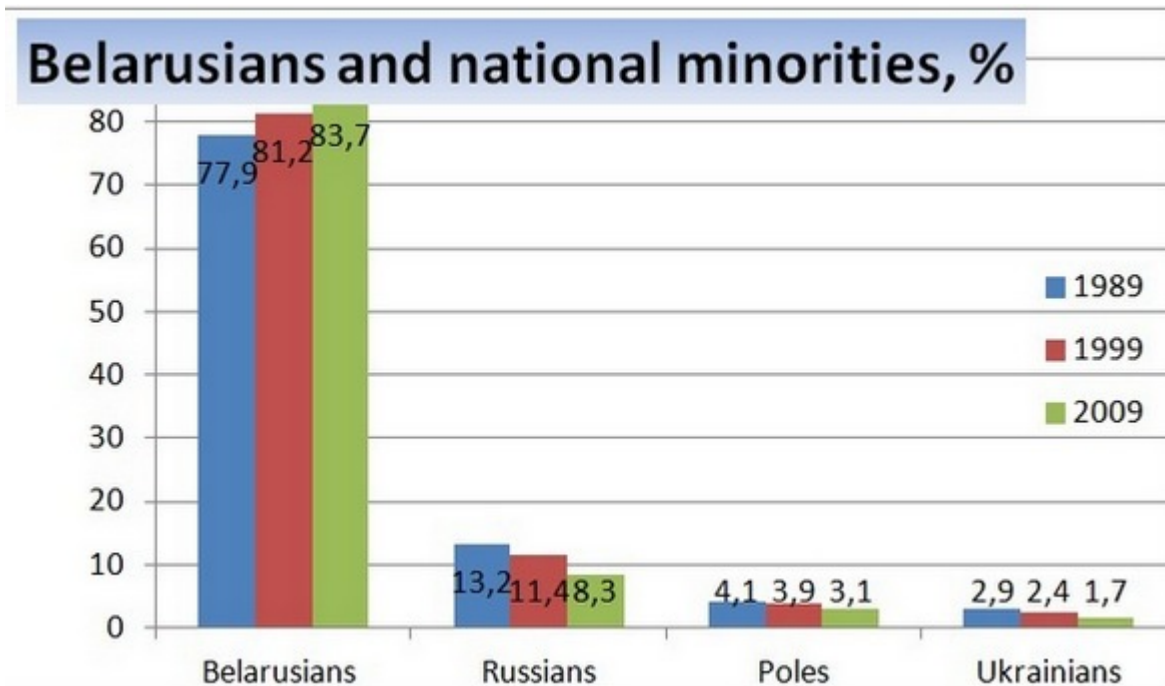
According to official data, in 2005-2009 around 30,000 Belarusians left their homeland, but independent experts often dispute this figure. The official methodology does not include some important categories of migrants, such as labour migrants to Russia. Today this is perhaps the biggest Belarusian migration group, data on which is not officially published.

Identity: Belarusianisation without Belarusian Language

Belarus remains a relatively monoethnic nation state.

Notably, the number of people who consider themselves Belarusians increased from 80 per cent to 84 per cent over the last twenty years. Among the national minorities the largest are Russians, Poles, and Ukrainians.

Traditionally, the Russian minority resides in the central and northern parts of Belarus and big cities, while the Polish minority makes up a considerable part of the western oblast of Hrodna, and Ukrainians settle more densely in the southern Brest and Homel regions near the Ukrainian border.

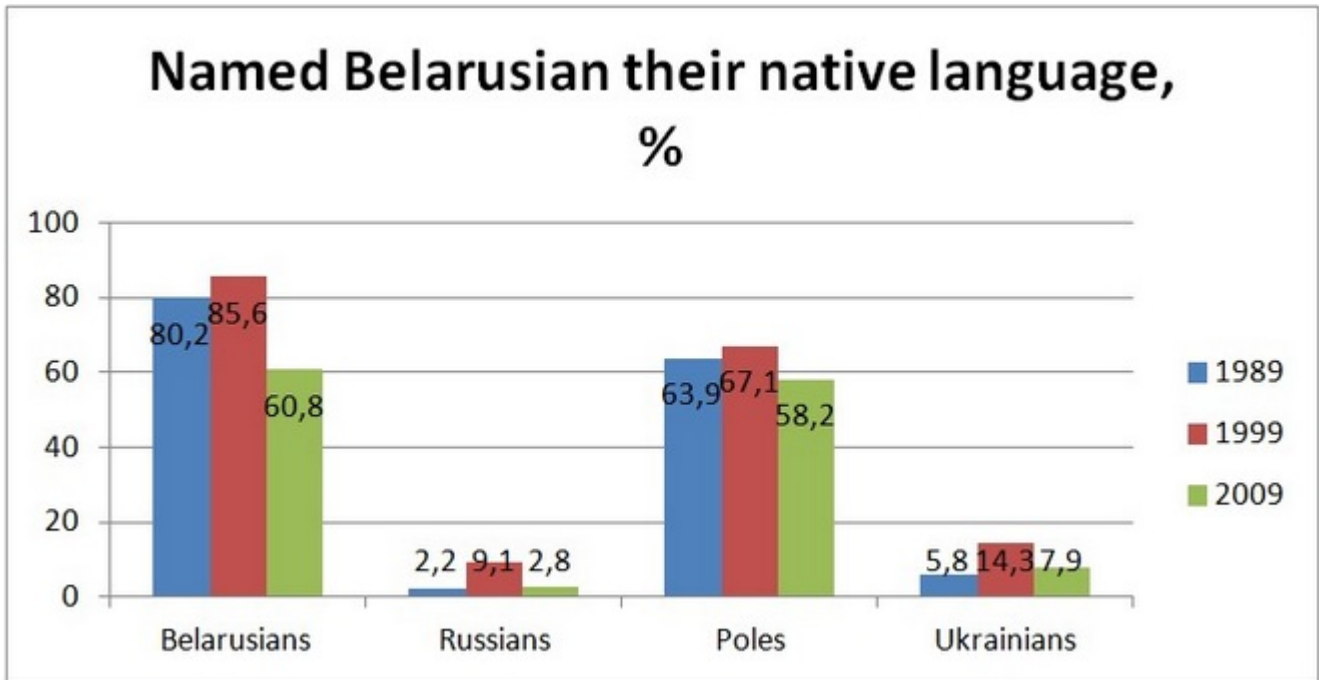


As the diagram shows, the size of each of minority group (especially Russians) has been decreasing since 1989. This trend apparently shows that minorities assimilate and change their identities along with the development of the Belarusian independent state. On the other hand, this may be a result of growing national consciousness among Belarusians, who identified with the other nation previously.

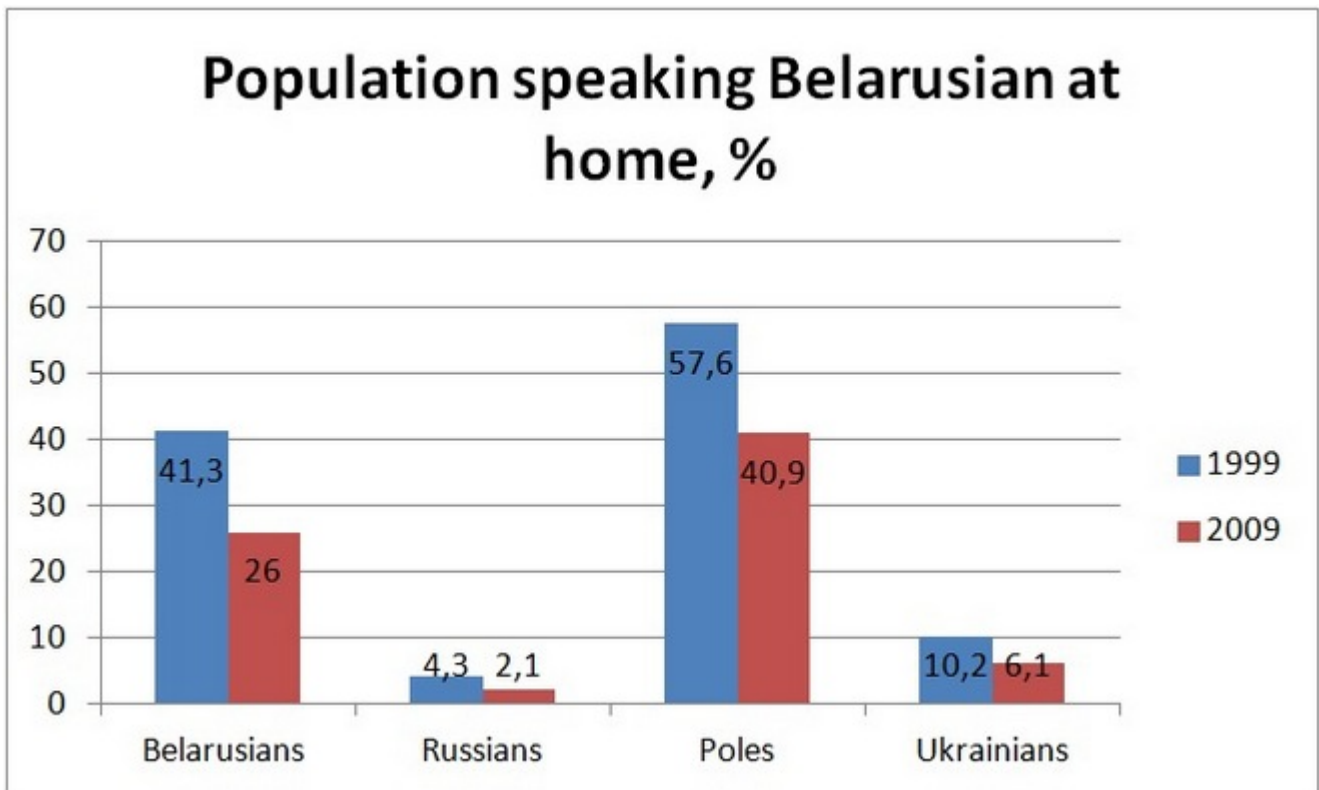
However, this growing national consciousness is not based on language and culture of the dominating ethnic group, as is usually the case with modern nation states.

Here, a rather different picture is observed: over the period, the significance of Belarusian language has declined. While in the 1990s, before the Lukashenka regime had set in, national Renaissance policy improved the position of the Belarusian language, stabilisation of the regime brought the decay of the Belarusian language.

Speaking this language was associated with opposition to Lukashenka's pro-Russian regime. As a result, its speakers were implicitly or explicitly excluded from politics and public space in general. This is clear from the diagram below.



The same concerns such indicators as use of Belarusian language at home, which shows the actual viability of the language. Here, the decline is even more dramatic:

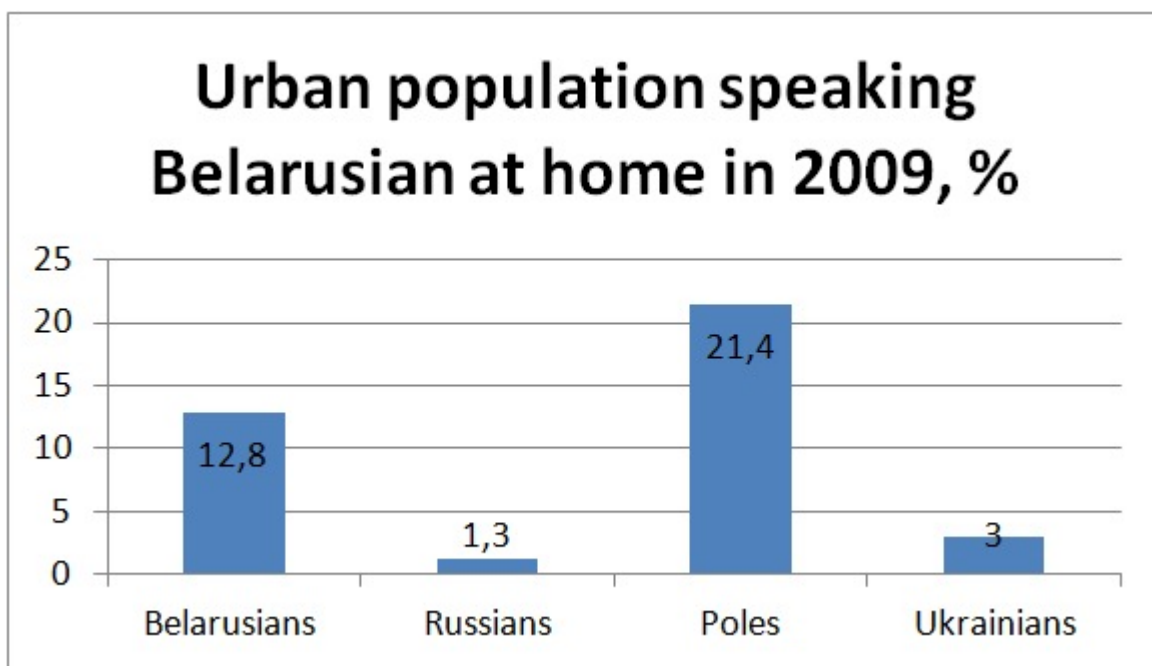


Belarusian Poles are an interesting phenomenon when it comes to the Belarusian language. They are the biggest national group in relation to the total number of a group who speak Belarusian at home. Out of 295,000 Poles, 120,000, or 40 per

cent, speak Belarusian at home, while the share of Belarusians speaking Belarusian at home reaches only 26 per cent.

The term “Pole” in Belarus has a rather confusing and ambiguous meaning, as many consider Belarusian Poles as Belarusians of Roman Catholic tradition, who historically were under a strong influence of Poland. This group, though referring to the Polish tradition, evidently is a community that strongly preserves the features of Belarusian culture.

In Minsk, the number of people who indicated Belarusian as their native language has decreased almost two-fold within the last decade (1999-2000). In general, only a little more than 10 per cent of the urban population of Belarus speaks Belarusian at home, and for the largest cities this number is much smaller.



Thus, Belarusian remains a language of the disappearing rural population, and its future in urban centres does not look optimistic. The language policy of Lukashenka led to the formation of a particular type of modern Belarusian identity, with urban Russian-speaking population considering itself an independent community.

Vadzim Smok