

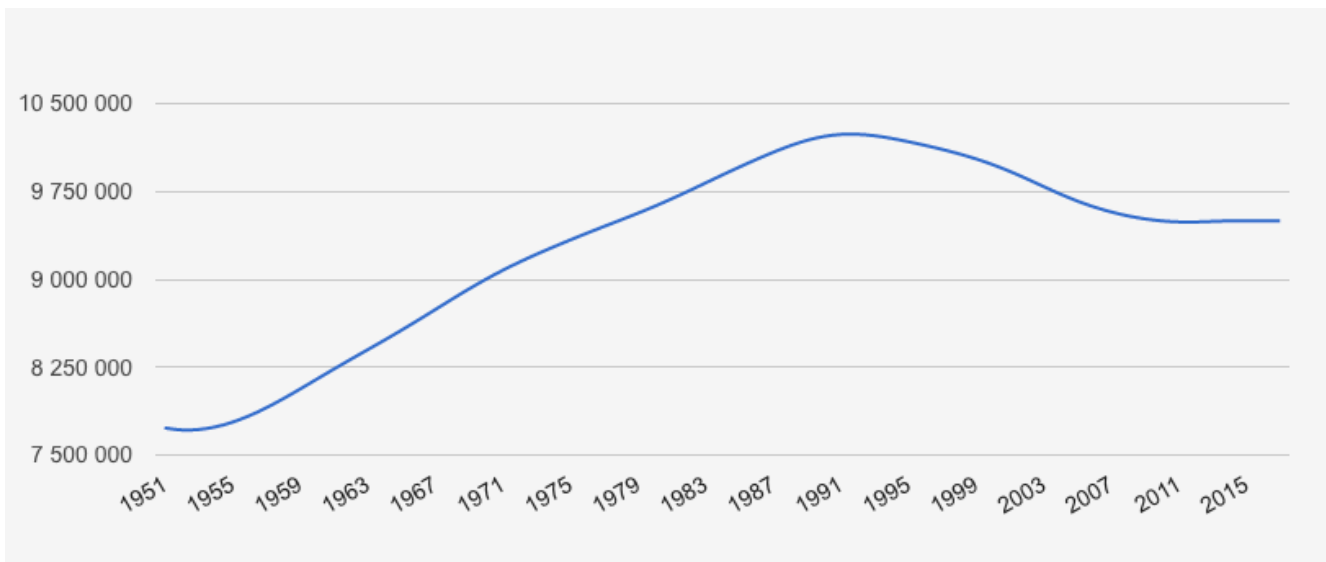
# Lukashenka wants to double Belarus population: will that work?

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: [countrysmeters.com](http://countrysmeters.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.

---

# In Search of Dignity: Childbirth and Childcare in Belarus

The Belarusian all-star Olympic biathlete Darya Domracheva will have a baby in October. The news came in April from the future child's father Ole Einar Bjoerdalen, also known as the "King of Biathlon", the most medalled Winter Olympic Norwegian.

Because Darya symbolises Belarusian pride and holds the title of "Belarusian Hero", some have insisted she must deliver in Belarus. While this particular international couple may pick and choose the country and hospital for their future childbirth, most Belarusians have few such options.

Belarus scores well in international indices of [gender equality](#) and maternal health. But this brings little consolation to individual women who have to deliver and raise children. In search of dignity during childbirth some go to neighbouring Lithuania, while others have launched local initiatives to advocate for transparency and a human touch during such pivotal moments in life.

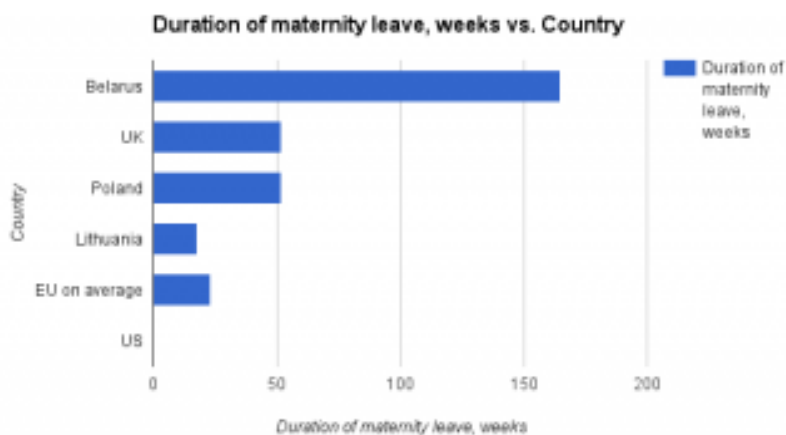
At [Mamonlineshop](#) you will find a lot of helpful information that will guide you in this journey of being a parent, topics like parenting tips, toys, accessories and much more.

# Impressive maternal health care and benefits record

2015 marked a modest victory for Belarusian demographic policy as cumulative fertility rate reached 1.7 children per woman. While it may not seem enough for the [rapidly ageing nation to reproduce itself](#), this constitutes a considerable increase from 1.4 in 2010. And it fares well compared to the neighbouring Baltic states, where the highest birth rate is 1.6, in Lithuania.

Most women in Belarus both in urban and rural areas choose to have more than one child. Just like their European counterparts, women are getting married later – now at an average age of 25.5 – and give birth to their first baby at 26. Belarusian women begin families a little earlier than Polish and Lithuanian women who on average have their first baby at 26.7.

In 2015 the annual Save the Children Mother's Index assessed the well-being of mothers and children in 179 countries and ranked Belarus 25th in their list. Belarus came right after the UK, scoring better than neighbouring Poland and Lithuania. The index considers such vital statistics as lifetime risk of maternal death and children's mortality rate among other things.



Compared to other countries, Belarus offers rather [generous maternity leave](#). It consists of 126 days of paid leave with 100 per cent retention of income, and a total of 165 weeks of possible time off work with an

allowance of \$115 per child and uncertain job security. Uncertain, because not many employers in a competitive business climate will hold a place for a woman for three years.

Generally speaking, generous maternity leave comes at the expense of benefits and compensation. The European champions in length of maternity leave, Poland and the UK, both offer 52 weeks to a woman, and compensate 87 per cent of her income and give a flat rate after the first 6 weeks. On the contrary, Lithuania offers only 18 weeks but at 100 per cent income compensation.

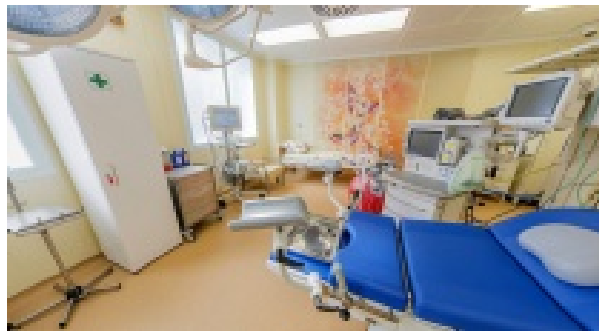
## Statistics versus reality

The quality of health care during pregnancy and anticipated childbirth experience feed into women's decisions about the number of children they will have. While the labour experience will almost always be painful for a woman, it does not have to be lonely and humiliating. Yet for many women in Belarus it feels exactly that way. Facilities that offer no privacy and allow no partners or relatives to be present, along with callous personnel, leave women traumatised and therefore unwilling to go through the ordeal again.

Since 2000 it has become more common to have a partner present



at childbirth in Belarus. According to [zautra.by](http://zautra.by), every tenth couple wishes to go through this experience together, although no official data is available. In order to make this happen, the couple has to take a special paid labour preparation class, but even then there is no guarantee that the father will be admitted. Doctors and medical personnel have the final say.



The decision on admitting a woman's partner to a childbirth depends on delivery room availability, the partner's medical record, and certainly the whim of doctors. Women get transferred to certain rooms during active labour, which they usually have to share with two or three other women. This means no male can enter the room.

Yet according to Belarusian news outlets this is about to change, at least for those who can afford it. The Ministry of Health announced in May that one Minsk hospitals will now offer two individual rooms to accommodate pregnant and labouring women with better comfort, but most importantly to allow family members, including a woman's partner, to be present during the labour. They also mentioned that [A good feeding chair](#) is also of prime importance after child birth.

## Childbirth with dignity

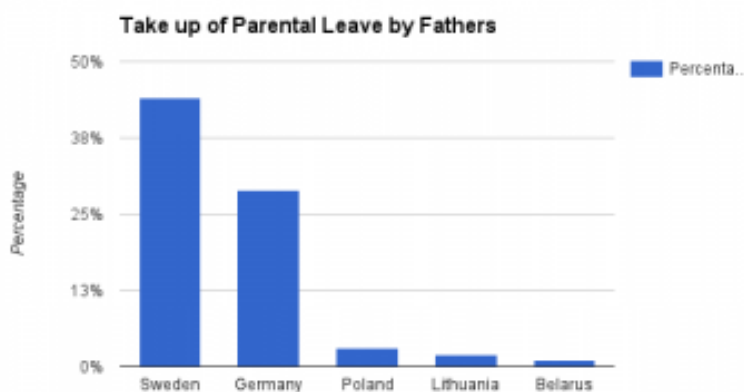
Giving birth in neighbouring Lithuania is becoming more popular among young well-to-do Belarusians who wish to go through this experience together. Located 180km (115 miles) from Minsk, the Lithuanian capital Vilnius may as well be in a different universe in terms of the childbirth experience. The average cost of natural labour is 800-1000 euro per family, and may increase to 1,300 in case of a Caesarian. The data suggest that 60 Belarusians babies were born in one major

Vilnius hospital in 2013, and 70 in 2014.

Belarusian families travel to Lithuania for three basic necessities: the importance of both parents being together for the labour, the ability to have the child stay in the same room as its mother, and friendly, well-wishing medical personnel. Daria Vashkevich and Siarhei Lisichonak, who had their first baby boy in February in Vilnius, tell their story:

*In Lithuania they have already changed their approach to childbirth and delivery and view it as something very natural for a healthy woman. We wanted to be treated as normal human beings going through an important physiological and psychological act in our family, and not as those in an emergency situation. You know, the basic approach to childbirth defines the rest: procedures, protocols, environment, hospitality, and etc.*

Going back to the most celebrated athletic couple – the Norwegian father in accordance with family law in Norway will have to take at least 10 weeks off to take care of the newborn. By contrast in Belarus less than 2 per cent of men take any such paternity leave. While they have the same rights as mothers to take leave, they seldom take advantage of it.



One of the obvious reasons for such decision-making lies in higher earnings. Because men tend [to earn 25 per cent more than women](#) in Belarus, it makes no economic sense to forgo a higher salary. While this rings true for most countries in the world, the Nordic countries, including Norway, made such leave

obligatory for men. Belarus is about to follow suit. On 12 May a representative of the Ministry of Labour announced that it will consider the possibility of introducing mandatory paternity leave. The availability of [nurseries](#) are also important.

It seems Belarus still lags behind at adopting forward-thinking family-oriented practices. It has succeeded in keeping up the high standards of pre-natal and post-natal health care developed during the Soviet era, but with it has not questioned old fashioned rules and rigid protocols. Maybe the time has now come to add to these high-quality services a much-needed human touch.