

# 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  $\geq 40$ ), 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).



Data: World Health Organisation (2015).

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.



Photo: Shutterstock

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.



Photo: Shutterstock

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.

---

## **Belarus's immigration policy: perpetuating a demographic crisis?**

On 8 November, Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenka met with the president of the International Committee of the Red Cross. Lukashenka mentioned that the number of Ukrainian refugees who arrived in Belarus since 2014 has reached

150,000.

Over the past 20 years, the population of Belarus has decreased by more than 600,000 people. At a security meeting on demographics in August, President Lukashenka set a target [to increase Belarus's population](#) to 15 million.

In the context of low birth and high death rates, the Belarusian population can only grow due to an increased number of immigrants. However, Belarus still has no clear policy to encourage labour migration. Moreover, bureaucratic procedures, such as work permits, remain difficult to obtain for the majority of foreigners apart from citizens of CIS member countries (Azerbaijan, Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Russia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Ukraine), especially Russians, which have special conditions for working in Belarus.

## **Labor migration: Ukrainian factor does not work anymore**

Lukashenka stated that more than 150,000 Ukrainians have come to Belarus since the beginning of the war in Eastern Ukraine. This figure significantly differs from Internal Affairs Ministry statistics, which report about 42,000 refugees from Ukraine in the period 2014–2017.

The war in Eastern Ukraine indeed contributed to a growth in labour migration in Belarus, but not all Ukrainians who moved to Belarus stayed for long.



Ukrainian labour migrants coming to Belarus. Source: uainfo.com

“The situation with work in Belarus itself is quite sad: Belarusians lose jobs [or] take pay cuts from a salary that is already very small,” writes Ukrainian website *Workland*, which helps Ukrainians to find jobs abroad.

*Workland* reports that in Belarus it remains easy to get agriculture-related work, but there is almost no chance of finding an office position. The best that a Ukrainian immigrant can expect in Belarus is €150–200 per month.

Therefore, current conditions in Belarus are unlikely to bring large numbers of labour immigrants from Ukraine to Belarus. Indeed, now that Ukrainians have received visa-free travel to EU countries, they are even less likely to come. In the past year, Belarus has experienced a reduction in the number of immigrants—21,038 comparing to 28,349 people in 2015. The number of tourist visitors from Ukraine has also decreased by half from 10,000 in 2015 to 5,000 in 2016. Go ahead and [check my site](#) to find more information about the best law firm near you.



# Receiving a work permit in Belarus

Every year thousands of foreigners arrive in Belarus in search of work. Most of them come from China, Ukraine, Russia, and Uzbekistan. In the first quarter of 2017, 4,369 labour migrants came to Belarus, according to official statistics. So far, the vast majority (almost 80 per cent) of immigrants in Belarus are employed as labourers. At the moment more than 20,000 foreigners have the right to work in Belarus.

Enticing highly skilled employees to Belarus remains difficult. Anastasia Babrova at the Institute of Economics of the Belarusian Academy of Sciences lists a number of constraints. In previous years, a law on labour migration limited employment possibilities for foreigners in Belarus. However, in 2010 the government liberalised the law, which simplified the employment of foreigners in Belarus. In 2016, authorities revised the law again, increasing bureaucratic involvement in the work permit process. However, go ahead and learn [more here](#) about the most important laws about immigration.

Rules for receiving work permits in Belarus vary depending on a person's country of origin and occupation. According to the law on external labour migration, foreigners willing to work in Belarus need to receive 'special permission' approved by an executive committee and the police. From 2014–2015, the number of rejections of 'special permissions' decreased by 21 per cent, reports *lastrada.by*, the Belarusian arm of an international anti-human trafficking network.



Russian-Belarusian border. Source: [bbc.com](http://bbc.com)

Receiving 'special permission' remains the most difficult step for foreigners. They need to possess five years of experience in the relevant field. Moreover, a Belarusian employer needs to pay at least \$1,500 salary to the highly qualified foreigner. "This appears as a high threshold, taking into account the fact that the average salary in Belarus barely reaches \$500," said Babrova in an interview with *Naviny.by*, a news website.

Russian citizens face the least paperwork when it comes to labour immigration to Belarus. They receive a right to work in Belarus by registering in the population register within 90 days after arrival. Moreover, a Belarusian employer pays a regular salary to Russian citizens comparing to \$1500 for other foreigners.

Belarus's Migration policy supports citizens of particular countries. Different rules apply to citizens of Russia, Armenia, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. Foreigners coming from these countries can work without special permission. The Eurasian Economic Union agreement (signed May 2014) created guidelines for granting CIS citizens the right to work in Belarus.

# How to improve migration?

Conditions surrounding labour immigration to Belarus vary significantly depending on the country of origin. CIS countries have many favourable conditions for employment in Belarus compared with foreigners from other countries. The law remains even more welcoming for Russian citizens, who just need to register as a resident when they arrive.

However, to provide a migration gain in circumstances of growing emigration, the Belarusian government needs to review the policy on foreign labour migration. It seems overly optimistic to assume that qualified labour immigrants will choose to move to Belarus without additional incentives.

The most necessary policy changes are the simplification of employment procedures for foreigners outside the CIS area and the lowering of the obligatory \$1500 salary for immigrants to a more equal level with Belarusian salaries.

Additionally, Ideaby.org, a media platform created by young professionals who promote smart large-scale reforms in Belarus, notes that Belarus lacks accommodation even for its own citizens. This suggests the building of new living areas would also be needed to improve conditions for immigrants.

Another incentive could be 'the Belarusian card,' which would encourage the return of Belarusians to Belarus who also have citizenship of other countries. So far, it seems that the authorities are trying to patch the demographic hole with labour migrants. However, Belarus has an immigration policy that favours a select few countries, instead of liberalising the law and opening its doors to a more inclusive group of foreigners.

---

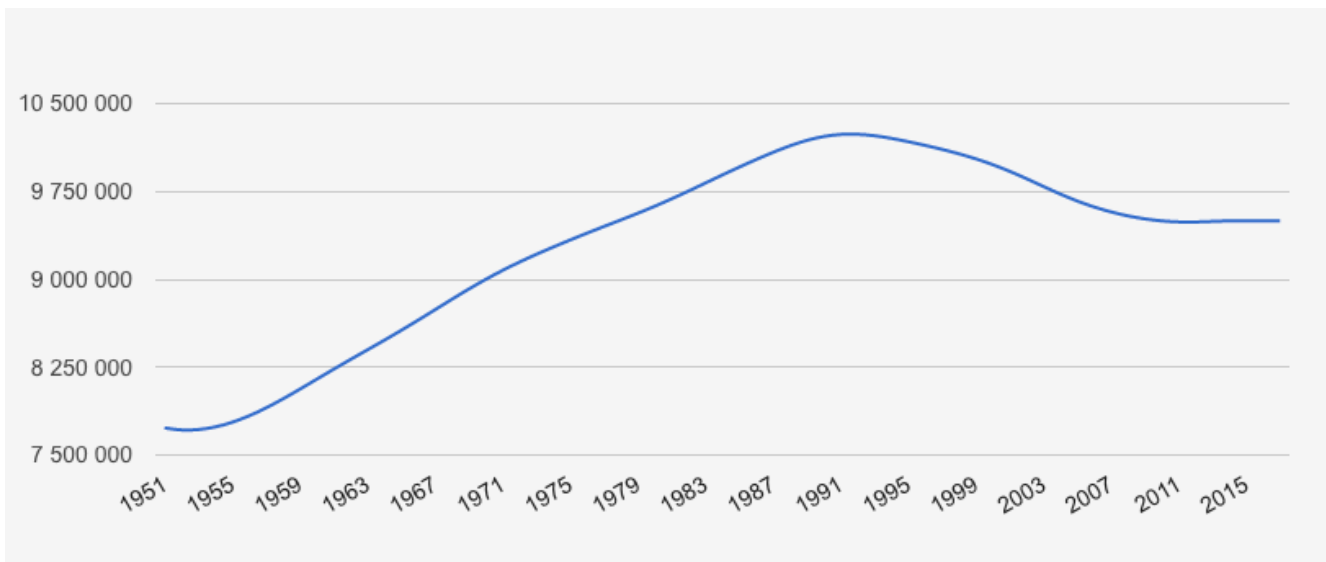
# Lukashenka wants to double Belarus population: will that work?

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.



---

# Belarusian Demographic Trends: Rapid Ageing and Depopulation

In 2014, the Belarusian authorities started preparations for a new demographic security program. The problems facing Belarus are not unique in Europe, but in many ways they look worse than in most EU countries.

Belarus continues to face a trend of depopulation, and with a birth rate of 1.6, there appears to be no chance for it to sustain its current level, much less grow. Demographic pressures will force the government to raise the age of retirement, at least for women, from 55 to 60.

In neighbouring Poland the authorities have already raised the retirement age up to 67 in attempt to deal with its own demographic issues.

The healthcare and social security systems remain under a tremendous amount of pressure, as the number of people of working age in society is steadily declining. Mortality and fertility rates are not solely responsible for this trend, as emigration also affects Belarus' demographic situation. Many Belarusians say that the country "lacks the necessary hands to work."

To improve the situation, the state should, on the one hand, liberalise the economy, and on the other increase benefits for child bearers. When working on a new program of demographic security, the authorities must rely on real statistics, as the official data does not reflect the

reality.

## **Belarusian Deteriorating Demography**

Last month [Mariana Shchotkina](#), the Minister of Labour and Social Protection, announced the launch of their new programme entitled Demographic Security of Belarus. The current programme ends in 2015. Its results were, overall, considered to be unsatisfactory, although Belarus has improved its position according to several indicators.

Since gaining its independence Belarus has lost about 750,000 people. According to official data, 2014 became the first year since 1994, when the nation's population saw an increase. However, this data is inadequate in assessing the nation's total population as Belarus' official statistics ignore the exact number of Belarusians who have [emigrated](#).

Both independent and pro-government analysts say that the Belarusian National Statistical Committee is not presenting an honest picture. For one, they have concluded that the migration balance for Belarus is negative, meaning more people are leaving than coming in. When considering the overall picture, it is clear that the official statistics are not accurately portraying the true demographic dynamics at play in Belarus.

To ensure level of population replacement reaches an equilibrium, it is necessary for every woman to give birth to 2.15 children. At present, it is around 1.6 per woman in Belarus. Two-thirds of families have only one child. Belarus remains a country of [broken marriages](#), as about half of all families split up and there is no reason to believe that this figure will change in the near future.

As it was 20 years ago, women in Belarus make up more than half of the population. According to official statistics, in early 2014 Belarus has 4,401 thousand men and 5,067 thousand

women. Many [Belarusian villages](#), where a predominantly elderly population lives, have only one man to a much numerous population of women co-inhabitants.

This is due to the well-documented fact that Belarusian men tend to die much younger than women. Male life expectancy in Belarus is about 67 years, while their female counterparts are living until they are approximately 77 years old. In neighbouring Poland these figures stand at 76 and 80 years respectively. According to the World Health Organisation, Belarusian males between 15-60 years of age are 3-4.5 more likely to die than males in the European Union.

### **Consequences of Demographic Failure**

Many countries are struggling, and unsuccessfully so, with depopulation and ageing, but Belarus is unique in its own way.

Despite the high mortality and low fertility rates, the authorities have not carried out any pension reform. Belarusian women are permitted to [retire at the age of 55](#) and men at 60. Many professions, such as the police, allow their employees to retire at 45. Further delays in pension reform will undoubtedly cost Belarus dearly in the future.

Without serious reform, the healthcare system will come under attack. Promoting a healthy lifestyle still appears to be an unpopular policy in the country, as Belarusians remain among the heaviest drinking and smoking nations in the world. The number of diseases will continue to be high, while Belarusian medicine remains largely in the hands of the state, which has less and less money for these services.

The system of social protection, without any reforms, will begin to buckle under the weight of a reduced number of people entering the workforce. Belarus remains a net emigration country, as there are more people leaving than coming. For this reason, this apparently permanent emigration trend will put additional pressure on the Belarusian budget as it

struggles to maintain its workforce population at a healthy level. This will force the government to raise taxes, which could also lead to another bout of emigration. The government's attempts to impose a [tax on the unemployed](#) show how serious the situation is in Belarus as it struggles to find an influx of working hands to bolster its labour force.□

The general concept of family values also appears to be rather foreign to Belarusians. Local organisations hardly take the time to deal with this problem, and churches do not have the opportunity to become engaged in this work. Last year, the government banned a march in defence of family values, even though the Orthodox and Catholic churches supported it. The state promotes family values □□only with its words, not with its actions. The Belarusian leadership is a case in point. In Belarus, nobody knows precisely where Lukashenka's wife lives, nor who gave birth to Lukashenka`s youngest.

### **Is There any Chance to Rectify the Situation?**

It seems rather unlikely that Belarus will be able to reverse the current trend of demographic decline, a process that has been unfolding over the past 20 years. Many people choose not to have children or to have only one for financial reasons, and the Belarusian government has no money to provide a high level of well-distributed social benefits for its citizens. An average Belarusian teacher earns about \$400 monthly, while a doctor brings in only \$ 600. With these kinds of salaries, many Belarusians are simply afraid to have a two or three child family.

According to a UN forecast, by 2025 the population of Belarus will drop down to 8.6 million people. The rate of economic growth will also continue to decrease. Without the necessary funds, carrying out reforms to deal with its demographic issues will be difficult, and waiting any longer will make them even more difficult to implement. These reforms must be pursued as soon as possible.

The Belarusian government must start priming its policy based on real data, not on the current National Statistical Office's information. The authorities have to liberalise the economy, which can help in an effort to have more people stay in Belarus and even convince some emigrants [to return](#). The state will be forced, at one point, to implement pension reform in order to avoid a full collapse in its the social security system. Raising the retirement age for women to mirror that of men can be a good start.

Dealing with the nation's low fertility rate remains one of the most difficult tasks at hand, as it is necessary to provide parents a large payout at the time of birth and for several years after a child is born. Also, the state must drastically revise its strategy in promoting family values. If the authorities accomplish these tasks, Belarus will have at least a shot at correcting the current demographic situation.

---

## Abortion in Belarus

Belarus remains one of the leaders among post-communist countries when it comes to the abortion rate. In 2012, nearly 27 thousand pregnancy terminations took place in Belarus.

Although the authorities restricted the abortion law in 2013, Belarus still remains more liberal than the majority of Western countries. The present shape of the abortion law in Belarus bears the legacy of Soviet times when ending a pregnancy was widely available and has been practised since 1920s.

Supporters of the liberal abortion law argue that poor socio-economic conditions should justify the decision to end a pregnancy. On the other hand, Catholic and Orthodox churches and Belarusian pro-life movements emphasize the Christian dimension of the abortion and call for respecting traditional values. Apart from the hot ideological discussion over abortion, Belarus today is struggling with demographic problems typical to all European societies and its need to rethink its present social policies.

### **Present Abortion Law in Belarus: Back to the Soviet Times**

According to the World Health Organisation, "Eastern European countries have the highest estimated abortion rates in the world". The experts, however, underline that a number of abortions there dropped dramatically between 1995 and 2004, probably due to

the increased use of contraception.

Year	2000	2009	2010	2011
Number of abortions	121,900	30,86	27,662	26,858
Source: Ministry of Health of Belarus				

Many think that abortion remains popular in Belarus because of insufficient knowledge about modern birth control methods. They often advocate education on family planning beginning early in a child's school years as one of the key issues to protect teenagers against unwanted pregnancy.

Others, with the Christian churches at the forefront, explain the wide use of abortion by the crisis of values in Belarus aftermath the Soviet times.

### **Serious changes that limit abortion**

The roots of today's high abortion rate go back probably to legislation created during Soviet times. Its authorities legalised abortion on demand back in the 1920s and since then it has been widely practised. Other communist countries took after Moscow and also opened the window for a rather wide use of abortion.

Soviet Belarus implemented its abortion law in 1950s and with minor changes to them, they have remained in force until recently. Before 2013, the law permitted abortion in different ten cases. For example, divorce during the time of a pregnancy or the imprisonment of a husband now are no longer give a woman a right to have an abortion.

Today the new law permits abortion only up until the 22nd week at the latest if pregnancy is a result of rape or a woman lost parental rights. Due to the social conditions, a woman can decide on abortion until 12th week. Latvia allows abortion on request only within the first twelve weeks of pregnancy. Lithuanian law also permits women to have an abortion until the twelfth week of pregnancy. In Ukraine, women can end pregnancy until the 12th week but in some cases also they are permitted to end a pregnancy up until the 22nd week. Both Ukraine and Lithuania are now considering placing further restrictions into their abortion laws. Poland has banned abortion in the 1990s. Now Poles cannot legally terminate pregnancy except in three situations: when the health or life of a woman is at stake, if there is a malformed fetus or when the pregnancy is a result of a criminal act.

### **A scale of abortion in Belarus**

Country	Percent of known pregnancies ending in legal abortions in 2010
Russia	39.9
Latvia	27.9
Ukraine	26.2
Belarus	23.6
Lithuania	16.4
Poland	0.16
Source: <a href="http://www.johnstonsarchive.net">www.johnstonsarchive.net</a>	

The Belarusian Ministry of Health reported that nearly 27 thousand abortions in 2011. When comparing 2010 and 2009 the number is steadily dropping.

The chart to the right presents the percentage of aborted pregnancies in 2010 in Belarus and neighbouring countries. However, many illegal incidents take place in so called “underground abortions”, particularly in countries with stricter laws. They remain under-reported and thus certainly decrease the overall numbers.

More and more Belarusian women, as in the Western Europe, consciously plan when to start the family. Certainly, each case is individual, but often they have one shared factor: economic circumstances. In the majority of cases, women wish to have children, but first they want to achieve financial stability.

### **Pro-life Movement in Belarus**

In November 2012 the Catholic and Orthodox churches have jointly appealed to the Belarusian authorities for restriction of the abortion law. The Christian churches agree that abortion goes too far in Belarus.

The Churches support the pro-life movement in Belarus. Apparently, their campaigning forced the authorities to seriously re-consider amendments to the abortion law. One initiative, called ‘Pro-life Belarus’, aims to promote values such as family and the protection of life. It is a social movement that acts in close cooperation with the Orthodox Church.

Another organisation, Open Hearts Foundation works in Mahiliou, mostly with the Catholic Church. Both engage themselves into organising lectures, seminars and supportive meetings. They offer also free counselling on maternity- and pregnancy- related issues for women throughout Belarus.

### **Abortion and the Demographic Reality**

A high abortion rate, together with a low birth and death rates all matter when it comes to demographic problems in Belarus. Like many other European countries, Belarus is also struggling with a decline in population. In the data revealed by the National Statistics Committee, the birth rate in 2013 reached a level of 11.9 per 1,000 population. On the contrary, a death rate is estimated at 14.2 per 1,000 population.

Not surprisingly, Belarusian authorities want to reverse this trend. On 17 June First Deputy of Presidential Administration, Aliaksandr Radzkou, called to make large families fashionable in Belarus. Alexandr Lukashenka also likes to talk about reversing the negative demographic trends in Belarus. But despite the talk and attempts to reverse the situation, Belarusians are getting married less and the number of [divorces](#) has increased over the last years.

A better way would be to implement a set of consistent policies encouraging both men and women to be able to “afford” having children. State benefits for families with children or support for housing might work in Belarus. However, increasing the [economic difficulties](#) taking hold in Belarus may make implementation of these plans more difficult.

Of course, changes in the abortion law will not resolve

Belarus's demographic problems. Belarusians should have more forums to discuss issues of abortion, contraception and family planning. For now, the Internet remains the only place to do so.