

The average Belarusian: who is he? Actually, it's she

On 25th January 2018, top Belarusian media outlet TUT.BY compiled a portrait of the average Belarusian citizen. The media outlet used a combination of recent data from the National Statistical Committee of Belarus, the World Health Organization, and the United Nations. Apparently, the average Belarusian citizen is a 42-and-a-half-year old woman with higher education. She speaks Russian, votes for Lukashenka, and consumes 64 kg of potatoes per year.

At the same time, the recent statistical data on the Belarusian population raises a number of concerns. Belarus comprises an ageing nation with astonishing gender imbalances. While Belarusian women face difficulties in finding a marriage partner, Belarusian men fervently consume alcohol. The diet of Belarusian citizens still lacks fruit and vegetables, and their salary ranks among the least competitive in the region. Permanent stress eventually take its toll in the form of heart disease.

Who is the average Belarusian woman?

She is 42-and-a-half years old, and her name is most probably Alena, Maryna, Natallia, Sviatlana, or Tatsiana. She lives in Minsk and possesses higher education. She works in services, education, or healthcare. By October 2017, the average Belarusian woman earned \$426. This represents the second lowest salary in the region; only Ukrainians earned less – \$274.

The average Belarusian woman speaks Russian on a daily basis.

She formally belongs to the [Russian Orthodox](#) Church and in the last Belarusian presidential elections, she voted for Alexander Lukashenka.

Her family life starts at 26, and her first child appears at roughly the same age. Her family budget is quite tight though – the largest share of it (39%) goes on food expenses. The National Statistical Committee of Belarus proudly confirmed that the average Belarusian citizen consumed 64 kg of potatoes, 65 kg of fruit, 88 kg of vegetables, 76 kg of meat, and 274 kg of dairy products in 2017.

Yet the consumption of fruit, vegetables and dairy products still fails to meet the WHO recommendations. In many ways, small salaries force Belarusian families to forsake more expensive imported fruit and vegetables. This appears particularly disturbing in the wake of health consequences of the [Chernobyl disaster](#).

Who is the average Belarusian man?

An average Belarusian man is 37 years old. His name is most probably Alexander, Andrey, Siarhei, Uladzimir, or Viktar. He also lives in Minsk and predominantly works in agriculture, construction, industry, or transport. Unlike his female colleagues, he does not necessarily possess a higher education diploma. As for his salary, the National Statistical Committee of Belarus has not recorded a pay gap between men and women. Hence an average Belarusian man receives the same \$426 per month – an insufficient amount to support a family.



Photo: BELTA

He also speaks Russian and formally belongs to the Russian Orthodox church. Together with his female colleagues, he voted for Alexander Lukashenka in the last presidential elections. As regards the family budget, he might save a few Belarusian rubles by buying the cheapest petrol in Europe, but his daily bills will most probably include alcohol.

According to the WHO (2017), the average Belarusian man consumes 16.4 litres of alcohol per year. This represents [the second highest alcohol consumption](#) in the world: only Lithuanians drink slightly more. Belarusian psychiatrists cite hidden aggression and permanent depression as the root causes for such tremendous alcoholic addiction among men. The economic instability in Belarus has a lot to do with it as well.

At the same time, excessive alcohol consumption represents a common trend among the European part of the former Soviet Union. Moldova, Russia, and Ukraine also topped the latest chart of alcohol consumption per capita. Hence, this data clearly reflects a decrease in regional economic prosperity.

The land of strong and lonely women

Ladies dominate the gender ratio with 53 % of Belarusians being women and 47 % men. The gender discrepancy between men and women reflects a common demographic trend among Belarus's neighbours; Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Russia, and Ukraine. Much of the gender imbalance stems from tragic historical circumstances. The Russian Revolution, the "Great Terror" of the 1930s, and World War II had a devastating effect on the male population of the Soviet Union.



Source: BBC

The gap in life expectancy between men and women represents another remarkable demographic trend. Belarusian women have a life expectancy at birth of 79 years, while Belarusian men can expect just 69 years. This can be partly attributed to the increase in early mortality among men after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. A sharp decline in financial prospects led to numerous psychological traumas, which prompted excessive alcohol and drug abuse.

A similar demographic trend prevails in the European part of the former Soviet Union. According to the WHO (2015), Belarus, along with Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, Russia, and Ukraine,

dominate the list of 10 countries with the largest life expectancy gap between men and women. War-torn Syria, post-genocide Rwanda, and post-war Vietnam also make the list. At the same time, both Belarusian men and women most frequently die from heart diseases. Economic instability and urban life, it would seem, take their toll on Belarusians of both genders.

To conclude, Belarusians represent an ageing yet educated nation with a range of demographic and health issues. The poor economic situation negatively affects the Belarusian diet and provokes depression and stress. This leads to excessive alcohol consumption and early mortality among men. Belarusian women face difficulties finding marriage partners and many die from heart diseases. These demographic trends largely prevail in the European part of the former Soviet Union, which endured a series of tragic historical circumstances in the 20th century.

Against all odds: raising a large family in Belarus

On 27 October 2016, the first Belarusian Nobel Prize winner Sviatlana Alexievič made a donation to the Ravenka family, a couple in Slonim with six children.

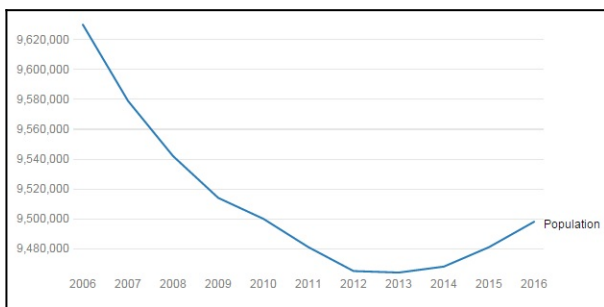
She deliberately made her act public, as discussions of this particular case in the media are telling of the many challenges faced by large families in Belarus.

Despite some state support, large families in Belarus struggle to survive financially. Many also suffer from stereotypes and prejudices: some view families with more than two children as

a burden on the social system or, even worse, as intentional parasites.

Moreover, economic insecurity, combined with the [poor housing situation](#), are significant obstacles for Belarusians considering having more children. These hurdles threaten to make large families extinct. Even though the birth rate has grown in recent years, experts anticipate a decrease in the Belarusian population in the future.

Grim demographic scenarios



By October 2016, the population of Belarus comprised 9,505,200 people. On 17 November 2016, the UNFPA Belarus, in cooperation with the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection, presented a study on possible demographic scenarios for the country.

Most of them predicted that the economy would continue to stagnate, keeping the birth rate low. According to the worst case scenario, the population of Belarus could fall by half a million people by 2030.

Among the major factors contributing to the negative trends, experts identified depopulation, rapid ageing, low birth rates (which do not guarantee population replacement rates), and uneven distribution of the population throughout the country. For instance, over the past 17 years, the Belarusian regions have lost about 10 per cent of their population. Currently, roughly 20 per cent of the population [resides in Minsk](#); this

is slightly more than 1,900,000 people, not taking into account those who stay in the capital temporarily.

On top of these negative demographic trends, the 21st century is transforming social perceptions of the family structure. People no longer prioritise having children. The recent increase in birth rates is likely a short term phenomenon, as the state will not be capable of supporting such trends financially.

Experts agree that in the long term, negative demographic trends could increase pressure on the social system and contribute to GDP decline. Thus, Belarus still needs to develop an effective approach towards sustaining its birth rate.

Benefits and incentives vs. harsh realities

Belarus has been actively promoting the image of a large family since the early 2000s. A family qualifies for the status of 'large family' if it has three or more children. Currently, there are over 62,000 such families. The state offers them a number of benefits and financial incentives. In 2015, it introduced a [family capital programme](#), offering a one-time allowance of \$10,000 to families who decide to have or adopt a third child.

Other benefits for large families include tax incentives and special low interest mortgage loans. The state also compensates mortgage loan payments, depending on the number of children in the family. For instance, if a family has four and more under-age children, the state covers 100 per cent of their loan payments.

Currently, more than 4,800 large families live in Minsk. If

they decide to build their own house, they qualify for priority in distribution of land plots within city limits. However, in response to recent hotline questions, Head of the Minsk Executive Committee [Andrej Šorac](#) stated that individual construction would not be possible for large families in Minsk anymore.

He justified this by pointing to the lack of available plots. Ironically, only a month ago, the Minsk municipality did not have this land allocation problem when deputy prime minister [Natalia Kačanava](#) decided to build a house in the elite suburb of Drazdy.

Lukashenka has stated that Belarus needs at least 25–30 million people to secure full economic independence

Lukashenka, the president of Belarus, has stated on many occasions that Belarus needs at least 25–30 million people to secure full economic independence. However, large families are not likely to become common in Belarus. Fighting social rejection and bureaucratic hypocrisy is only part of the problem.

Political analyst [Valer Karbalevič](#) pointed out that birth rates are falling all over Europe, and Belarus is victim to the same trends. Moreover, he pointed out that Belarus in particular faces a number of challenges in connecting with specific social factors. These include an uncertain economic situation, unemployment, small salaries, poor housing, and migration. In the long run, these factors can only exacerbate the demographic decline in Belarus.

Callous society and a

scrutinising state

Much like the Ravenka family from Slonim, which struggled to find money to make their initial mortgage payment, families with kids often face financial difficulties. On 16 November 2016, one of the leading official newspapers, *Belarus Segodnia*, told the story of Aliaksandr Pastolau, a father of four. After losing his job in Minsk, he decided to downshift and moved to a village in the Dokšytsy district (Viciebsk province).

In August 2016, Pastolau found a house to rent and started planning to launch a small family-run farm. However, not more than a month later, social services and the local school authorities started to frequent the house. They claimed that Pastolau's children were not receiving adequate care and attention. Threats of termination of parental rights forced the family to return to Minsk.

state institutions treat large families with a heavy dose of legalism and scrutiny

In the Pastolau's case, safety concerns regarding heating in the house prompted local authorities to choose an overbearing manner of communication with the newcomers. Eventually, this provoked a conflict. This incident illustrates how state institutions treat large families with a heavy dose of legalism and scrutiny. Often, they use the well-being of the children as a justification to interfere in family matters.

Moreover, ordinary Belarusians can be suspicious of large families. Having more than two children may lead to questions about whether the family is deliberately seeking social benefits from the state or is overly religious. Even the ideal large family of famous Belarusian actor Pavel Harlančuk, who raised five children, gave rise to such commentary from the public.

Having a large family needs to become a more attractive option for wider sections of the population. Ideally, Belarus needs to develop more affordable housing programmes, expand the childcare system, and ensure that families do not feel economically insecure.

Last but not least, the state should also pay attention to the change of attitudes to large families in society. Sweden, for instance, is a good model. It has promoted baby-friendly public spaces and improved the reintegration of new mothers into social life.

Losses from Sanctions War, Liability for Extremism, Geely Cars – State Press Digest

The Belarusian authorities are trying to debunk Russian accusations that it is making increasingly nationalist policies. The authorities are tightening legislation on extremism by introducing criminal liability for extremism and fighting in foreign conflicts.

The president has ordered all officials to drive only Belarusian-Chinese Geely cars. The state newspaper blames business associations for weak legitimacy and a lack of support within business circles. All of this and more in this edition of State Press Digest.

Foreign policy

[Belarus has lost \\$1bn as a result of Russia's sanctions war with the West.](#) *Zviazda* newspaper published the words of Belarusian foreign minister [Uladzimir Makiej](#), who spoke in Moscow at a press conference dedicated to Belarus-Russia relations. According to the minister, Belarus-Russia relations are seeing a growing number of myths and distorted interpretations.

Some groups have accused Belarus of increasingly nationalistic and anti-Russian behaviour, but this sounds like “blasphemy in relation to our shared history and the Belarusian people, because we have always seen Russia as our closest friend.” Makiej also attempted to debunk the view that Belarus benefited from the Russia-West food embargo. He said that Belarus actually lost around \$1bn from these sanctions.

Security

[The authorities are introducing criminal liability for extremism and participation in foreign conflicts.](#) *Belarus Segodnia* reports that parliament has approved amendments to the criminal code which introduce criminal liability for extremism and participation in armed conflicts abroad. Counter-extremist legislation in Belarus has become outdated and the Criminal Code does not currently provide liability for extremism, KGB head [Valier Vakuľčyk](#) said at the parliamentary session. Interestingly, the law will also consider production, storage and sale of Molotov cocktails as extremist activity.



The newspaper opines that Belarusian nationals fighting abroad not only damage the image of the country, but can cause its involvement in the conflict.

Besides, professionally trained fighters sooner or later return home and can use their skills in the interests of certain groups and organisations. Currently the Criminal Code provides liability only for mercenaries – individuals who fight solely for financial reasons. Now the amendments make it possible to try persons who fight for ideas, not just money.

[Belarus will seek responses to growing NATO presence near its border.](#) *Narodnaja Hazieta* interviewed expert [Aliaksandr Špakoŭski](#) on Belarus-NATO relations. Military industry groups, primarily from the US, are artificially creating the idea of an aggressive Russia in the information space, which threatens the security of NATO members. In this way the US is forcing NATO allies to increase defence spending while being the leader of arms manufacturing and export.

Since Belarus has a military alliance with Russia, it will be engaged in this confrontation and seek responses to the strengthening of NATO capacities near the Belarusian border. There is no direct risk of a conflict as neither Russia nor the West want a war, but the growth in the mood of conflict on both sides also poses a threat to Belarus' security. Therefore the country should remain alert and have an effective, mobile army.

Economy

[Belarusian officials are obliged to drive only Belarusian-Chinese Geely cars.](#) *Vitebskie Vesti* highlights President Alexander Lukashenka's visit to the Minsk Automobile Plant (MAZ) – the Belarusian machine building giant. He noted that the plant will receive loans from the government only if it demonstrates the ability to sell products to concrete markets.

“I can not once again invest hundreds of millions dollars in products that you will dump in warehouses ...MAZ, BelAZ and Motovelo are the face of our country, and we have no right to ruin these enterprises. MAZ will live forever, during my rule and after it”, Lukashenka stated.

The Belarusian leader also ordered all officials, from district heads to ministers, to use only the Geely cars produced at the Belarus-Chinese joint plant BelGee. “Except for the prime minister, his deputies and some high officials no one should use foreign cars during their work”, Lukashenka said.

[The first private hydroelectric power station in Belarus will be built in Hrodna region.](#) *Hrodzienskaja Prauda* writes about the first private hydroelectric power station in Belarus, that will appear in Slonim district of Hrodna region on the Issa river. The projects is worth \$450,000 and the investor plans to build the station by 2017.

It will produce 240 kilowatt-hour of energy annually. The company will sell the energy to the country's general electrical network according to a quota defined by the Ministry of Energy. Currently Hrodna region has the largest hydroelectric power station in Belarus with a capacity of 17 megawatts.

Society

Belarusian business associations have weak legitimacy.

Respublika newspaper claims that business associations in Belarus have failed to become mass organisations and unite less than 10 per cent of Belarusian businessmen. Besides, leaders of business associations, instead of promoting business interests of the whole sector, seek connections in the government or lobby their commercial interests.



The newspaper gives the example of an association of entrepreneurs called *Perspektyva* and its head [Anatol Šumčanka](#), who became one of the leaders of recent protests of small business owners.

The newspaper was unable to identify how many members there are in *Perspektyva*, and noted that the petitions of the organisation usually gather only a few hundred signatures. It concluded that *Perspektyva* lacks the support of business and therefore cannot represent it in negotiations with the authorities or formulate policy proposals.

In 2015 the birth rate in Belarus grew as a result of demographic security policies.

Reproductive health services in Belarus reached the level of France, Finland and Luxembourg, said deputy prime-minister [Natalia Kačanava](#) in an interview with *Belarus Segodnia*. Belarus is in the top 50 countries in

terms of the quality of pregnancy and birth care and is in 26th position for maternity comfort.

Moreover, Belarus occupies 4th place for low infant and maternal death rate. The number of families with many children is also growing and has now reached 80,000. At the same time, Belarus has 21,000 orphans, 80 per cent of whom have living parents who have been deprived of parental rights.

The State Press Digest is based on review of state-controlled publications in Belarus. Freedom of the press in Belarus remains restricted and state media convey primarily the point of view of the Belarusian authorities. This review attempts to give the English-speaking audience a better understanding of how Belarusian state media shape public opinion in the country.

Poland Lures “the Best Migrants in the World” from Belarus

On 28 January the Polish Union of Entrepreneurs and Employers proposed granting residence permits to a million migrants currently in Poland. The majority of them are Ukrainians, followed by Belarusians and Vietnamese.

In recent years Poland has been aiming its immigration policy at absorbing a young labour force from the regions of former Polish rule, and has created unique preferences for foreign citizens in the form of the Card of the Pole. The card gives its holder the right to work and study in Poland, and later to obtain Polish citizenship.

Many Belarusians see it as an opportunity to work and study in Poland with the prospect of getting EU citizenship in the conditions of the ongoing economic crisis. The authorities of

Belarus definitely dislike the initiative, but have proved unable to counter it so far.

Poland attracts migrants

On 28 January the Polish Union of Entrepreneurs and Employers in a publication estimated that due to the demographic crisis, by 2050 Poland will need to accept between 2m and 5m migrants to retain current economic growth rates. Currently, around one million people, mainly from Ukraine and Belarus, are employed in the Polish economy. Thanks to them the Polish budget receives an extra €1.5-2bn annually.

In an interview with Gazeta Prawna, union head Cezary Kaźmierczak said that migrants from these countries are “the best in the world”. They do not take away jobs from Poles and cost nothing for taxpayers. He contrasted them to migrants from the Near East and Africa, who in most cases do not work and live on social benefits. As discontent with current EU migration policy grows in Poland, Belarusians and Ukrainians are increasing their chances of becoming resident in Poland.

The Card of the Pole

In 2008 Poland introduced a Law on the Card of the Pole, which targeted the population of lands formerly ruled by Poland in Belarus, Ukraine and the Baltics. The card gives its owner the right to get a long-term free Polish visa, legally work, do business and study in Poland on an equal footing with Polish citizens, as well as offering some other benefits.



To get a card, one needs to demonstrate documented proof of ancestors living in Poland in 1921-1939. Poland at that time included the current western Belarusian territories. Alternatively, one must make a considerable

contribution to Polish culture to receive the card. These criteria makes a few hundred thousand Belarusians potentially eligible for the card.

In 2013 the Polish authorities announced that they had granted the Card of the Pole to 42,000 Belarusians. The current number of card owners in Belarus remains unknown, as Polish officials are reluctant to reveal the latest figures. According to Eurostat, around 70,000 Belarusians have received national long-term visas, which gives an approximate indication of the number of Pole card holders in Belarus.

In November 2015 a special commission of the Polish parliament recommended an amendment to the Law on the Card of the Pole, which would allow its owner to get Polish (and EU) citizenship after living in Poland for only one year. Moreover, the card owners would receive a grant of around €5,400 per family member to cover their adaptation costs, as well as professional and language training.

Initially Poland declared the Card of the Pole a symbolic step to support its nationals abroad, but it has obviously become a purely pragmatic policy – an instrument to absorb the young workforce from neighbouring countries, which cannot go unnoticed by the Belarusian government

Authorities see Card of the Pole as a threat

In 2012 the Constitutional Court of Belarus announced that the Law on the Card of the Pole contradicts international law and violates a number of bilateral agreements. The government also made amendments to the law on the civil service which forbids officials from having a Pole card and similar documents from other states.

[Andrei Jelisiejeŭ](#), migration expert from Belarus, told Belarus Digest that few countries would tolerate the fact that a considerable number of their citizens, including officials, declare themselves loyal to another state. He recalled the reaction of Lithuanian officials to the Card of the Pole law in 2009, when Lithuanian MPs tried to restrict card holders' right to run in parliamentary elections.

The negative reaction of the Belarusian authorities is justified. The Card of the Pole will cause a drain on the Belarusian labour force and strengthen the influence of Poland, a NATO member and ardent critic of Lukashenka, on the Belarusian population.

However, the authorities unwisely stimulate the rush for a Card of the Pole by protracting visa liberalisation with the EU and blocking small [local border traffic](#) with Poland. Many Belarusians would be satisfied just with free Schengen visas [to shop](#) in nearby Poland and Lithuania. With the Card of the Pole they receive a more alluring opportunity to get EU citizenship.

Belarusians are heading west

The economic situation in Belarus [has been worsening](#) for the last two years, and the coming years do not look bright either. Russia, which traditionally served as a [migration hub](#) for many Belarusians, is also declining and in addition getting increasingly aggressive and xenophobic. These developments push Belarusians to look west, to countries with more stable economies and effective rule of law.



Most Belarusians wish to get a Card of the Pole not because of sentimental attachment to Polish culture or pride in their ancestors. They want concrete material benefits – getting free visas with the prospect of receiving a residence permit and later citizenship of the EU, and the ability to work and study on equal terms with Polish citizens in a country with a three times higher average salary. Those who are not ready to move abroad wish at least to get the possibility of shopping and travelling.

Ihar from Minsk, 30, has recently become a happy owner of a Card of the Pole. He told Belarus Digest that among his friends around 10 people already have cards, and it has become increasingly popular among young people. For example, a section of the largest Belarusian Internet forum Onliner dedicated to discussion of ways of getting a Card of the Pole has 3,000 pages – one of the most popular topics on the forum.

Andrej Jelisiejeŭ thinks that the current economic crisis will

definitely cause an outflow of Belarusians towards the west. Those not eligible for a Card of the Pole will use other opportunities, like seasonal works in Poland.

If the Belarusian authorities want to stop the brain drain, they should in the first place enforce local border traffic and make efforts to liberalise or completely remove the visa regime with the EU. In a longer term perspective, the government should think of introducing a similar policy to attract ethnic Belarusians from abroad and provide them with special preferences.