

Belarus Learns to Absorb Tens of Thousands Ukrainians

On 15 January 2016, the Belarusian president Alexander Lukashenka commented on the refugee crisis in the EU, noting that the latter is “drowning in the streams of migrants, accompanied with terror and criminality.”

The numbers of the asylum seekers from the Middle East in Belarus remains rather modest, as Belarus is difficult to reach and is not a particularly wealthy country. On the other hand, Belarus remains an attractive option for Ukrainians, who can easily integrate into the Belarusian society. As a result, Belarus was able to boast a controlled and regulated migration process.

Belarusian legislation tries to keep up with adapting to the possible new challenges, unifying procedures and regulations for handling refugees and migrants. However, recent statements by the Belarusian officials also indicate that rising security concerns might dominate the refugee politics agenda in 2016.

Growing Ukrainian minority in Belarus

With the highest numbers of [Ukrainian migrants per capita in 2015](#), Belarus had to adapt to the new migration trends in the region. Ukrainian citizens from the Donetsk and Luhansk regions enjoyed preferential treatment from the Belarusian state. Simplified procedures for temporary and permanent residence applications helped to expedite formalities for migrants from eastern Ukraine.

The overall number of Ukrainians who came to Belarus since the

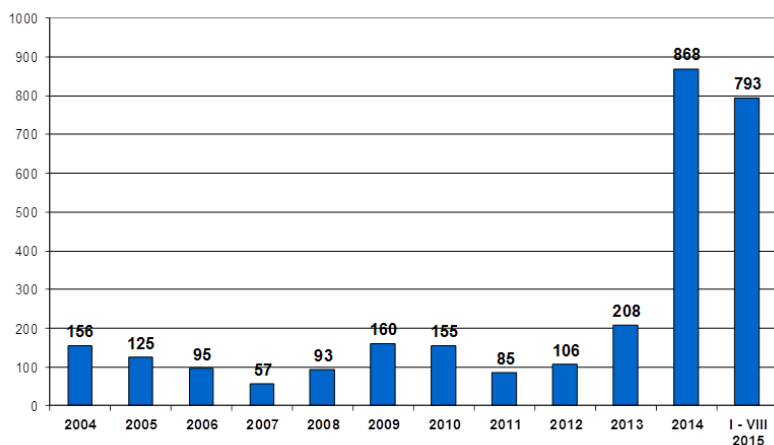
start of the conflict in south-eastern Ukraine lies at around 150,000 persons. This figure includes refugees, economic migrants, and people with family ties in Belarus, who potentially could soon apply for citizenship. This category of migrants demonstrates high degrees of adaptability and integration due to cultural and linguistic closeness.

As of December 2015, 46,000 Ukrainians have already secured permanent resident status in Belarus. Overall, by the end of 2015, 180,000 foreign nationals (making up less than 2% of the total population of the country) held Belarusian permanent residence status.

Refugee quotas and exemplary Syrians

Nearly 1,200 persons applied for refugee or complementary protection status in Belarus in 2015. Ukrainians accounted for the majority of the refugee status applicants (75%), while the number of applications submitted by the Syrian citizens remained below 10%.

According to the Belarusian Ministry of the Interior, the country saw a sharp rise in the number of refugee applicants in 2014 and 2015, even though it is not the preferred destination for displaced people seeking better life. Ukrainian migrants tend to choose the path of becoming temporary or permanent residents, rather than applying for asylum.



While Belarusian authorities continue to prioritise Ukrainian migration, they do not exclude the possibility of the growing number of refugees of other nationalities. Yet according to BelTA, only 20 Syrians received refugee status in Belarus between 2013 – 2015. By September 2015 this number grew, and about 40 Syrians held complementary protection status in Belarus.

The UNHCR Representative in Belarus, Jean-Yves Bouchardy, does not expect millions of Syrians coming to Belarus. He suggests that numbers will continue to grow steadily, yet within the current Belarusian trends.

In 2016 the authorities plan to grant refugee status in Belarus to 1,200 persons, to be settled across various regions of the country. “Our competent organs check every person, who is admitted to Belarus. Families are our priority,” said the Belarusian president.

For instance, the Ministry of the Interior and the UN sponsored three Syrian families' arrival and accommodation in Belarus. Reports in the media tend to focus on a few Syrians, currently residing in Belarus. On the one hand, they target to create a positive and competent image of the state policies, while on the other hand, they also emphasise expected integration of the newcomers.

“Regulating negative moments”

Similarly to the European societies, Belarus has the problem of an [ageing population](#). Belarusian president admitted that migration appears to be the natural solution of the demographic issues. At the same time, he also noted that sudden unregulated influx of migrants can potentially result in growing security risks and discontent among the local population. “We are not about to start playing democratic games in these issues,” the president stated resolutely.

Recent migration-related tensions in Germany made Belarusian authorities acutely aware of the dangers of the insufficient control over who is allowed into the country. “We should take into account experiences and issues, which the EU states face currently,” noted deputy Interior Minister Mikalaj Mielčanka.



In terms of security concerns Mielčanka warned about the possible liabilities in the unguarded large section of the state border to Russia. However, according to the Belarusian Department of Citizenship and Migration, annual numbers of illegal migrants detained in Belarus keep steady between 500 and 1,000 persons.

Changing legislation to accommodate refugees

The Belarusian Parliament recently discussed several amendments to the law on forced migration to facilitate the process of applying for refugee status, asylum, and complementary protection. Designed to decrease the application

processing times from 18 to 6 months, new regulations aim to limit the time that foreign nationals spend in Belarus and make use of its social system, while awaiting the decision on their cases.

Further, amendments foresee situations of the mass arrival of refugees to Belarus, incorporating the European experiences. They specify which state institutions are in charge of compulsory fingerprint registration, medical exams, and identification of the persons.

In all likelihood, global security concerns will define and dominate the refugee agenda in Belarus in 2016. Internally, recent amendments of the legislation assure Belarusians that the authorities have possible increases of the migration streams under control.

On the other hand, strict refugee quotas, the existing visa regime, and its geographical location, placing Belarus on the periphery of the main routes to the more prosperous EU, suggest that it should not fear mass arrivals of asylum-seekers.

Migrants from Eastern Ukraine Put Pressure on Belarus

Belarus has never had anything resembling the number of migrants it has recently experienced. Over the past 12 months the Belarusian population, thanks to the 100,000 refugees from the Donbas, has increased by 1%. Indeed, Belarus has more Ukrainian migrants per capita than any other country.

Belarus is not a particularly attractive destination for migrants, since it does not offer much in the way of social benefits or employment opportunities. For a long time Afghans, who came to Belarus in the 1980s and 1990s, accounted for 70% of all the country's refugees.

These days, the picture is rapidly changing. The number of Syrian refugees remains minimal but the sheer volume of people migrating from the Donbas has put serious pressure on Belarus' economy and has even contributed to the growing crime rate.

Belarus Meets the Middle East

Belarus has never been particularly attractive to immigrants for a number of reasons. The public authorities are under no obligation to provide refugees with housing, a means of subsistence, or even language courses. Refugees can apply for additional support (which the state has the right to deny them) like food, clothing, travel and accommodations, but this assistance has a \$200 ceiling. Therefore, migrants usually use Belarus as a jumping off point [en route to the European Union](#).

Refugees in Belarus		
State	Recognised refugees	Received subsidiary protection
Afghanistan	627	2
Ukraine	0	676
Georgia	136	0
Syria	20	90
Tajikistan	32	0
Azerbaijan	30	0
Ethiopia	23	0
Iran	12	1
Palestine	10	0
Iraq	3	7
Other countries	47	17
Total	910	793

Refugees usually come to Belarus from the Middle East and former Soviet republics. As is true with most countries in

Europe, Belarus differentiates between refugees and people who have emigrated for humanitarian reasons (subsidiary protection).

□Afghanis have long been the only major group to receive refugee status in Belarus. It started in the 1980s, when many Afghanis who came to the Soviet Union to study decided not to return home. The stream of migration continued through the 1990s, as more of them came to Belarus to reunite with their families.

Since the beginning of the war in Syria, Belarus has attracted more and more Syrian refugees. In 2013, 63 Syrian citizens applied for asylum in Belarus. Syrians receive significant assistance from the international community in Belarus. The state media has repeatedly put out stories about the Syrians living in Homiel in an apartment that was purchased for them by the United Nations.

While many Syrians have trouble negotiating the local language, Afghans are a good example of immigrants adapting to Belarus. So far, it would appear that the Belarusian media has never once reported of there being any problems with Afghan refugees. Other migrants tend to come from countries where Russian has at least some presence in public life, so it is easier for them to adapt. For instance, the author's classmate from Georgia was able to learn Belarusian in just a few years.

Donbass Goes to Belarus

In 2014 and 2015 more than 100,000 Ukrainians made their way to Belarus, thus increasing the country's population by more than 1%. Migrants from Ukraine do not hold refugees status, as Ukraine is not formally in a war and its citizens that coming to Belarus are not persecuted in Ukraine. Most of them obtained either a permanent or temporary residence to live in Belarus. Generally, migrants say that the government and the Red Cross provide around a \$ 250-300 one-time allowance for

each person to help them readjust.

migrants from the Donetsk and Lugansk regions of Ukraine have access to social services such as kindergartens and hospitals

While the appropriate data is not available, it seems, according to media outlets, that most Ukrainians are able to find work in agriculture, construction or commerce. A large number of migrants have settled in rural areas, where some have even managed to secure either an apartment or a house for free. As Aliaksandr Lukashenka mentioned last year, "we need a labour force, and we are ready to settle them in various parts of the country, provide them with shelter and jobs."

The Belarusian authorities hope that Ukraine's refugees [will help to rescue the country's agricultural sector](#), as it continues to decline. Despite the low salaries, many Ukrainians are inclined to work in agriculture, if for no other reason, than the absence of war.

According to an decree signed by [Aliaksandr Lukashenka](#), migrants from the Donetsk and Lugansk regions of Ukraine have access to social services such as kindergartens and hospitals. However, while teenagers from the Donbas can go to Belarusian schools for free, they still do not have money for buying books or the required school uniform.

Economic Pressure and Crime

In June, many media outlets reprinted a statement by a representative of the Belarusian police who made light of the problems Belarus was facing when trying to deal with the "mentality of the refugees". According to him, the police have to explain to migrants from the Donbas that it is illegal to cross the street when there is a red light or drink beer out in public places.

Ukrainian migrants are willing to work for a salary several times lower than what a Belarusian would find acceptable

The police reported several cases where individuals from the Donbas got in fights after squabbling over politics. Since the beginning of 2015, the crime rate among individuals coming from Ukraine has increased by 30% according to the Belarusian police. In 2014 crime was also an issue among them, prompting Belarus to deport 200 Ukrainians last year.

The most serious issues revolve not just around crime, but the effect of Ukrainian migrants on the labour market. Most of them are willing to work for a salary several times lower than what a Belarusian would find acceptable. This makes it even harder for Belarusians who have lost their job due to economic recession to regain footing.

[Mikhail Miasnikovich](#), former prime minister and current head of the upper chamber of the Belarusian parliament, said in April that the Ukrainian immigrants "have created a certain amount of pressure on the economy." According to him, "Belarus has to think about employing its own people, not just help out our Ukrainian friends."

On 15 July, UNHCR Representative in the Republic of Belarus Jean-Yves Bouchardy appealed for more support for refugees from Ukraine, as his organisation lacks funding to help Belarus and mostly concentrates on Syrian immigrants who have received refugee status. "They are in a worse position than Ukrainians because they do not speak Russian, which seriously hinders their employment opportunities," mentioned Jean-Yves Bouchardy.

According to [Ihar Shunevich](#), the Minister of the Interior, some Ukrainians have already left Belarus. This is due to the fact that Belarus appears to be unprepared for migration on this scale and cannot support everyone coming in. This might have been different, but Belarus has thus far failed to engage the international community in the name of supporting

Ukrainian refugees.

Celebrating Lukashenka's 20th Anniversary in Power, Liberation from Nazis – Belarus State TV Digest

Last week on Belarus state TV was a week of historical anniversaries.

The 70th anniversary of the liberation of Belarus, Belarusian Independence Day and, finally, the 20th anniversary of election of Alexander Lukashenka all were presented to demonstrate the success of Belarus' current leadership.

Commenting upon the situation in Ukraine, journalists often made reference to the situation using terms like “slavic unity”, “refugees from Ukraine”, but also readily noted Kiev's reluctance to paying off arrears to Gazprom.

Domestic Affairs

[20 years ago, on 10 July Lukashenka became the President of Belarus](#). Casting their votes for Lukashenka, “Belarusians voted for sovereign politics and independence”, one state TV journalist narrates. According to the report, people voted then for “real independence” not the one just on paper.

The reporter covering the story also commented upon the political rivals back in 1994: [Viačaslau Kiebič](#), the one “from nomenclature”, [Zianon Pazniak](#), a “nationalist” from

the Belarusian Popular Front, and finally, Alexander Lukashenka, a “deputy from the people, without a party affiliation”. “Today they call him a “pro-Belarusian candidate”, then he was just “ours”.

[The mysterious victory of Lukashenka](#). The coverage states that Lukashenka’s victory remained an interesting phenomenon up until the present day. He explained further that the 1990s was a time of “romantics and euphoria”, a period that lasted only until the first serious economic difficulties arose.

These times lasted up until 1994 and had their own colourful charm, with the reporter reminiscing about “coupons for pasta and vodka, delays in paying salaries, a soap opera of endless disagreements in the Parliament”. Lukashenka offered solutions to these problems and won the support of Belarusians.

The coverage also commented upon the opposition from the 1990s and positively evaluated the shift towards a “monolith in politics” as it gave Belarus a chance for its economy to develop.

Closing, the reporter concluded that today Belarus remains a place where bilinugism and inter-confessional peace are a norm.

[Symbolic opening of a war museum with Putin](#). Just a day before Belarus' Independence Day, both Alexander Lukashenka and Vladimir Putin opened the Museum of the Great Patriotic War in Minsk.

During the opening ceremony, the Belarusian leader spoke about the importance of the unity of the Soviet republics that fought together against the Nazis. According to Lukashenka, instead of the West showing their gratitude for their Soviet ally's sacrifices, “we see a dictate of sanctions”.

The Russian president, Vladimir Putin, praised the bright future of Belarus-Russia co-operation within the Eurasian

Union.

Kupalle: uniting the Slavic people. Belarusians again gathered in the village Aleksandryja in the Shklov district (Lukashenka's home region) to celebrate the midsummer festival, Kupalle. Lukashenka also attended the event and in his speech explained what coming back there meant to him personally. He also argued that the situation in “brotherly Ukraine” should be resolved as soon as possible.

In their coverage, state TV narrates that festivals such as Kupalle in Aleksandryja and Slavianski Bazaar in Viciebsk had played an important role in history – they reunited the Slavic world. This is particularly important, according to the report, after the events in Ukraine.

According to an old legend, the main goal of the Kupalle festivities was to find a fern flower and, should one be successful, it would bring them happiness and prosperity. “We would like to believe that it will bring peace and prosperity to all Slavic nations”, the reporter concludes.

Less help from the state for Belarusian enterprises' modernisation. At a special meeting, headed by the prime-minister Michail Miasnikovič, officials discussed new approaches for pushing for modernisation. The country is in need of a fairly comprehensive “complex modernisation, and the management must be responsible for their companies' efficiency”.

“At present, every company should increase its efficiency on its own”, the reporter clarified. “It is time that the state alone stops financing modernisation, but should just focus on supporting the most highly prioritised enterprises”, he concluded.

A new task for the Belarusian army – increase its mobility. Lukashenka visited the 103rd Independent Guard Mobile Brigade of the special operations forces of the Belarusian army. The

coverage notes that the Belarusian leader personally evaluated the battle readiness of the brigade.

During his visit, Lukashenka argued that Belarus would need to acquire more equipment for mobilisation "in case we would have to wage a war on our own". He also visited a local canteen which can feed up to 240 soldiers. The reporter covering the event was keen to point out that all of its equipment was made in Belarus and all of the food came from local producers. The head of state ordered a meal in the military canteen.

Ukraine

[The Association Agreement is signed, but is all of the EU ready to support Ukraine?](#) "Although the EU summit was called historical, it was no bombshell", states a state TV journalist analysing the event. Following up on this thought, the reporter asks rhetorically whether all of the EU was really ready to support Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia.

The coverage described the ceremony for signing the Association Agreement as pompous and full of optimism. The EU leadership pointed out throughout the event how historical it was. This co-operation with Brussels will, however, cost Kiev \$8bn, which the country will lose due to Russian taxation on goods exported from Ukraine. "Experts explain that Russia will have to protect its market from re-exported European goods", the journalist explains.

In the same report the journalist also discussed Kiev's arrears in payments to Gazprom, the controversies surrounding the South Stream and the issue of refugees from Ukraine. She cited Vladimir Chizhov, the Russian Ambassador to the EU, who stated that "the project does not satisfy those in the West who want to take control of the gas transportation system in Ukraine". "But thinking Europeans understand that the South Stream will serve in the interests of energy security of the EU", reporter emphasises.

[Refugees from Ukraine are invading the EU countries?](#) In another report, state TV reports that according to the European agency in charge of refugees, ten times more Ukrainian immigrants have come to the EU after "the coup d'état in Kyiv". Štefan Füle, the European Commissioner for Enlargement and European Neighbourhood Policy, confirmed the arrival of a number of refugees from the east of Ukraine.

Belarus Digest prepared this overview on the basis of materials available on the web site of Belarusian State Television 1 (BT1). 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.