

# 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.

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## State Health Care: Can Belarus Be Proud?

On 21 October, Alexander Lukashenka explained to the Regional Office for Europe Director of the World Health Organisation, Zsuzsanna Jakab, how Belarus had succeeded in improving its health service and received many compliments from her for that.

Belarus has achieved much in the fight against certain diseases and has placed modern medical equipment in many hospitals, including an expert division of [orthopedic doctors](#). But a few significant problems remain in the Belarusian public health system, some cities are missing up to 40% of the necessary personnel. On top of this the average medical worker earns only \$325.

Moreover, the authorities continue a hypocritical policy of allowing alcohol to be easily accessible to Belarusians and isolating the Belarusian health system from global trends.

## WHO Praises Belarus For Good Results

On 21 October, [Alexander Lukashenka](#) met with the WHO Regional Director for Europe Zsuzsanna Jakab, who openly praised the Belarusian ruler “for leadership and efforts aimed at improving the health care system that have already brought a clear result.” Jacob arrived in Belarus for a WHO conference “Health 2020”, which brought together several hundred European experts in the field of medicine, including 13 ministers of health.

In fact, public health remains one of the areas where the Belarusian authorities have achieved results. In 2013 the World Health Organisation stated that Belarus had achieved the Millennium Goals. According to the Bloomberg ranking, the Belarusian health care system is almost as efficient as the health service in Belgium. The Belarusian authorities have purchased modern equipment for Belarusian hospitals and built new medical centres. In 2015, the first nursing care hospital for patients with chronic diseases and disabilities was built in Minsk.

Belarus has achieved good results in the immunisation of children, the fight against HIV/AIDS, [tuberculosis](#), child and maternal mortality. The authorities like to underline that no mother died in Belarus during childbirth in 2015.



The health service remains quite affordable for ordinary people, and Alexander Lukashenka has not lost a single opportunity to emphasise this. On 21 October, he stated that “unlike other countries, people in Belarus do not die under a fence if they lack insurance.”□

Belarusian health care brings not only international recognition, but also money. Although 95% of medical centres remain state-run, they provide more and more paid services for Belarusians and foreigners. Former chief of Mossad intelligence, Meir Dagan□, had a liver transplant in Belarus and Russian neo-fascist, Maxim Martsinkevich□, had an eye operation in Minsk.

Russians often use the services of Belarusian clinics as they remain cheaper, better run and more effective than Russian ones. For instance, MRI of the brain in Belarusian top clinic costs around only \$60.

## Another Story of the



# Belarusian Health Service

Yet in reality many Belarusians have another vision of the domestic health care system than Alexander Lukashenka. This is due to the lack of specialised doctors and huge queues at clinics.

Some Belarusian cities, according to the Health Minister [Vasil Zharko](#), lack 30-40% of necessary medical staff. Furthermore, a large percentage of the existing staff are either retired, due for retirement or are interns. Often it remains impossible to get an appointment with a doctor, because there is not a qualified doctor in town. Even if a hospital has modern equipment, the waiting time for the use of the equipment can be a few months.

A few doctors even leave the profession or the country because the average salary of health workers, according to official statistics, in September totaled \$325. Naturally, doctors earn more, and [medical personnel such as nurses earn less](#). In neighbouring Poland by contrast health workers earn three times more than in Belarus.

To earn this money, health workers usually have to take one and a half full time jobs. Doctors joke, that if they worked only one job, they would have nothing to eat, but if one works two jobs, he has no time to eat.

## Isolated Health Service

In the regional context it may seem that Belarus has a similar health service to Poland or Lithuania. All of them have achievements and failures. However, life expectancy in Poland or Lithuania remains higher than in Belarus by five and two years respectively. Moreover, the difference between life expectancy among men and women remains striking in Belarus.

Belarusian women live on average 78 years, while men only live to 67.

The state [policy of alcoholisation](#) partly explains the issue. It remains difficult to achieve good results in public health, when [Belarus ranks first](#), according to the WHO, in world consumption of alcohol, and the state keeps alcohol prices low. Belarusians also occupy a leading position in Europe in terms of [obesity](#) and [smoking](#). State institutions remain reluctant to see health system holistically, so they should not expect that Belarusians will have long healthy lives.

Also Belarusian health care lacks contacts with the outside world or even some basic opportunities to improve qualifications. Usually Belarusian doctors who would like to visit a foreign conference, have to take a vacation at their own expense, ask for permission to participate in the conference and pay all the costs of the conference from their pockets.

Despite the fact that the issue of medical care matters for the majority of Belarusians and opposition now and then try to politicise the issue, public health still has not become a topic of national debate. Even independent media rarely write about Belarusian medicine. However, many people would be grateful to the media and opposition, if they pressed the question of long queues and low salaries. For many, such issues matter more than democracy and human rights.

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## **The Tobacco Curse: Why**

# Belarus Smokes and Smuggles Cigarettes

More than 65% of Belarusian university and high school students smoke, according to recent estimates from the Ministry of Health.

While smoking is declining across Europe, a growing number of young Belarusians are turning to cigarettes due to lax regulations and low prices. Cheap cigarettes from Belarus are also being smuggled into Western Europe, involving thousands of Belarusians who regularly engage in criminal activity. If you want to buy legit cigarettes visit [iqos heets dubai](#).

Why do cigarettes in Belarus remain among the cheapest in Europe?

Raising the cost of tobacco products – by levying an excise tax on consumers – is a simple and effective measure to combat smoking among both youth and adults.

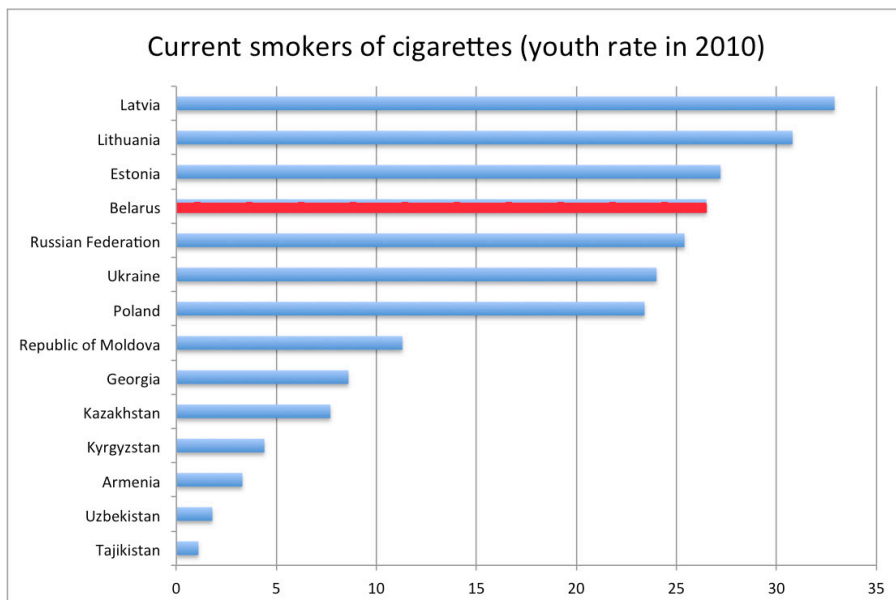
A tobacco tax could produce economic as well as social and health benefits. At the end of the day though experts at [numan](#) state that, the Belarusian government is reluctant to tax tobacco because of the profits it reaps from manufacturing and exporting tobacco products.

## **Belarusian Youth are the Biggest Smokers in the post-Soviet Space**

Overall rates of smoking in Belarus are comparable to those in other post-Soviet states. But Belarus leads in the prevalence of smoking among young people. This suggests that the state has not done enough to discourage new smokers from joining the legions of the nation's smokers.

According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), raising

taxes on tobacco products is one of the most efficient ways of combating tobacco consumption. This measure is especially effective among young people, who tend to have lower incomes and are not yet addicted to nicotine. Those who are addicted should switch to a much safer alternative like [smok vapes](#).



WHO estimates that if all countries raised taxes on tobacco by 50% per pack, governments would earn an extra \$101 billion in revenue, while decreasing the number of smokers by 49 million.

WHO recommends the tax be equivalent to at least 75% of the retail price. This policy is currently in place in 26 out of 53 countries in the Europe, including those EU countries that border Belarus (Poland, Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia). Not a single post-Soviet country has raised taxes on tobacco products to this level, however.

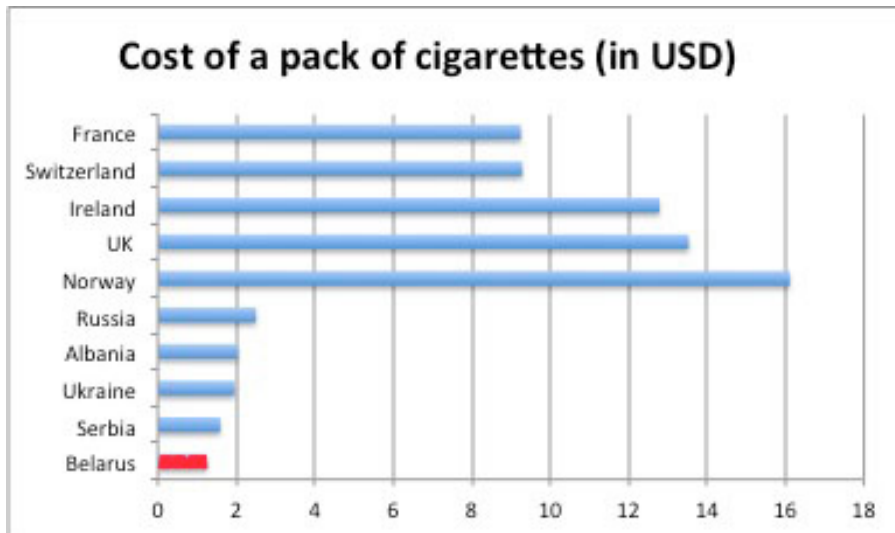
Belarus offers perhaps the cheapest cigarettes in the EU neighbourhood. They cost about 13 times less than in other European states. For example, in 2012, the price for a pack of Philip Morris' Marlboro ranged from \$1.50 in Belarus to \$17.80 in Norway, according to a report by KPMG LLP.

### **Smugglers Can Earn up to 1000% in Profits**

In the last ten years, as the price gap have significantly narrowed between EU countries and as Belarusian prices have

remained low, the country has become the largest source of illegal tobacco in the EU.

According to a KPMG study commissioned by major global tobacco companies, Belarus' total volume of illegal C&C cigarettes exported to the EU was around 6.9 billion cigarettes in 2013. For sake of comparison, Russia accounted for a mere 3 billion illegal C&C cigarettes over the same period of time.



The KPMG study also found that the highest levels of illegal trade incidences are found in Latvia (28.8%), Lithuania (27.1%), Ireland (21.1%), Estonia (18.6%) and Bulgaria (18.2%).

It is no coincidence that three of these five countries border Belarus. Smuggling from countries like Belarus, where a pack of cigarettes costs just over one euro, allows smugglers to earn profit margins of up to 1000%.

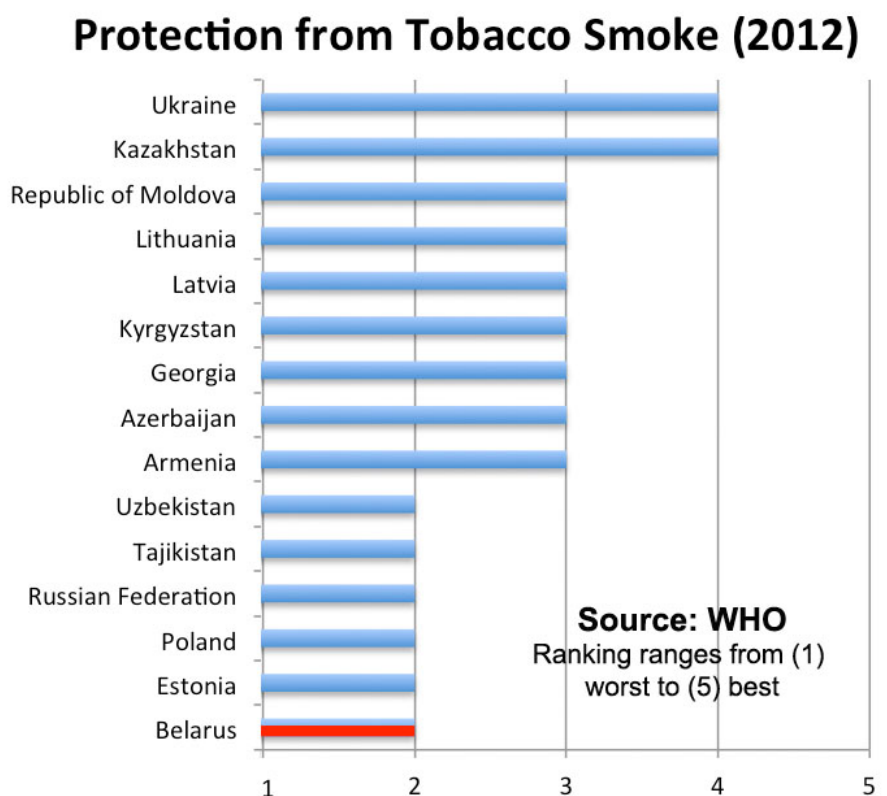
### **The Real Costs of Cheap Tobacco**

Poland is another popular destination for illegal tobacco from Belarus. Passengers on a short train ride from Grodno, Belarus to Bialystok, Poland can easily illustrate just how bold some ordinary citizens can become when given sufficient financial incentives.

As soon as the train starts on its way, about two-thirds of

“passengers” rush to unscrew parts of the floor, seats, and ceiling to hide their stock of illegal cigarettes. Cigarette packs can also be easily taped to passengers’ bodies. (The law permits two packs per person.)

At the border, customs officials uncover only a small portion of the hidden loot; the rest is taken out in Bialystok and sold. The few unlucky smugglers who are caught red-handed are fined, but the fine is unlikely to deter them from trying again.



The local newspapers frequently publish amusing stories about the ingenuity or the foolishness of tobacco smugglers.

These stories speak of secret compartments, double underwear, and packages with mini-antennae sent floating down the Neman river, which runs along 18 kilometres of the Belarusian-Lithuanian border.

Of course, the volume of cigarettes smuggled by these “desperate” citizens is peanuts when compared to the volumes transported by criminal gangs via more sophisticated methods.

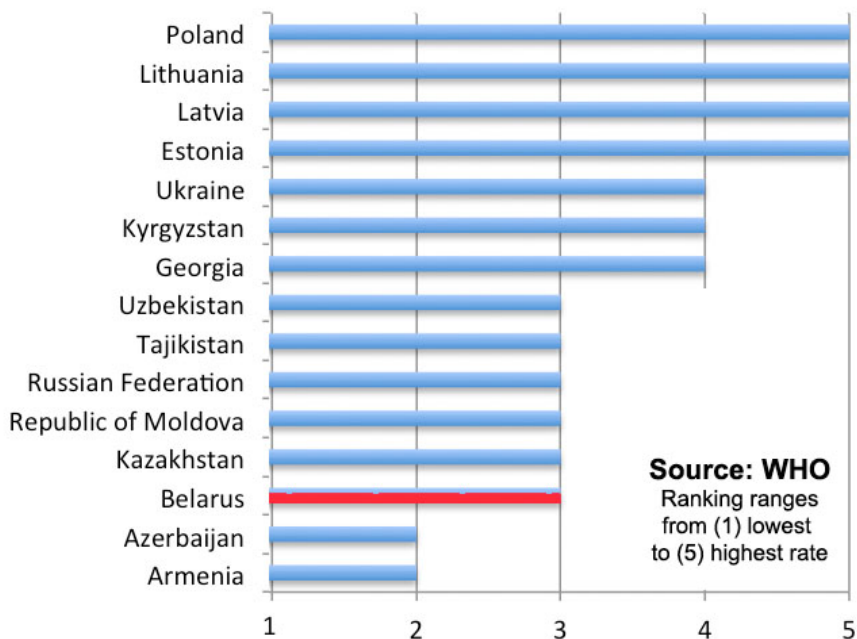
Smuggling cheats governments and tobacco companies out of billions in profits. Aside from financial losses, cigarette

smuggling carries social costs that disproportionately fall on communities living close to the EU border. Studies show that illicit trade fosters broader criminality, from stolen property to corruption to murder.

### Who Invests in Belarusian Tobacco?

Even though cigarette companies lose some sales through smuggled cigarettes, they can also benefit financially when investing in factories located in countries with low tax rates. These factories are used to produce brand-name products that are then sold abroad. Because of the low tax rates on tobacco products, Belarus has become an important link in the tobacco sales chain.

### Taxation of tobacco products (2012)



There are two major manufacturers of cigarettes in Belarus: the “Neman” Tobacco Factory in Grodno and the Belarusian-American joint venture “Tabak-Invest.”

Both factories have attracted big-name international investors. British American Tobacco reportedly invested 20 million Euros in “Neman”, while Japan Tobacco International is manufacturing its cigarettes via “Tabak-Invest”. In April of

this year, the British company Tobacco International Enterprises agreed to invest 4.5 million Euros in “Neman” as well.

According to its 2014 budget estimates, the Belarusian Ministry of Finance projected US\$400 million in excise tax revenue from tobacco products. Higher tobacco taxes would further raise revenues for many years to come, even if they would decrease the rates of smoking over time.

In some cases where a country has raised tobacco taxes, the price increases have actually increased the prevalence of smuggling cheaper cigarettes into the country, diverting money that would otherwise flow to governments in the form of tax revenues.

In Belarus, however, the situation appears to be rather different, since cigarettes are smuggled out of the country into the neighbouring EU. Raising tobacco taxes are thus likely to reduce rather than increase smuggling – a win-win scenario for government coffers and the healthcare system.