

# 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
<b>Total</b>	<b>910</b>	<b>793</b>

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. Others 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.

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## The Echo of Chernobyl

26 April is a very sad day in Belarusian history. On 26 April 1986 a disastrous accident took place at a nuclear power plant in Chernobyl, just across the border in Ukraine. It became one of the most horrible man-made disasters ever. Belarus suffered from the radioactive fallout more than any other country.

Since the disintegration of the Soviet Union Belarus has had to handle the whole array of social, economic and demographic repercussions of the disaster. The lack of financial resources makes it a difficult task. As a result, the Belarusian authorities try to minimise the scale of the problem.

As Germany is moving away from the use of nuclear power,

Belarus started building its own nuclear power plant and considers adding one more in the future.

### **Belarus Suffered the Most**

Over 50 million curies of radioactive material were released as a result of the accident. Its fallout encompassed a population of 17 million people, including 2,5 million children under the age of five. Even though the nuclear power plant was in Ukraine, the winds brought most of the radioactive fallout to Belarus. It quickly contaminated 23% of the country's territory.

Thousands of inhabitants of the polluted area had to leave. Thousands of rescuers who worked at the disaster's site suffered from immediate radiation sickness. Hundreds of thousands of people still suffer from the aftereffects of the accident.

Smaller areas in southern and south-eastern parts of the country became completely unsuitable for any human activity and still pose a threat of radiation spread. To monitor and research the situation there the authorities created Polesie State Radiation and Ecological Reserve.

According to international scientists, the increased cancer and infant mortality rates in Belarus suggest that the deadly effects of the Chernobyl disaster are still lingering.

### **Struggle with the Repercussions**

After Belarus gained independence in 1991 it immediately faced the burden of financing numerous rehabilitation programmes. Some estimates said that every fourth rouble of the state budget had to be spent on those programmes. It became a real challenge for the newly independent republic and its weak economy.

One of the core questions that the Belarusians face is what to

do with the contaminated territories. According to independent researchers, the polluted lands will remain highly radioactive for hundreds of years. Therefore, they cannot be turned back into agricultural and industrial use.

However, according to the Belarusian Academy of Sciences, the polluted territory has decreased 1,6-fold since 1986. In their opinion, now 14,5% of the Belarusian land remains contaminated and about 1,2 million inhabitants reside there. They think that the level of contamination is not critical and, therefore, recommend to intensify economic activities on these lands.

The government follows the recommendation of the Academy of Sciences. More and more products from contaminated areas appear in shops across the country. Moreover, Belarusian universities send their graduates to contaminated regions for post-graduation mandatory work.

### **Helping the victims of Chernobyl**

Those who took part in the rescuing operations in Chernobyl and the inhabitants of the contaminated areas became entitled to a number of social benefits. For example, the rescuers became entitled to a 25% bonus to their pensions. Those who became physically disabled as a result of the accident got the right for free or discounted medicine and a free medical rehabilitation course every two years.

In 2007 the government announced its plans to trim the benefits package for those who suffered from radiation. It provoked an outburst of resentment and protests among various Chernobyl organisations. But the authorities ignored the demands of the NGOs and victims of the Chernobyl catastrophe and limited the benefits.

In the aftermath of the tragedy numerous international donors started to initiate rehabilitation programmes in Belarus. They included provision of medication and medical equipment,

technical assistance in the restoration of the contaminated territories and summer programmes for children from polluted areas. Foreign aid has been crucial in assisting the Belarusian government and society in their struggle with the repercussions of Chernobyl disaster.

However, due to political reasons the authorities have been very selective in their cooperation with foreign donors on Chernobyl-related projects. In many cases foreign funds and NGOs have been suspected of connections with the opposition. On such grounds the authorities restricted their possibilities of working in the country. As a result, people in the contaminated territories have lost considerable amounts of funding.

### **Plans for New Nuclear Power Plants Despite Lingering Fears**

Public opinion surveys clearly show that the Belarusians still have a lingering fear of atomic energy. This is no surprise given the human and financial losses that the Chernobyl tragedy incurred on the nation.

However, in 2008 the political leadership started talking about the prospects of constructing a nuclear power plant in the country. Alexander Lukashenka then declared that atomic energy is very cheap compared to the prices of Russian oil and gas. In his opinion, a [nuclear power plant](#) will ensure Belarus's energy independence.

After numerous NGOs started to publicly protest against the government's plans the authorities launched a PR campaign to popularise the idea of a power plant. But, as is usually the case in present-day Belarus, the government's campaign was very formal and did not really listen to the public opinion.

Later the authorities asked for a Russian loan to construct the plant. In November 2011 the loan [agreement was signed](#). Moreover, at the beginning of April in his talk with the Director General of the IAEA Lukashenka announced that



Belarus could consider constructing a second nuclear power plant.

Thus, Belarus is about to enter another nuclear era even though the wounds from the Chernobyl disaster are still bleeding.