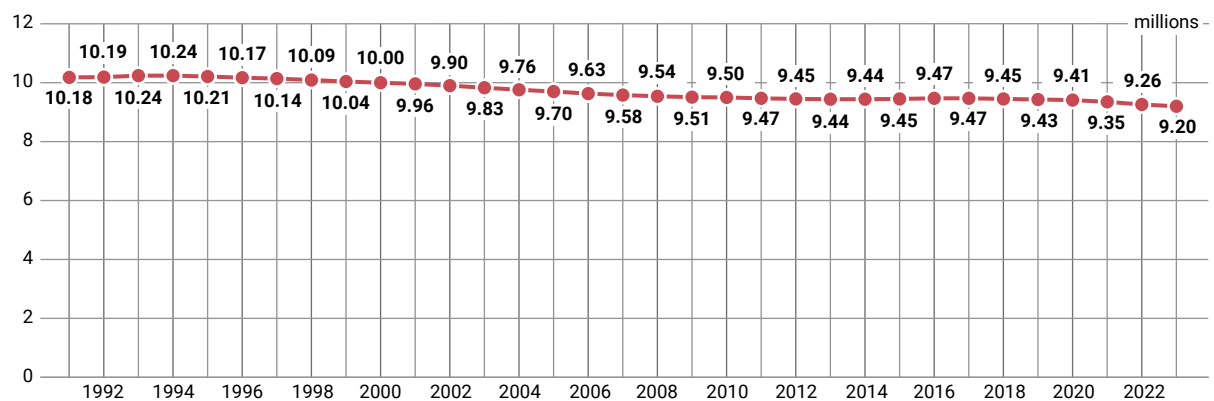


arrived there (mainly from other former Soviet republics). However, the scale of these two developments proved too small to reverse the general negative demographic trend.

In this context, it is worth noting that Belarus was (and continues to be) unable to offer sufficiently attractive salary prospects to these newcomers (including from Central Asia); this is why it never attracted as large numbers of immigrants as Russia (in particular Moscow) did for many years. This is evidenced by reports compiled by the Belarusian ministry of internal affairs, according to which in recent years the local labour market has hosted just 10,000–20,000 economic migrants annually, mostly hailing from Russia, Ukraine and Turkmenistan. There are also instances of Chinese citizens taking up job in Belarus, although this usually involves contractual work as part of the implementation of Chinese investments. It is worth adding that at the end of 2022 only 8500 foreign workers were registered in Belarus.²

Chart 1. Belarus's population in 1991–2023



Source: National Statistical Committee of the Republic of Belarus.

The negative demographic trend is mainly due to an ageing population, something typical of the majority of the independent republics established following the collapse of the USSR. The sudden impoverishment of a significant portion of the population in the early 1990s, and the insufficient social security linked with it, effectively discouraged people from starting or expanding a family. Another important factor negatively affecting the birth rate, one which is particular to Belarus, involved the fear of the consequences of the Chernobyl nuclear power plant disaster, which was widespread in the late 1980s. As a consequence, fewer people of reproductive age decided to have more than one child, which translated into a change in the family model.³

As regards demographic trends, the situation in Belarus is similar to that in the societies of developed Western countries. However, this does not include a similar increase in wealth or in life expectancy, which is also significant. The statistics are particularly negative for men, as according to the 2019 data the average life expectancy of Belarusian males is just 64 years, one year shorter than it was on the eve of the country's independence in 1991.⁴

The three population censuses conducted in independent Belarus (in 1999, 2009 and 2019) showed a considerable increase in the size of the oldest group of citizens, i.e. individuals aged 55 and older. Their share in Belarusian society increased from almost 24% in 1999 to 30% in 2019. As a consequence,

² 'Статистика по миграции', Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Republic of Belarus, mvd.gov.by.

³ Л.П. Шахотько, 'Снижение рождаемости как главный из вызовов демографической безопасности Республики Беларусь', *Вопросы статистики* 10/2007, after: demoscope.ru. For example, in 1986–1991 in Homel oblast, which was most affected by the Chernobyl disaster, the number of births declined by almost 30%. See А. Тачняк, 'На Гомельщине спад рождаемости: положение хуже, чем было после чернобыльской аварии', *Белсат*, 5 April 2023, belsat.eu.

⁴ 'Минздрав: продолжительность жизни женщин в Беларуси – 78 лет, мужчин – 64', *Белта*, 30 September 2020, belta.by.

the proportion of individuals of working age to senior citizens was 2.7. At the same time, according to the findings of the most recent census, the population continues to be largely homogenous as regards the type of income it receives and the type of work it performs. More than 90% of respondents cited a benefit provided by the state (such as old age pension, disability pension, social benefit), a salary earned in a permanent job, or income earned by another household member as their main source of income; a mere 2.4% cited self-employment or another type of individual economic activity. Although in their narrative the Belarusian government has presented this fact as proof of a low level of social stratification (unlike in the 'unfair' Western systems), the extremely small proportion of entrepreneurs, who are the most innovative and dynamic social group, *de facto* curbs the country's potential for economic development.⁵

It is also worth noting that, prior to 2020, Belarusians mainly emigrated due to economic reasons, and Russia was their first destination of choice as its visa-free re-

gime and the lack of linguistic or cultural barriers made it attractive. Although official figures compiled by the Russian migration services indicate that the number of employees from Belarus usually stood at several tens of thousands annually, independent experts estimate that it may have been as high as 300,000. Most of these individuals were temporary emigrants who remained abroad for the duration of their specific employment contract.⁶ As regards political emigration, it should be remembered that although various groups of activists did flee abroad following the 2006 and 2010 presidential elections, some of them later returned, while the majority of the regime's opponents continued to reside in Belarus.

” In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent political crisis following the presidential election contributed to a significant acceleration in the negative trends in Belarus’s demographic situation.

A dynamic increase in emigration post-2020

In 2020, two factors contributed to a significant acceleration in the negative trends in Belarus's demographic situation. The first one, the COVID-19 pandemic, proved particularly harmful to countries such as Belarus, where the government failed to introduce any major restrictions while at the same time concealing the number of deaths due to the disease.⁷ In May 2020, the National Statistical Committee of the Republic of Belarus stopped publishing death statistics, and has also ceased providing information on births. When asked by journalists to explain this, officials cited "a need for additional data verification".⁸ The other factor, which turned out to have a much stronger impact in the long term, was the political crisis linked with the presidential election held on 9 August 2020. The mass-scale, unprecedentedly brutal repression targeting participants in demonstrations against the election rigging forced many opponents of the regime to leave the country, mainly for Poland and Lithuania.

Although the true magnitude of COVID-19-related deaths and post-election emigration has not been disclosed, official statistics do reflect these developments to some degree. According to official data, on 1 January 2021 Belarus had 9.35 million residents, which indicates a decrease of up to 60,000 individuals over a year. This means that the pace of population decline was three times faster than in 2019.⁹

⁵ Д. Наривончик, 'Первые итоги переписи 2019 года: где живут, как зарабатывают и на каком языке говорят белорусы', *Экономическая газета*, 22 September 2020, neg.by; 'Первые итоги переписи населения Республики Беларусь 2019 года', National Statistical Committee of the Republic of Belarus, belstat.gov.by.

⁶ «Только в Россию – около 300 тысяч в год». Сколько белорусов на самом деле уезжают на заработки', *21.by*, 14 June 2017, news.21.by.

⁷ See K. Kłysiński, P. Żochowski, 'Zaklinanie rzeczywistości: Białoruś w obliczu pandemii COVID-19', *Komentarze OSW*, no. 324, 3 April 2020, osw.waw.pl.

⁸ «Это зависит не от Белстата». В ведомстве рассказали, почему никак не могут подсчитать смертность за 2020 год', *Белсат*, 22 October 2022, belsat.eu.

⁹ 'В 2020 году население Беларуси сократилось на 60 тысяч человек', *Экономическая газета*, 27 April 2021, neg.by.

Data compiled over the next few years indicate that this increased depopulation dynamic has been maintained. In this context, it is worth noting that the consequences of the pandemic were less lasting and less noticeable than the effects of acts of repression targeting the regime's real and potential opponents; these have not subsided, and are still triggering new waves of emigration. Moreover, both of the above-mentioned phenomena are occurring concurrently with the ageing of the population. 2021 saw the biggest population decline in Belarus's history, that is by more than 90,000 individuals. As a result, by 1 January 2023 the country's inhabitants numbered 9.2 million individuals,¹⁰ around 200,000 fewer than in 2020.

A drop in the size of the workforce

The absence or vagueness of official statistics prevent researchers from determining how many Belarusians have left the country since 2020. Statistics published by the emigrant destination countries, which are more readily available, do not provide a comprehensive picture of the situation either; for example, some visa applicants (including Belarusians applying for a Polish visa under the Poland Business Harbour programme) have never used their visas. However, it is likely that at least 100,000 Belarusian citizens have left the country; most of them have relocated to Poland and Lithuania. Other popular destinations include Georgia and Uzbekistan, which have visa-free regimes with Belarus. The clear decline in the size of the workforce in the Belarusian economy is also worth noting. In 2020, this group numbered 4.3 million individuals, while two years later the figure was just over 4.2 million.¹¹ This means that around 100,000 individuals have left the labour market over this period, only some of whom had retired.

While the labour outflow recorded over the past three years is estimated at around 5% of the working age population, the shortfall of workers is particularly evident

” For the economy as a whole, the most recent waves of emigration have translated into Belarus losing 1% of its GDP, which proves that this situation has severe consequences.

in specific sectors. 2022 saw a shortfall of 8000 specialists in the health care sector and as many as 11,000 in the construction sector,¹² and similar problems have also been recorded in other branches of the economy. According to research carried out by Political Sphere, an independent Belarusian think tank, many Belarusians have found employment in Lithuania and Poland in sectors such as logistics, transport and industrial production. The proportion of political emigrants among those leaving Belarus for Lithuania is estimated at just 50%; this means that in recent years economic reasons are of major importance for the emigrants (probably also including those who choose other destinations).¹³

The largest outflow of professionals was recorded in the IT sector, which suffered particular repression after 2020. Although no precise figures are available in this case either, it seems that more than 20,000 programmers may have left the country since autumn 2020. The IT sector's share in Belarus's GDP has decreased for the first time in 12 years, from 7.5% in 2021 to 5% in 2022, and may likely stand at just 4% in 2023. For the economy as a whole, the recent waves of emigration have translated into Belarus losing 1% of its GDP.¹⁴ This shows the severity of consequences of the recent waves of emigration, most importantly those involving the highest-skilled specialists, which now confront Belarus and its economy.

¹⁰ 'Численность населения на 1 января 2023 г. по областям и г.Минску', National Statistical Committee of the Republic of Belarus, belstat.gov.by.

¹¹ 'Труд', National Statistical Committee of the Republic of Belarus, belstat.gov.by.

¹² '«Беларусь покидают не только люди, но целые организации и структуры». Социолог Коршунов — про миграцию белорусов', MOST, 18 January 2023, mostmedia.io.

¹³ Д. Бернштейн, 'Эмиграция из Беларуси: уезжают опытные кадры', Deutsche Welle, 6 March 2023, dw.com.

¹⁴ К. Кłysiński, 'A crisis rather than a disaster. The Belarusian economy a year into Russia's war against Ukraine', *OSW Commentary*, no. 501, 22 March 2023, osw.waw.pl.

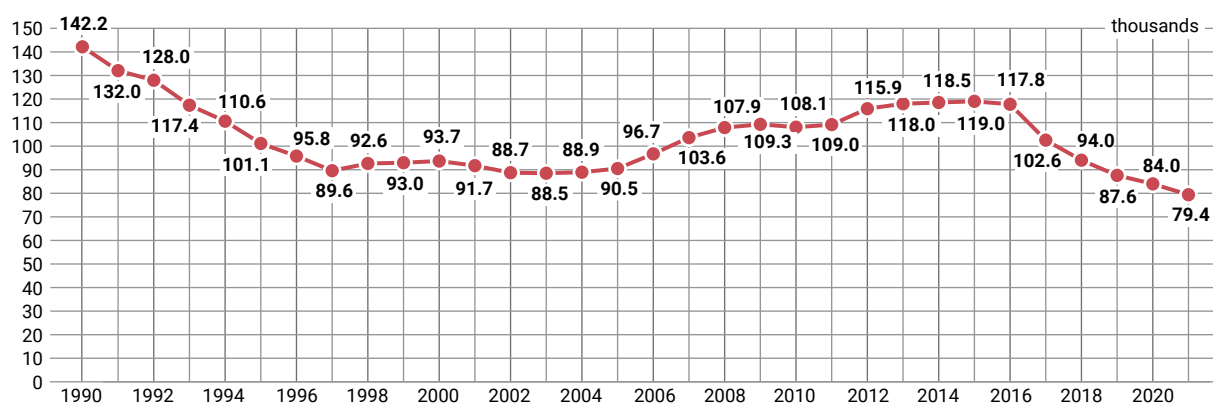
The unprecedented increase in the number of individuals emigrating to Western countries post-2020 has not affected the scale of eastward emigration. According to the Eurasian Economic Commission, which is an executive body of the Eurasian Economic Union, in 2022 more than 170,000 Belarusians were officially employed in Russia, a figure similar to 2021. The situation was only different in 2020, when the scale of economic migration was reduced considerably due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Emigration to the Russian Federation is motivated by purely economic factors, and in many instances, the presence of Belarusian workers on the Russian labour market is only temporary.¹⁵

The government’s actions to prevent depopulation

Since the 1990s, one of the pillars of Minsk’s social welfare policy has been the measures taken to support Belarusian families, which are defined in regular multiannual strategies on the ‘Health of the Nation and Demographic Security’. The most recent strategy was approved by Prime Minister Raman Halouchenka in 2021 and will apply until 2025.¹⁶ Instruments such as a three-year maternity leave period, subsidies offered to parents of young children to buy a flat, monthly child allowances, free school meals, preferential treatment for young people from multi-child families during university entrance exams and the allocation of accommodation in student hostels are frequently highlighted as proof of the state’s ‘sensitivity to social issues’.

However, this support has not translated into even a minimal increase in the birth rate, and has not managed to slow down the negative trends. Alyksandr Lukashenka’s statement from July 2023, when he called on young women to “give birth to three children each, because we need people”, indirectly corroborates this fact. Alongside this, Lukashenka has clearly stressed that “demography is the number one problem for us”.¹⁷ This situation has been reflected in the government’s official statistics, according to which the number of births has dropped by around 10% annually in recent years (see Chart 2). The family-oriented policies proposed by the state have not been able to immediately stem the consequences of the fertility decline recorded in the 1990s, which in the subsequent years resulted in fewer individuals entering reproductive age. Other causes of this situation include the public’s feeling of insecurity, which has been particularly prominent since 2020. This was when the COVID-19 pandemic, followed by the political crisis triggered by the presidential election, undermined the myth of a ‘peaceful and stable’ Belarus which had been promoted in Belarusian society for many years.¹⁸

Chart 2. Belarus’s birth rate in 1990–2020



Source: National Statistical Committee of the Republic of Belarus.

¹⁵ ‘Стало известно, сколько белорусов работало в России в прошлом году’, MyFin, 10 March 2023, myfin.by.

¹⁶ О Государственной программе «Здоровье народа и демографическая безопасность» на 2021–2025 годы, 19 January 2021, after: pravo.by.

¹⁷ Я. Жиманов, ‘Неутешительная демография: почему рождаемость стала проблемой для Беларуси’, Минская правда, 15 July 2023, mlyn.by.

¹⁸ ‘В Беларуси сокращается число детей. Чем это грозит экономике и когда мы почувствуем последствия от этого (прогноз неутешительный)’, Зеркало, 1 June 2023, news.zerkalo.io.

In addition to these rather ineffective attempts to stimulate the birth rate, the regime has attempted, in a manner typical of undemocratic systems, to discourage its skilled workforce from emigrating. During a meeting on 21 September 2023 devoted to the organisation of the education system, Lukashenka emphasised the excessive outflow of high-skilled specialists from the market and demanded an extension of the so-called employment obligation, which obliges graduates of state-funded universities which do not collect fees from students to work off their education. This obligation has been in place since the Soviet era. At present, this 'working-off' period usually lasts two years, but according to the new proposals it could be extended up to five or, in some instances, even seven years. For the first time, this mechanism may also include fee-paying students.¹⁹ However, the toughest of the proposed measures to curb economic emigration to the West came from Belarus's prosecutor general Andrei Shved, who expressed his outrage at the 'excessive' number of English-language classes in schools, which, in his view, facilitates the decisions of future graduates to seek employment in the West.²⁰

The government's helplessness in the face of a negative birth rate has been combined with a much more determined and consistently implemented policy involving the

” Minsk has also introduced a series of measures to isolate all emigrants who are critical of the regime, regardless of to what degree they had been involved in political activism.

harassment and isolation of those individuals who have already left the country. Lukashenka has repeatedly made contemptuous comments about these emigrants and referred to them as "traitors unworthy of Belarusian citizenship".²¹ 10 January 2023 saw the publication of an amended law 'On the Citizenship of the Republic of Belarus', which introduced several new measures including the possibility of stripping the Belarusian citizenship from individuals living abroad who have received a valid sentence punishing them for 'extremist' activities and other crimes against national security. Alongside this, trials *in absentia* were launched against political leaders and activists living in exile, including Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya and Pavel Latushka. According to the amended law, the sentences which will be passed in these trials will form the basis for stripping these individuals of Belarusian citizenship. This in turn is intended to symbolically reinforce the message spread by the regime's propaganda that these people are frustrated 'troublemakers', who are detached from Belarusian reality and are pursuing the interests of Western political elites.²²

Minsk has also introduced a series of measures to isolate all emigrants who are critical of the regime, regardless of to what degree they had been involved in political activism. During preparations for the constitutional referendum held on 27 February 2022, for the first time in the history of independent Belarus the foreign ministry decided not to organise polling stations in Belarusian embassies and consulates, citing "security concerns regarding diplomatic personnel" as the reason. However, the most radical repressive measure involved the decree 'On the procedure for issuing documents and performing duties' which Lukashenka signed in September 2023. The decree prevents Belarusian citizens from obtaining a new passport at Belarusian diplomatic posts abroad. Belarusians are now only able to obtain their passports at Belarusian public administration offices located in the vicinity of their official place of residence. From the point of view of numerous individuals fearing detention for their activity in exile or participation in post-electoral protests back in 2020, this measure *de facto* equates to them losing their valid identity documentation.²³

¹⁹ 'Изменения в системе отработки по распределению после вузов обсудили на совещании у Лукашенко', *Белта*, 21 September 2023, belta.by.

²⁰ 'Швед возмущен количеством часов английского в школах: «Мы готовим рабочую силу для Запада?»', *Зеркало*, 22 September 2023, news.zerkalo.io.

²¹ 'Лукашенко: «Достойны ли эти люди оставаться гражданами Беларуси, если они сбежали из родной страны?»', *Салідарнасць*, 6 September 2022, gazetaby.com.

²² K. Kłysiński, 'Belarus: loss of citizenship for opposition activities', *OSW*, 12 January 2023, osw.waw.pl.

²³ 'Новый порядок выдачи документов. Что изменится для белорусов, живущих за границей?', *Onliner*, 5 September 2023, money.onliner.by.

At the same time, the regime has launched a propaganda campaign to demonstrate its good will and lenience towards other emigrants. Lukashenka has repeatedly called on them to return to Belarus, and in February 2023 he signed a decree on establishing a special committee to consider applications submitted by 'repentant' opponents of the regime who may be interested in returning to Belarus.²⁴

Is a demographic disaster looming? An attempt at a forecast

The decline in the birth rate which began in the 1990s, together with the politically and economically motivated emigration have resulted (albeit to varying degrees) in the Belarusian population shrinking by as many as 1 million individuals, or by around 10%. Although the present demographic situation is not particularly unfavourable, especially when analysed against the backdrop of war-stricken Ukraine, this decline has negatively affected the functioning of the economy, the pension system and social life, which is evident even for such a medium-sized country and nation. According to the most pessimistic forecasts, by the end of the 21st century the Belarusian population may shrink to just 4 million individuals.²⁵

The statements offered by Lukashenka and his subordinates suggest that the regime is aware of the gravity of this situation. At the same time, however, it is resorting to methods which are typical of the authoritarian model of power, and rely on the use of propaganda and intimidation. In no way will this provoke an increase in the birth rate or help to retain a skilled workforce in Belarus. Similarly, the strategy of isolating and discrediting the political emigrants also seems ineffective; the government's pressure has boosted the opposition leaders' efforts in recent months to launch a system for issuing alternative passports to Belarusians residing in Western states. These passports are intended to be viewed as symbolic attributes of Belarusian quasi-statehood abroad.

In this way the Belarusian leadership has provoked a situation in which the country will continue to depopulate at an ever faster pace, while an ever larger group of emigrants will become even more isolated from their homeland. In the short term, the demographic balance can only be improved if the regime is toppled and a democratic transition is carried out, which would at least enable all those Belarusians who reside abroad to choose whether they prefer to remain in their current place of residence or return to Belarus. However, not even a potential regime change will reverse the long-term negative trend as regards the birth rate, as this has already become a permanent feature of the Belarusian population's age structure. This indicates that the main cause of Belarus's gradual depopulation, that is the reduced fertility rate which is typical of the region, will not be eliminated.

²⁴ 'Стали известны подробности указа о работе с желающими вернуться на родину. Рассказываем о главных положениях', Белта, 6 February 2023, belta.by.

²⁵ Л. Львовский, 'Как остановить вымирание белорусов? Мнение', Зеркало, 17 January 2023, news.zerkalo.io.