

The “Minsk Phenomenon:” demographic development in the Republic of Belarus

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This paper returns to a topic the author dealt with in a more basic form some years ago. But it also makes an attempt to conceptualize the development of independent Belarus through its population migration to urban centers and especially its capital city, a development that dates exclusively from the post-1945 period, but that paradoxically has prevented this republic from experiencing the sort of modernization processes evident elsewhere in Europe. It takes as its starting point the pioneering work by the German historian Thomas Bohn (Bon/Bohn 2013) titled *The Minsk Phenomenon* and develops it further by linking it to demographic issues, current health concerns, and problems in industrial development.

Keywords: Minsk; Belarus; Lukashenka; demographics; urbanization

Introduction

Anyone writing on a topic linked to urbanization in the former Soviet space must acknowledge the pioneering work of many scholars, most notably perhaps that of Chauncy Harris, on urbanization in Russia and the Soviet Union (see especially Harris 1970, 1971). This paper, however, does not engage in the various debates on economic geography, such as whether primate cities are of appropriate size in relation to other cities. Nor does it wish to engage in general comparison between Belarus and urbanization processes in other parts of the former Soviet Union. Minsk’s role in contemporary Belarus is so overwhelming that it merits a separate discussion and it is becoming more, not less, dominant over time. Of more importance is what has occurred since the republic became independent in 1991 and the extent to which the Soviet façade, in contrast to analogous cities such as Kyiv or Vilnius, has been retained.

In addition to the concentration on Minsk specifically, the other fundamental question raised is whether Belarus is developing as a “normal European state” and if its development signals the demise of the village and the future predominance of the city, and specifically its capital. The term “demographic crisis” in the 2000 article referred to population decline, infant mortality, health care, the effects of radiation from the nuclear disaster at Chernobyl, now on its 30th anniversary. Has the situation changed? What does the study of contemporary demography tell us about Belarus today?

Admittedly, the paper’s methodology is very broad, since it focuses on several issues that seem relevant to what we have termed the “demographic crisis” and Belarusian

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economic development, and that are often essential to an understanding of the contemporary state, its leadership, and population. Thus, it deals in turn with demographic decline; urbanization and the concomitant decline of the village; the impact of the 1986 accident at Chernobyl as well as other health issues that appear related to the progress of the republic; and finally, the recent situation in Belarusian industry prior to the current economic crisis (2015–2016) particularly in those enterprises that have been responsible for the success of the socialistic model in the past and are markers of the success or failure of the longtime presidency of Aliaksandr Lukashenka.¹

The Republic of Belarus is a complex case study and this analysis will provide only a cursory portrait of the current state. The working assumption is that national development has taken place in an unusual manner because of the makeup of the republic, its overreliance on what can be described as a “post-socialist capital city” and the earlier removal of the national elite through Stalin’s purges. The elimination of indigenous leaders and cultural figures in the 1930s preceded the devastation of the war (which resulted in about 1.8 million deaths, including some 600,000 Jews), and a process of Russification in the postwar years, particularly in the 1970s and 1980s. Belarusians assimilated into the dominant Russian culture, even to the very end of the Soviet period (Guthier 1977) and to some extent they still do so, with the creation of unions and organizations that link Belarus directly to Russia, starting with the 1999 formation of a Russia–Belarus Union.

In August 1991, Belarus attained independence by accident rather than as the result of a lengthy political campaign. Lukashenka, elected in July 1994 under a new constitution, from the outset embraced Soviet customs and memories, and retained and promoted the Russian language to official status alongside Belarusian (closing Belarusian schools at all levels in 1995). The administration also used its enhanced powers derived from the national referendums of 1995 and 1996 to increase state control, ignoring many social problems and pursuing, eventually, a program of building a state based on a form of civic – or what has been termed Creole – nationalism.² In this way, if it has not formed a dictatorship, it is at least a highly authoritarian regime in the center of Europe, despite the fact that its residents appear to be increasingly pro-European and westward-oriented.³

In the late 1990s, Soviet scientists held a major conference concerning what they considered a “demographic crisis,” in Belarus, a sharp population decline accentuated by a marked rise in morbidities as a result of a variety of factors, including the consequences of the Chernobyl accident (Marples 2000). Accordingly, it seemed pertinent and important to include a section below on the current situation on Chernobyl-irradiated lands as well as a look at some of the chief health concerns in the contemporary state. While the situation has improved of late, there remain some serious concerns, and claims by the government of a full recovery from the effects of the 1986 accident seem overly optimistic. (see, for example, <http://en.ctv.by/en/1430130672-president-lukashenko-checks-rehabilitation-of-lands-in-chernobyl-hit-district>). The other area in which Belarus has frequently made world headlines is alcohol consumption and deaths related to alcohol. Unlike in 1998, the impact of alcohol on the health of citizens is perhaps the key issue today.

Underlying these themes is the fundamental question of Belarusian identity and lack of national self-assertion, characteristics that have often been identified with the success of the Soviet experiment, relatively high living standards for most of the independence period, and the popularity of its only president to date. We cannot here deal in detail with the nature and policies of the Lukashenka administration, which has resorted to increasingly authoritarian methods to rule and control the country. It has been covered in depth elsewhere (see, for example, Silitski 2007, Ioffe 2006, 2007, Leshchenko 2008, Bekus 2010, and Wilson 2011). Suffice it to say that because of the concentration of power in the hands of the

president, the country's current structure and progress are very much a reflection of his worldview (which in turn may be a reflection of the outlook of the population) – as is more obviously its political direction and lack of democracy. Essentially, Lukashenka continues to revere the Soviet past and its “achievements,” depends on a command economy, and has not created or acknowledged other facets of national memory outside the relatively short but extremely costly (in terms of lives lost prematurely) Soviet era. On the other hand, the state has not gone backward, in that most residents support its independence and opportunities to operate in a world nestled between Russia and the European Union (EU), without full commitment to either.

This paper argues that while Belarus may be an example of a successful socialist republic of the Soviet period that has continued in the same vein since 1991, such development is unique, unnatural, and brought about by the extraordinary circumstances of state formation, which in turn have precluded nation-building in the European form (such as the Baltic states, Poland, and to some extent even Moldova). An understanding of the current state, regarded by some observers as retrogressive, authoritarian, paternalistic, and unreformed, but by at least one author as simply an accurate reflection of the society over which it rules (Ioffe 2015), is enhanced by an analysis of the factors that brought it into place and that have hindered its progression to democracy or a liberal form of government based on private investment and industrial modernization. Moreover, that state's long-term survival may depend upon the reversal of current trends.

Population trends

In August 2012, the *tut.by* news agency reported that Belarus had become the most urbanized republic of the former Soviet Union, with 75% of its population living in cities and towns. Moreover, since the collapse of the Soviet state, the portion of urban dwellers had increased by 8%, from 67% to 75%. By 2014, it had risen further to 76.28% (<http://www.statista.com/statistics/446463/urbanization-in-belarus/>). In this respect, the country mirrors the Russian Federation, where the urban population has remained at 74%, but contrasts with other republics like Moldova, in which the urban population has declined over the same period from 47% to 41%, Tajikistan (31% to 26%), Armenia (68% to 64%), and Kazakhstan (58% to 54%).

In Western Europe, there are examples of states with a higher level of urbanization – the extreme example is Belgium at 97.5% – and the Czech Republic and Switzerland have levels similar to that of Belarus. As will be shown below, however, these are not logical analogies because of the method of development, which tended elsewhere to enhance national cohesion rather than weaken it. Moreover, these states had more direct control and decision-making over their development. In addition to the trend of urbanization, the other significant point to be made about Belarus is the expansion of the capital city of Minsk in particular, mainly because of the in-migration of young adolescents aged 15–19.⁴

In the 2009 population census of the Republic of Belarus, the most recent, certain trends were apparent. First, the population had continued to decline, from 10.04 million a decade earlier, to 9.5 million (National Statistical Committee of the Republic of Belarus [NSCRB] 2016, 1). This trend has been in place since the mid-1990s. Interestingly, the peak year of population was the year Lukashenka took office, 1994, when it reached 10.24 million (Ministry of Statistics and Analysis of the Republic of Belarus 2004, 49). In 2013, the population was 9.46 million, a further drop of 80,000 from the time of the 2009 census. The share of the rural population had fallen further to 23.7% and the number of people living in villages was only 2.5 million (NSCRB 2016). The estimated population on 1 January 2015 was 9.48

million, suggesting a slight growth, though the source of the information was different and it would be premature to speak of a reversal of a long-time pattern (<http://www.citypopulation.de/Belarus.html>).

Two further trends are worth noting: the aging of the population and the incongruous increase in the number of residents of Minsk. According to one source, over the past decade, the coefficient of the “demographic load” in Belarus has risen considerably. It is manifested in the impact and burden on society of the nonproductive population and through calculation of the relative number of children and pensioners compared with those of working age. Based on the calculations of demographer Tat’iana Pron’ko, each year, the average age of Belarusians increases by 0.3 years. Whereas in 2010, it was 38.3 years, in 2030, it is expected to be 44.4, and in 2050, 48.5 (see <http://bdg.by/news/society/26505.html>). In this regard, it is not dissimilar to neighboring countries such as Poland and Ukraine (or distant ones such as Japan), and slightly higher than in Russia.

The Lukashenka regime maintains that the decline in life spans has been halted and that residents of Belarus are now living longer than in the recent past. This statement is borne out by statistical data but merely exacerbates the problem of aging, since the average age of the population may rise more rapidly given the low birth rates in the republic.⁵ In the 2009 census, 1.35 million residents were over the age of 65, and of these 68% were women (NSCRB 2016, 4). Recent alleged improvements in living standards, or social habits, or in health care have not affected the predominant trend, which is that villages continue to lose people and are inhabited mainly by elderly women. Moreover, there is little evidence that the health situation has improved markedly in recent years. The continuing impact of Chernobyl as well as the impact on society of alcoholism and other ailments is discussed below.

The other singular feature of population trends in the republic is not simply the growth of urban centers, but the expansion and prevalence of the city of Minsk in particular. At the time of the 2009 census, the city contained 19.2% of the population. Today, it is 20.4%, more than one-fifth of the total (<http://www.citypopulation.de/Belarus.html>). It is four times larger than the next biggest urban center, the city of Homiel, with a population of 482,700 – whereas in 1989, it was only three times larger (NSCRB 2016, 3). It is difficult to estimate the number of permanent settlers because many of those coming to the city are young people who wish to further their education. Presumably, some of these students leave Minsk upon graduation. Nevertheless, there are a substantial number of migrants arriving from the regions of Belarus who are slightly older, in the age range of 21–24 years. In terms of migration generally, and in contrast to other regions, Minsk has a slightly positive inflow of population as opposed to outflow, and much of it derives from migration from other parts of the republic, and to a lesser extent other countries of the former Soviet Union.⁶ The city of Minsk thus appears to warrant special attention in assessing the demographic situation in the republic because of its influence and unusual predominance.

Explaining the growth of the city of Minsk

Siarhei Danskikh points out that the urbanization of Belarus took place in a single generation. He also observes that urbanization is generally believed to accelerate “national ‘integrative’ processes,” citing the Czech Republic, Hungary, Finland, and Estonia as examples of the important role of the city in nation-building and modernization (Danskikh 2008, 89–90). The situation in Belarus, however, was quite different because the titular group was not involved in industrialization and remained almost exclusively rural, so that at the end of the nineteenth century, only 2.3% of Belarusians resided in urban centers. Even in 1939, after

the initial period of Soviet five-year plans and industrialization, the urban population of the republic was only 20.8% (Danskikh 2008, 94).

Two other developments of the 1930s paved the way for the singular evolution of the republic in later years: collectivization of agriculture and the elimination of the cultural elite during the Stalinist purges. By the end of 1934, collectivization in the republic was virtually completed, and on the eve of the Great Patriotic War in June 1941, at which time West Belarus had been incorporated into the republic, the eastern regions reported that 93.4% of households were now in the collectives and possessed 96.2% of the sown area (Kovalevna 2011, 257). Collectivization, which eliminated small private landholding and imposed heavy taxes on those farmers who attempted to remain outside the collective farms, paved the way for migration from the countryside to the towns, thus radically changing the formerly rural character of the ethnic Belarusian population.

The purges of 1937–1941 in Belarus are one of the least researched areas of Belarusian studies and are usually included in accounts of repressions across the country as a general phenomenon. Yet, they were exceptionally rigorous and all-encompassing, and eliminated 90% of the intelligentsia (Wilson 2011, 95). Another source comments that according to researchers, the deaths from Stalinist repressions amounted to 250,000 residents of the republic, a staggering figure, and that Kurapaty, the location of many executions, had become a symbol of genocide of the Belarusian people (Abetsedarskaia et al. 1997, 220). Simply put, the results of the purges were to deprive the republic of an indigenous (natural) leadership, one that had ironically sprung up particularly in the first decade of Soviet rule. The reform of the Belarusian language in 1933, to make it more similar to Russian, also played a part in this process (Goujon 1999, 663).

Thus, when mass urbanization accelerated in the postwar period, the cities in which it took place were both Sovietized and Russian-speaking. The Belarusians who moved there were almost exclusively peasants who did not become the elite of a new society, but rather cogs in a socialist experiment that some observers have seen as a model of Soviet industrial development.⁷ The point can hardly be exaggerated: modernization in Belarus took place without or else dragged along in its wake the Belarusians who should have been leading it, had the process occurred as it had in other growing nations or on the lines of the indigenization policies pursued by the Soviet leadership in the 1920s.⁸

The other event that had an enormous impact on the republic was World War II, which particularly changed the urban environment both through physical destruction – of the cities in particular – and the elimination of the vast majority of the Jewish population that had constituted the backbone of the urban centers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and a plurality of the city population prior to 1939. The war and its prequel – the annexation of West Belarus – also led to the emergence of Minsk as the pivotal city of the republic, both in terms of size and location and its later predominance in nation-building. Moreover, with the change of borders in 1939, reconfirmed when the war ended, Minsk moved from being a border city to the very center of the republic. The “loss” of Vilnius to Lithuania in October 1939, also ratified after the war, removed from the equation the other major city that had been a repository of Belarusian culture (Marples 1996, 17–18, 22–23).

Titarenko and Shirokanova note that because of the wartime destruction, the capital city had to be built anew, as a model of socialist (Stalinist) architecture. Subsequently, in 1991, when Belarus achieved independence, it was necessary “to build a nation out of the city’s socialist space” (Titarenko and Shirokanova 2011, 22). In short, rather than building a nation on typical European models, Belarus by circumstances – past repressions, a destructive war, and Stalinist forms of architecture, paralleled incidentally with post-Stalin sculptures of Soviet memorials and war heroes – emerged as a post-Soviet republic built

according to the Soviet model, with no special place accorded to the indigenous nation or the native language and culture. Such a development would have made European forms of nation-building difficult; the presidency of Lukashenka, however, exacerbated and reinforced the past development for most of the past two decades.

Titarenko and Shirokanova take their analysis further. They note the eradication of parts of the past in Minsk, taking advantage of the damage to buildings from 1941 to 1945 to construct a new “socialist” city. Thus, the postwar Soviet authorities removed the area of Castle Hill, on which a wooden castle had stood as well as the site of the historical river Niamiha (now underground), whereas the former Jewish quarter of Niamiha is now the location of the Sports Palace. Street names were changed – a practice that the current regime has continued – new office buildings replaced older ones, and bronze monuments to personalities of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries appeared. Many of them, as is the case more recently, were to heroes or partisans in the Great Patriotic War, which is currently “the main symbol of the nation.” In their view, the major Belarusian city is modeled on the Soviet socialist project but uses “post-modern tools” to build the nation and form a new cultural narrative (Titarenko and Shirokanova 2011, 31–33). On Victory Day 2005, the president continued the trend by renaming the two major streets of Minsk, Skaryna Avenue and Prospekt Masherova as Independence Avenue and Avenue of the Victors respectively.⁹ Thus, more distant historical memories are erased and replaced by socialist ones that are more convenient for the current state post-Soviet model.

The dominance of the capital city of Minsk, perpetuated by recent population increases that have taken place despite declining populations especially in rural regions, signifies the continuing prevalence of the socialist model. The German scholar Tomas Bohn has provided the most comprehensive study of what he terms the “Minsk Phenomenon” to date. In a wide-ranging study that looks at state planning since World War II, he highlights the earlier planning of a socialist city, migration, residential conditions, enormous immigration to Minsk, the residential zones, and the urbanization of Belarus. He notes that the city was rebuilt from zero after its complete destruction during the war, alongside a war cult that stressed the heroics while ignoring events such as the Holocaust in Belarus. Among the most prominent heroes are the partisans, whom Bohn perceives as a symbol of the republic’s striving for autonomy from the Kremlin. He sees the devastation of the war as central to one of the main dilemmas of twentieth-century Belarus: the failure to develop an urban culture.¹⁰

Moreover, the capital since the Soviet period has been almost exclusively Russian-speaking, further signaling the alienation and marginalization of the indigenous population, which is essentially village-oriented – any visitor to Minsk or other cities will note the amount of time residents spend helping relatives with the harvest or attending to dachas in the summer. One can also note the habit of apartment residents (predominantly women) meeting to hold conversations village-style in the communal areas between Soviet-era apartment buildings. The only source of authentic Belarusian conversation or communication in the capital city is among intellectuals, linguists, and young people at universities and institutes. There are similar examples on social networks, and the correlation between opposition to the regime and speaking the native language is still in place, if not as pointed as in former years.¹¹

The proto-Soviet building trends have continued in Belarus since 2005. Most notably, the Museum of the Great Patriotic War in Minsk has moved from its old home in Kastychnickaja Square to a new location on Avenue of the Victors. The president authorized the move in 2008 and the newly constructed museum opened its doors on 2 July 2014, on the eve of the 70th anniversary of the liberation of Minsk from Nazi occupation. Its

architect, Viktor Kramarenka (together with Mikhail Vinogradov), also devised another relocated building, the National Library of Minsk, close to the Vostok metro station on the road that leads to Moscow (Kasmach 2016). The library carries the distinction of being named one of the world's 30 "ugliest buildings" and resembles a space capsule atop two triangular arches (<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/finance/property/pictures/9126031/The-worlds-30-ugliest-buildings.html?frame=2159746>). The War Museum has yet to be assessed on its aesthetic appearance but it has attracted about 30,000 visitors per month and last year featured a joint exhibition with its Russian counterpart in Moscow titled "Victors – Together in Art!" (<http://eng.belta.by/society/view/great-patriotic-war-museum-in-minsk-draws-over-30000-visitors-per-month-11311-2015>).

The key point is that official Belarus has not sought to transform the architectural structure of the capital city. On the contrary, it perpetuates the former Soviet model, and Soviet themes are now reused with more Belarusian content. Whereas its southern neighbor Ukraine has initiated a so-called "decommunization" campaign that has begun with the dismantling of Lenin's statues and those of other Soviet figures, as well as the renaming of all towns, villages, and streets called after "heroes" from the Soviet period, those in Belarus, from Mikhail Kalinin to Feliks Dzerzhinsky (in this case, a simple bust opposite the KGB headquarters in Minsk) remain, as does the imposing Lenin in Independence Square outside the parliament building. Some visitors to Minsk from other parts of Europe appear to appreciate the continued construction of a neo-Stalinist city, but more than half of the tourists who come to the city are residents of Russia. Only Moldova, of the post-Soviet states, attracts fewer visitors than Belarus, indicating perhaps the limited attractiveness of the surroundings.¹² The architecture aptly symbolizes the reluctance of the authorities to move on to something new, or for that matter older, in the earlier history of Belarus and Belarusians.

Impact of Chernobyl and other health issues

Another key area in assessing the demographic situation in the republic is health care. Here, the critical event of the past, both psychologically and in economic terms such as the costs of evacuation and continuing health care, is the Chernobyl nuclear accident. Its impact on Belarus is still the subject of debate, particularly after the president authorized the re-cultivation of contaminated lands in 2004 (Myers 2005) and subsequently commissioned the building of the country's first nuclear power plant in February 2012 at Astraviec on the border with Lithuania.¹³ The questions relevant to this paper are: has the accident had a significant impact on the country's demographic development and to what extent does it remain a factor 30 years later? We will deal briefly with both these questions.

The Belarusian government claims that it has overcome the major consequences of the Chernobyl disaster, and each new report brings stories of a further reduction in the number of contaminated settlements and those with a right to evacuation. According to data from the NSCRB, there were 2352 populated settlements in radioactive contamination zones at the beginning of 2012, of which 470 had the right to resettlement.¹⁴ In these regions lived a population of 1.14 million, or 12% of the country's population. That figure included 216,900 children, defined as those aged 0–17 years. The number of those living in irradiated zones has declined by about 500,000 since 1996, presumably because many of those eligible for resettlement moved. But considering that the population throughout the republic fell by 700,000 over that same period (NSCRB 2016, 1, 4–5), the *proportion* of those living in affected zones has not changed significantly over the past 16 years.

A decree of the Belarusian Council of Ministers dated 11 January 2016 brought further "good news". The radioactive contamination zone now consists of 2193 settlements and 52

“objects;” a further 1827 settlements are in the zone with “periodic radiation control” and 352 in the zone with the right to evacuation. Almost 31,000 people are living in the most contaminated zones (http://www.chernobyl.gov.by/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=486:-203&catid=54:knews&Itemid=2). It is well known that the most affected regions of Belarus are, in order, Homiel, Brest, and Mahiliou, though the entire republic other than the northern Viciebsk region received substantial fallout of radioactive iodine in the first days after the accident. Since the late 1980s, the Chernobyl accident has been highlighted by the opposition as an example of the maltreatment of Belarus by the former Soviet regime, and today as a question neglected by the Lukashenka regime (Stsiapanau 2010, 146).

Another study of the effects of Chernobyl on Belarus is based on a survey of more than 6500 people from 2003 to 2008. It concludes, in line with earlier works, that the chief health result of the disaster was a “substantial” increase in childhood thyroid cancer brought about by radioactive iodine in the air. It was a very rare disease prior to the accident, and its emergence was precisely in those areas most vulnerable to radioactive iodine fallout. By 2008, there were approximately 5000 cases, mostly among those under four years of age at the time of the accident. The authors also note the heightened appearance of a number of other illnesses in the contaminated regions, including lung diseases, digestive problems, blood disorders, birth defects, fertility problems, and immune deficiencies. They cite reports also of psychological issues, increased anxiety, depression, and other illnesses in these same zones, as well as what is termed “Chernobyl AIDS,” a general weakening of the immune system resulting in more frequent ailments and common infections (Yemelyanau, Amialchuk, and Ali 2012, 5–7). Thus, one can conclude that Chernobyl-related illnesses continue to plague the population of about one-fifth of the republic.

In addition to problems arising from Chernobyl, other health difficulties are linked often to lifestyles, such as the spread of socially transmitted diseases, smoking, and particularly, the consumption of alcohol. Though space precludes a detailed analysis of these issues, a recent study has concluded that in Belarus, 28.4% of all deaths among males and 14.3% of those among women are linked to alcohol abuse. The author notes that Belarusians fall into the category of spirit drinkers, among whom deaths from alcohol are significantly higher than those in countries where consumption is linked to less-alcoholic drinks, consumed mainly at mealtimes and more evenly distributed through the week. The study’s main conclusions are that in Belarus today, alcohol is a key reason for the high mortality rate, with those most affected being men 30–49 years old. The study cites other research that revealed that in the city of Hrodna, almost one-third of men were occasional consumers of *samogon* (moonshine), leading to the deduction that mortality rates have risen because of the strength of the alcohol imbibed. Moreover, alcohol and tobacco consumption seem to be closely linked, according to this study (Razvodovsky 2012).

In related research, the same author explores the relationship between overindulgence and the affordability of alcohol. He sees a pattern between the rise in those seeking treatment for alcoholism, which increased 1.7 times from 1990 to 2010, and continues to rise, and the attainability of drinks. Not until the financial recession of 2008 was there any marked change in this general trend, that is, between 1998 and 2008, vodka became ever more affordable. Thus, whereas a monthly salary in 1993 allowed an individual to purchase 7.3 liters of vodka, by 2010, the same person could buy 73.9 liters. Even were the state to take the unpopular step of raising the price of vodka, that would not address the pervasive consumption of illegal alcohol (Razvodovsky 2013, 32–34).¹⁵

The above comments appear corroborated by a far less detailed online paper on “the heaviest drinking countries of the world,” which places Belarus first, ahead of Moldova,

Lithuania, and the Russian Federation. Its authors estimate consumption of alcohol per capita at 17.5 liters annually and note that alcohol was a factor in almost 35% of national mortalities. Though the government has taken severe measures to reduce illegal distillation of alcohol, the amount produced in *samogon* stills accounts for about one-fifth of total consumption (Hess, Frohlich, and Calio 2014). Unsurprisingly, the authors conclude that alcohol has had a serious impact on the health of the republic's population. As one analyst noted in 2011, it is also inexpensive: a bottle of vodka in Belarusian restaurants frequently "costs less than a carton of orange juice."¹⁶

Overindulgence in alcohol may thus explain in part the dearth of elderly men in Belarusian villages, the key demographic feature of population trends, but they are also scarce in urban environments, where alcohol is more readily available.¹⁷ In short, the Belarusians have a drinking problem. In this respect, they are perhaps not dissimilar to other European states, particularly of the northern regions, but as noted, their development has been very different. Excessive alcohol consumption is also related to the onset of coronary heart disease, of which Belarus has the sixth highest incident in the world (<http://www.worldlifeexpectancy.com/country-health-profile/belarus>). Such dilemmas serve to erode the emergence of a nation-state further and catalyze both the population decline and the death of the villages. In general, the leadership of the country tends to ignore many of these problems, though it has achieved some successes in other areas, particularly the reduction in infant mortality rates, which fell from 14.63 per 1000 live births in the year 2000 to 3.64 in 2014, and life expectancy, as noted, has ticked upward in recent years (<http://www.indexmundi.com/g/g.aspx?c=bo&v=29>).

Conclusions

This paper argues that Belarus as a developing nation-state is a special case. First, it is suffering from a demographic crisis that has continued since the late 1990s and, which left unchecked, will lead to the demise of its villages, the only remaining repositories of "Belarusian life." Second, urbanization has not only continued in the independence period, but it has increased at a rate faster than in any other former Soviet republic, though it has not occurred evenly throughout the republic. Third, and following on from this statement, the city of Minsk has become the most rapidly growing location in the republic and effectively controls the nation. Whereas other cities have declined in population, as have the regions in totality, Minsk city continues to attract people, becoming ever more dominant, further justifying Bohn's concept of a "phenomenon." It remains in many ways, despite modern developments, a socialist model city – the opening of the new Museum of the Great Patriotic War in 2014 symbolized this trend, and emphasized further Minsk's tendency to equate its past with Soviet times rather than earlier history.

Thus (and fourth), because of the nature of Belarus' development, the city is not leading national development but continuing the Soviet practice of development on socialist lines, and Minsk remains a Russian-speaking city with important state-run industries. Many of these enterprises, scattered throughout the country in cities like Hrodna, Salihorsk, and Homiel as well as Minsk, were highly profitable in the past, but are now facing financial crises, some of which are a result of the fractious relationship with Russia, where some business would like to launch takeover bids of their Belarusian counterparts or are prepared to await the demise of such firms through financial problems. These developments are a result of the financial woes of Belarus and the economic policies fostered since 1994 (but especially prominent from 2014 to 2016) by Lukashenka as well as external events. Added to these problems are the continuing health effects of Chernobyl and other issues,

particularly high rates of alcoholism, all of which only exacerbate the plight of the villages – despite the efforts of the president to sidestep the predicament with statements about re-cultivating contaminated lands.

Taken together, these issues raise serious doubts about the long-term future of this central European state.¹⁸ The population decline would make the sustainability of the rural areas in doubt by the middle of the twenty-first century. By that time, the rural population may be too small to be significant and depopulated villages would be the norm rather than the exception. The cities, which already constitute the vast majority of the population, and thus the future of the nation, are already seeing the decline of once-lucrative very large enterprises that comprise the main labor force of the country. The problems at Belaruskali, MAZ, and the Mazyr Oil Refinery – not discussed here because of space restrictions – are illustrative of this trend, which reflects the failure of the socialization project. Large-scale privatization of these companies is a potential way out of the dilemma, but it is fraught with danger as long as Russia remains the only purchaser in the market. Although the authorities have certainly pursued other partners, particularly China and Venezuela (particularly prior to the death of President Hugo Chavez in 2013), the returns have been limited.¹⁹

Deeper integration with the EU is a second option (trade is already expanding), but restricted as long as the two sides are divided over such issues as Belarus' retention of political prisoners, the death penalty, and manipulated elections. In January 2016, the EU suspended its sanctions on Belarus for four months, including asset freezes and visa bans on 170 of 174 state officials, including Lukashenka. The USA followed suit. (<http://www.rferl.org/content/eu-belarus-sanctions-suspended-four-months/27333874.html>). The change of policy took place following the release of the remaining designated “political prisoners” and as a result of Belarus' mediating role in the conflict between Ukraine and the Russian Federation. It is difficult to discern whether the improvement of relations will endure. To date, however, the government has shown few signs of moderating its harsh policies on human rights or toward perceived internal opponents. Without a fundamental change of outlook both of economic policies and political moderation, the options of pursuing the pro-EU route seem limited. Even more important, the Lukashenka presidency, which has been in power for almost 22 years, has not come up with a sustainable model for the future.

Notes

1. My premise is that it is premature to analyze the consequences of the current crisis, which is a result of several factors, particularly the fall of oil and gas prices in the Russian Federation and its impact on related industries in Belarus.
2. Arguably, the pursuit of a national policy stemmed directly from periodic rifts with Russia starting in 2002. The president has stated frequently, however, that he perceives no differences between Russians and Belarusians. He also adheres to the concept of the Russia–Belarus Union and has taken an active, albeit sometimes dissenting, role in the Customs Union of Russia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan. The term is not new, as it refers to the period of independence-seeking in Latin America in the early nineteenth century and featured in Benedict Anderson's seminal work *Imagined Communities* (2006), but with respect to the post-Soviet republics, one of the first instances of its usage was by Ukrainian publicist Mykola Riabchuk to describe Eastern Ukrainians, who are Russian-speaking but nonetheless supported the 2004 Orange Revolution. Ioffe (2006, 191) has applied it to Belarusians as well, which is a rational deduction as long as one takes into account the undulations of the history of the republic in the twentieth century, some aspects of which are noted below.
3. See, for example, the poll conducted by the National Institute for Socio-Economic and Political Research (Minsk-Vilnius), June 2016, indicating a rise in the percentage of respondents in a hypothetical vote in favor of joining the EU (a majority still opposes it).

4. See tut.by, 27 August 2012: <http://news.tut.by/society/307054.html>. According to this same source, urban population growth is forecasted to peak in 2020, when 7.2 million people will live in cities.
5. NSCRB (2016, 2) indicates that the average lifespan for men rose from 64.7 years in 2011 to 66.6 years in 2012, and for women, there was a similar increase from 76.7 to 77.6 years.
6. See, for example, FPS Research Center, 14 February 2012, <http://forsecurity.org/belarus-ahead-ex-ussr-urbanization-rates>.
7. The process of peasants moving to cities as cogs in a socialist experiment is not dissimilar to that described by Stephen Kotkin (1997) in his study of Magnitogorsk, but different, in that it took place in a non-Russian republic without an ethnic urban elite of its own.
8. Only from 1956 did the republic's Communist Party have ethnically Belarusian leaders. But these figures – Kiryl Mazurau (1956–1965) and Petr Masherau (1965–1980) – were former partisans and devotees of the socialized model. In this sense, they had been effectively de-Belarusianized, or perhaps more accurately, they had subsumed their ethnic identity to that of Homo Sovieticus. The partisan leaders led the republic until October 1980, when Masherau died in a motor accident.
9. Lukashenka did not erase the original names entirely, but gave them to more minor streets of Minsk. See <http://www.sb.by/post/43468/>.
10. Bon (Bohn) (2013, 330). Bohn's work is the definitive examination of the development of the city of Minsk as an example of urban planning and urbanization under the Soviet Union. I have explored the use of war and its commemoration for political propaganda in Marples (2014).
11. The main opposition newspapers are either bilingual or in Belarusian, such as *Nasha Niva* and *Narodnaia Volia*. But in general, newspapers are less popular than social media sites.
12. Charnysh (2015).
13. Neighboring states have expressed concern about problems of security stemming from the construction of the station so close to the Lithuanian capital of Vilnius (as well as another nuclear power station under construction in the Kaliningrad region). The two states are concerned about electric power lines from the two nuclear plants intruding on Baltic electricity links to other EU countries. See <http://www.kurier.lt/ministry-litvy-i-polshi-soveshayutsya-popovodu-sinxronizacii-i-bezopasnosti-ostroveckoj-aes/>. The first reactor is scheduled to come into service in 2018 and the second in 2020, each 1200 megawatts in capacity. See <http://belsat.eu/ru/news/rossiyane-sobrali-korpus-eksperimentalnogo-reaktora-dlya-vtorogo-energobloka-ostrovetskoy-aes/>. The Homeland Union–Lithuanian Christian Democratic Party has reportedly gathered 65,000 signatures opposing the building of a nuclear plant in Astraviec. See <https://charter97.org/ru/news/2016/7/11/212925/>.
14. The right to resettlement is based on the level of Cesium-137 in the soil in curies per square kilometer. Levels of one to five curies are in this category. After Chernobyl, areas with more than 15 curies/sq km in the soil were subject to evacuation.
15. One is reminded of Gorbachev's ill-fated anti-alcohol campaign of 1985. See Bhattacharya, Gathmann, and Miller (2013).
16. Yarik (Yaraslau) Kryvoi in *Belarus Digest*. <http://belarusdigest.com/story/cheap-booze-people-belarus-5528>.
17. One could add here alcohol-related accidents, particularly involving agricultural machinery.
18. Added to these comments, but as yet undetermined are the consequences of the conflict in Ukraine and Russian intervention in Crimea and parts of the Donbas. At the least, they have led to questions about how Belarus can remain neutral and develop its own political and social path, particularly in light of its commitments to the Eurasian Economic Community, the Collective Security Treaty Organization, and the Russia–Belarus Union, all of which are directed and controlled firmly by Moscow.
19. For a brief summary of current economic problems in Belarus, see Marples (2015) and <http://belarusdigest.com/story/moment-truth-digest-belarus-economy-24746>.

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