6. Contemporary Migration Trends in Belarus

*Lyubov’ E. Tikhonova*

A comprehensive assessment of contemporary migration trends in Belarus requires an historical perspective. Full appreciation necessitates comparison with previous patterns, as well as with trends in the republic’s socio-economic development. Thus, this essay provides a preliminary review of the basic correlation between shifting migration patterns and demographic, ecological, and political changes in Belarus.

Throughout the post-war period, there have been three distinct stages of migration to and from Belarus. The period of agrarian “over-population” corresponds to the first stage (up to the 1970s). During this phase, two-thirds of the Belarusian population resided in rural areas. The republic’s urban areas were unable to absorb the surplus rural population due to the gradual pace of industrial development. Consequently, over 100,000 people emigrated from Belarus during peak years. Emigration outside of the Soviet bloc was rare and was generally politically motivated. Most migration during this first period was to other Soviet republics and was economically driven.

The second stage (1970–1985) occurred during the period of intense industrial development of the republic. During this phase, large urban industrial centers emerged to lure migrants from the rural areas. Emigration flows decreased and leveled off by the end of the period. Moreover, the migration pattern assumed a stable centripetal structure that protected Belarusian infant industries. According to various studies, a highly mobile and educated labor force immigrated to Belarus. However, the urban areas could not completely absorb the droves of younger Belarusians that flocked to the cities from the farms. As a result, the urban social infrastructure was saturated, thus precipitating a social crisis that squelched the economic incentive for migration.

During the third stage (from 1985), the contradictions of economic development were magnified. A “depopulation” phenomenon, originally observed in the villages at the end of the 1980s, became the norm across Belarus. The situation worsened in the wake of the Chernobyl disaster and further deteriorated with the...
socio-economic displacement precipitated by the breakup of the Soviet Union. As a result, throughout this period there was a tremendous exodus of people from the republic. Belarus, for example, lost over 30,000 people in population exchanges with other former republics of the Soviet Union. On average, 1.5 million people moved during the two years following the Chernobyl disaster. Only recently has this trend begun to subside.

The Chernobyl disaster dramatically disrupted previous migration trends, as people sought to minimize exposure to radioactive fallout. Because of the disaster, over 23 percent of the republic’s territory was contaminated with Cesium 137 kBk/square meters. Over 18,000 square kilometers of farm land was contaminated, 22 percent of which became completely non-arable. Of the 1.8 million people that lived in the contaminated area prior to the accident (18 percent of the total population), roughly 25,000 people were evacuated immediately, largely on their own accord. Roughly 130,000 people have since relocated, although, due to the severe economic crisis accompanying the Soviet collapse, a large number have recently begun to return. This large-scale exodus from the contaminated zone altered the pattern of settlement throughout the republic. In particular, it gave rise to a bifurcated regional pattern of migration—some regions emerged with highly concentrated urban and rural populations, while others became scarcely populated zones which were poorly endowed with land and labor. In the Gomel oblast alone, for example, 100,000 people either left voluntarily or were forced out of the region.

The ecological disaster only exacerbated the existing rural to urban migration pattern in the republic. The largest exodus from the rural contaminated areas took place during the first few years after the disaster (134,700 in 1986; 115,800 in 1987; and 108,600 in 1988). This exodus not only reduced the size and altered the gender-age mix of the agricultural sector of the republic, but precipitated a nationwide de-population process.

In addition, the Chernobyl disaster indirectly led to a reduction in the labor force in cities near the contaminated zone. Large urban centers such as Gomel, Mogilev, Mozyr, Zhlobin, Pinsk, and Lida suffered dramatic population losses. The situation was even worse in many small towns located in the immediate vicinity of the accident. The void left by this mass exodus did not lure outsiders to the region due to concerns of lingering radioactivity, undeveloped local housing markets, shortages of medical provisions, a stagnating business community, and perverse taxation policies. Those who voluntarily left “clean” areas to return to the disaster zone remain there under one condition: that they never become “hostage to the zone.”
The Soviet collapse, however, also generated pressures that directly contradicted previous migration patterns. On the one hand, the process of democratization has allowed for tremendous labor mobility among the former Soviet republics. On the other hand, the ecological consequences of the disaster and the deepening economic crisis make the exchanges one-sided, as the number of emigrants from Belarus exceeds the number of immigrants. In 1985, emigration was extremely selective, resulting in a 2,200 net inflow of people into the republic. From the moment restrictions were lifted and emigration procedures were simplified, the balance turned negative—12,900 people in 1990; and 5,600 people in 1994. This volume was highest in 1990, as more than 34,000 people emigrated (over 97 percent went to Israel), with the number reaching 22,000 in 1991. During the last few years the emigration pattern in Belarus changed considerably, with the greatest numbers of emigrants opting for the United States (1.5 percent in 1990; and 41 percent in 1994) as the final destination point. The number of people emigrating to Germany has also increased, from 95 to 400 people, respectively.

In general, Jews have traditionally represented the largest share of emigrants from Belarus. This trend has changed over the past few years, as the number of ethnic Belarusian and Russian emigrants increased. In 1990, for instance, Jews represented 74 percent of all emigrants, with ethnic Belarusians and Russians constituting over 17 per cent. In comparison, the Jewish contingent in 1994 represented only 62 percent of the total number of emigrants, with the others together constituting approximately 26 percent.

According to the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the demographic trends of Belarusian emigration are especially ominous. Most of those that are exiting are young, working-age (20-24 years old) people, as well as those that are the most professionally active and productive (30-49 years old). Over 90 percent of those seeking permanent residence abroad are either college educated or have attended professional trade schools.

Major changes are also taking place in Belarus' net population flows with the former republics of the Soviet Union. The number of ethnic Belarusians leaving the republic for the near-abroad is decreasing at a rate that corresponds with the emigration of the Russian-speaking population. Moreover, those forced to leave their homes in various regions of ethnic strife throughout the former Soviet Union now seek refuge in Belarus. As a result, the aggregate population is increasing rather than decreasing, despite the emigration of Russian nationals. From 1991 to 1993, for example, the republic absorbed approximately 90,000 people. This migration trend not only has compensated for the natural loss in population, but has also contributed to the overall growth of the population. Fear and confusion, experienced by the Russian-speaking population as a result
of the collapse of the Soviet Union, sparked the increase in the number of people who came to Belarus despite the ecological and health risks. Over the past several years (1994-1995), however, stress has become secondary to economic and ecological concerns in the migration calculus, resulting in a slight decline in the aggregate population.

In 1994, certain critical changes took place in the population flows between Belarus and Russia. In the past, the number of people coming into the republic from Russia was greater than the number leaving. Beginning in 1994, however, there was a negative balance due to a decline in the Belarusian standard of living.

Among the peoples of the former Soviet Union, the Belarusians have demonstrated the greatest propensity to migrate. In fact, they constitute over 47 percent of the total number of people in transition in the region. In general, these trends have occurred while intra-state population mobility has declined. The number of people coming to and leaving Belarus have been decreasing at approximately the same rate. A reduction in the total volume of refugees has been observed across the board. During 1991-1994, Belarus’ population exchanges with Russia decreased by 53 percent, with the former Central Asian republics by 48.5 percent, and with the Trans-Caucasian region by 61.5 percent.

Although some of the most socially active residents of Belarus have emigrated, migration flows have been largely contained within the republic, reaching 71 percent of the total in the last few years. The population has reacted to the breakup of the Soviet Union by curtailing economic, educational, and marriage-oriented migrations. Localization of the migration processes within the republic and the lowering of the population’s mobility are the main characteristics of the contemporary period. People prefer to wait out this “difficult” time, staying put in traditional areas of residence.

Over the past several years, a new trend has emerged, characterized by a decline in the rate of growth of the urban population in Belarus. This is attributable mainly to a decline in the flow of people moving from rural areas. By 1992, Belarus’ rural areas, which previously used to lose up to 60,000-70,000 people annually, had a net population inflow of 14,200; in 1993, the trend only slightly readjusted, with a paltry 4,500 people leaving the rural zones; and by 1994–1995 this outflow reached levels of 10,900 and 7,900, respectively. Inter-city relocation plays an increasingly important role in the regional structure of migration relative to the village-to-city transition. In 1990, for example, 82,800 people migrated between cities, with village-to-city transition totaling 109,300 people. By 1994, despite an overall decrease in the volume of migration, these flows were
64,400 and 56,600 people, respectively. Subsequently, inter-city migration has exceeded the volumes of people moving from rural to urban areas.

The influx of people into areas previously contaminated by Soviet ecological disasters is the new trend. In the Gomel oblast, for example, the population increased in 1993 by 2,400 people, as compared to the decline of 50,700 inhabitants in 1990. Similarly, in the Mogilev oblast there was a net gain of 2,300 people in 1993, as compared to the net loss of 6,400 people in 1990.

These basic trends in Belarusian migration correspond with general demographic patterns associated with modernization. However, in the absence of industrial development or urban growth, the pattern of migration has become more volatile and has shifted as a result of ecological and local socio-economic conditions. Socio-economic stabilization and renewed development, while affected by population transition, cannot be realized solely via the process of migration.

This limitation notwithstanding, migration patterns have affected the trajectory of Belarusian development by determining the size of the labor force available for employment. Labor emigration is still at an embryonic level, as only 2,000 Belarusian citizens have work contracts abroad, of which over 90 percent are employed at construction sites in Russia. Those leaving for employment in the far abroad are either highly qualified specialists, or unskilled laborers that occupy poorly paid and less prestigious jobs. Legal rights and protection for such labor, however, is non-existent and shows no signs of becoming institutionalized in the near future.

In general, there is an increasing demand for the Belarusian government to regulate the influx of refugees. Despite the legacy of the Chernobyl disaster, Belarus’ relative political stability has made it an attractive place for groups seeking to escape discrimination and flee zones of ethnic conflict throughout the near abroad. Moreover, Belarus provides a convenient stopover for those groups migrating to and from Eastern and Western Europe. Throughout 1989–1995, the State Migration Service registered nearly 31,000 refugees from the near and far abroad. In the absence of effective government mechanisms for regulating migration, Belarus has, for all practical purposes, adopted an “open door” policy that, in turn, has aggravated demographic and socio-economic problems in certain regions.

The majority of refugees come from Russia and the Baltic states. Over 76 percent of these immigrants speak Russian, of which more than one-half are Belarusian. The remaining 24 percent are evenly divided between the Tadjiks, Ukrainians, Poles, Armenians, and Georgians. The majority of these immigrants consist of single women with children (roughly 60 percent are of working age), with 46
percent consisting of children under 16 years and the elderly. The largest burden of refugees (approximately 52 percent) falls on the Vitebsk oblast, the only area not contaminated by radioactivity. The next largest is Gomel oblast with 16 percent, followed by Mogilev oblast with 8.6 percent. Although the latter two are the most contaminated zones, both regions offer abundant housing that attracts desperate people.

Adding to this influx of immigrants are refugees from outside the former Soviet Union. These immigrants consist primarily of peoples from Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Iran, Iraq, Pakistan, Sri-Lanka, and Somalia. These people originally were sent to Belarus as part of educational and training programs administered by the Soviet state, and have since refused to return home for political reasons. According to the U.N. representative in Belarus, there are approximately 2,000 such refugees presently in Belarus. In addition, there are about 1,000 Vietnamese citizens living in the republic who had stopped working when their contracts expired. Some of them do not want to leave Belarus and continued to reside in the republic as illegal aliens. Others have been victimized by their own national government’s economic austerity and remain in Belarus because Vietnam does not have the financial resources to bring them home.

Belarus has neither the resources nor experience to legally monitor or enforce migration legislation. Nor do the other former republics of the Soviet Union have effective immigration controls. According to experts, the vast majority of illegal immigrants, roughly 200,000, enter from the CIS, Baltic states, Asia, Africa, and the Middle East, originally as tourists, with or without transit visas for work-related and personal reasons. As a result, the migration situation adversely affects the socio-economic situation in the country, contributing to the spread of serious illnesses, rising crime rates, drug smuggling, expansion of the underground labor market, and real threats to national security of the republic.

Often, illegal immigrants arrive in the republic as refugees. As such they are not eligible to receive government assistance because there are no legislative acts concerning the status of refugees. Deportation of foreign nationals who do not have the right to stay in Belarus poses another serious problem, as the republic does not have the requisite resources to undertake such measures without adversely affecting social stability.

In order to solve problems of migration, the government created the State Migration Service under the State Labor Committee in June 1992. At present, laws concerning reform of the migration services, such as the development of a central apparatus with territorial subdivisions and the establishment of an independent management entity are still pending. Instead, foreign residents are
governed by the June 3, 1993, “Law on the Legal Status of Foreigners and Stateless Persons in the Republic of Belarus.” According to this law, refugees are entitled to reside permanently or temporarily on the territory of the republic, to engage in a specific labor and economic activity, and to enjoy all socio-economic rights, including the right to social security (for permanent residents), and education. Other laws have also been passed, including “On Citizenship in the Republic of Belarus” (September 18, 1991); “On the Ethnic Minorities in the Republic of Belarus” (October 11, 1992); and “On Refugees” (February 22, 1995). The law “On Immigration,” which is currently under review by the Supreme Council of the Republic, should complete the formation of an effective legal framework.

The law “On Refugees,” adopted in February 1995, created the legal foundation for admitting refugees into Belarus. The law conferred upon refugees an appropriate legal status and specified the terms of government assistance. While it was expected that this law would be enacted starting July 1, 1995, it has been postponed due to the complex economic situation in the republic, the sharp drop in the standard of living, and the downturn in the labor market.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, migration trends in Belarus are forcing the government to improve rapidly the normative and legal infrastructure for regulating large population flows. Laws alone, however, will be insufficient for restoring balance to the process. Therefore, the state should craft regional programs aimed at controlling the uneven growth of urban areas and attracting people to depressed rural areas. State regulation is especially needed in those zones that are developing nascent economic markets. Farmers, for instance, require state subsidies to begin cultivating land on the outskirts of urban areas. Similarly, entrepreneurs that are seeking new business opportunities in small urban centers need federal support, via tax incentives and direct transfers, for the renewal and modernization of the local social infrastructure. Thus, because migration and modernization go hand in hand, it is critical for the Belarusian government to pursue highly coordinated strategies in both realms.