

“LONGEVITY OF THE POPULATION: THE GLOBAL CONTEXT AND POLITICS OF BELARUS”

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Abstract

The issue of aging has been actively discussed in recent decades. It is one of the global trends of the 21st century. The increasing life expectancy is one of the most visible achievements of our time. The constructive scientific approach focuses not on aging, but on productive longevity.

The developed health care system, proper material security, involvement in public processes and legal protection are the conditions for current and future generations of people to receive “longevity dividends”.

The Republic of Belarus, like many other countries, is undergoing a demographic transformation. Analysis of strategic principles, measures and mechanisms applied in our country in the field of ensuring productive longevity, shows the qualitative aspects of the socially oriented economy model that we are implementing. Its efficiency is confirmed by the high places of Belarus in the Human Development Index ranking and by Sustainable Development Goals results.

The category “older generation” is very diverse. It is determined by age differences, gender, nationality, level of education, income, health status, place of residence, family and many other factors. Consequently, the consideration of the problems of active longevity requires a combination of general principles and approaches with the selection of target groups and point measures when working with them.

Each member of society is valuable and equal, fulfills its mission. General involvement is the future of society; society of active, worthy, respected, and intelligent people.

Keywords

Productive longevity, longevity dividends, gerontology and geriatrics

Humanity has entered a new era. Rapid global natural, man-made, political and economic transformations have led to a new understanding of threats and challenges. Moreover, paradoxical situations arise when the impact of a generally positive trend leads to the appearance of new challenge. In such a way on a global scale problems of providing the population with clean water and food are progressively solved (although perhaps not so fast), health system capacity is growing, issues of providing housing and other benefits of civilization are resolved. All these facts together lead to an increase in life expectancy. On the other hand, it means that the average age of the Earth's inhabitants is steadily increasing or, in other words, the population is aging, and with this - related questions are raised.

It is no accident that the issue of aging has been actively discussed in recent decades. Of course, not all countries are equally going through these processes. Japan and European countries show the greatest interest in this regard. We are well aware of the two World Assemblies on

Ageing and the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing (2002) adopted at the second Assembly.

It is significant that global approaches have a strong perspective context, one might even say a positive one. For example in the report “Aging in the 21st Century: the Triumph and the Challenge”, which is a part of the work carried out once every ten years to assess the implementation of the Madrid Plan, issues of aging are considered precisely through the prism of the triumphal development of mankind¹. And really the increasing life expectancy is one of the most visible achievements of our time. Factors contributing to this increase are manifold: from high-quality nutrition and improvement of living conditions (such as, for example, water supply and wastewater disposal, power supply) to medical advances, health-preserving behavior, welfare growth.

From my point of view it is more logical to talk not about aging, but about longevity, moreover, productive longevity. It is appropriate to cite some data contained in the above-mentioned report, as well as in other international instruments such as “The World report on ageing and health” (2015), “The Global strategy and action plan on aging and health” (2016-2020). It should be noted that despite some differences in the forecast quantitative estimates, the general trend is clearly visible.

These documents provide a deep assessment of the global situation in this area and allow us to predict its development. In 1950, there were 205 million people aged 60 and over in the world or 7,9 % of total population. By 2012, there were almost 810 million of them, or 11.5% of the world's population. According to forecasts, by 2050, the total number of older people will exceed 2 billion. Every fifth inhabitant of the Earth will be of this age. Moreover, in 64 countries, this rate will exceed 30% of the population. By 2050 the proportion of people aged 60 years or older in the total population in Europe will be approximately 34%; in Latin America, the Caribbean and Asia – about 25%.

It is expected that by 2045-2050, the average life expectancy of newborns in developed countries will reach 83 years, in developing countries – 74 years. Herewith the growing gender imbalance is a serious trend. If at the age of 60 and over there are 84 men per 100 women, then at the age of 80 there are only 61 men. With that 47% of men and about 24% of women are involved in the labor process at an older age.

An important conclusion arising from the above-mentioned documents is that people aged 60 years and older demonstrate high labor productivity, make a significant contribution to society not only as employees, but also as entrepreneurs, volunteers, voters. The developed health care system, proper material security, involvement in public processes and legal protection are the conditions for current and future generations of people to receive “longevity dividends”.

From a methodological point of view it is logical to talk about the need to create such a model of society in which people of all ages will feel comfortable. All age categories in it should be treated as consistent milestones in growth and maturation. Moreover, each of them should possess its own undeniable bonuses that have a positive effect on the state of society. For example, for young people it is a craving for knowledge and youthful enthusiasm, for people of the “middle cohort” – productive use of the gained knowledge, for mature people – enrichment of experience and the ability to share it. Thus, we should talk about the constant development of the system of production, accumulation, processing and transfer of new knowledge. In fact, the

¹ United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and HelpAge International, 2012.

main part of a person's life, perhaps even his mission in the Universe, is to work with information, expand the range of knowledge about the peculiarities of nature, society and human thought. It includes the education of next generations, continuity of creation of material and spiritual culture objects. All these are the “longevity dividends”, investments in which start from birth.

What key aspects follow from this methodological message? First of all, we should use all the positive opportunities that the demographic shift promises us. It means that an economically and socially active society, well provided with life benefits and opportunities for continuous self-improvement is a truly self-regulating mechanism that does not require significant external influence. Reason, intelligence, rationality of behavior and consumption will ensure minimal stress on the environment and will reduce the so-called transaction costs. In general, they harmonize the “nature-man-society” triad.

It is important that the category “older generation” is very diverse due not only to purely age differences but also to gender, nationality, level of education, income, health status, place of residence, family and many other characteristics. In other words, consideration of the problems of aging requires a combination of general principles and approaches with the selection of target groups and point measures when working with them.

What does Belarus look like in the context of longevity?

First of all, our country, like many others, is now at the stage of transition from population growth to its aging. In 1990 the share of the population of 65 years and older was about 11%, in 2017 it increased to 14.5%, and by 2050 it is expected to reach 25%. What is more, by 2025 the share of the population aged 65 and older will exceed the share of children aged 0-14 for the first time ever.²

According to the United Nations data presented in 2019, the Life Expectancy Index in Belarus is 74.6 years. It is the fifth place among the former Soviet Union countries and the 85th place in the world.³

The average life expectancy in the former Soviet Union countries at the time of the study was 72.5 years, which is 5.6 years more than in 1991. By 2050, the average life expectancy will reach 77 years, and by 2100 - 84 years. It will happen largely due to an improved quality of life.⁴ Note that according to the World Health Organization definition, the quality of life is the individuals' perception of their position in life within the context of culture and the system of values in which they live in accordance with goals, expectations, norms and concerns. The quality of life is determined by the physical, social and emotional factors of a person's life that are important for him and affect him. The quality of life is the degree of a person's comfort both within himself and within his society.

The Labor Code of the Republic of Belarus contains direct provisions on the prohibition of age-based discrimination in labor relations, it means that the continuation of labor activity after the retirement age is not limited. The proportion of workers in the “mature” age varies quite strongly by industry.

² Roadmap for comprehensive consideration of population ageing in Belarus. Press release from December 3, 2019

³ World country ranking of life expectancy - <https://gtmarket.ru/ratings/life-expectancy-index/life-expectancy-index-info>

⁴ Population of post-Soviet countries: UN forecast -

<https://lt.sputniknews.ru/infographics/20170805/3606251/naselenie-postsovetskih-stran-prognoz-oon.html>

Areas where productive longevity is most manifested are: conducting scientific research and development, producing computing technics and electronics, real estate transactions, other services, as well as creative work, sports, entertainment and recreation, education.⁵

However, in most cases, termination of employment becomes more and more inevitable with age. A drastic change of lifestyle, loss of social roles and statuses, mounting health problems can cause depression, feeling of lack of demand, feeling of “left to oneself”, lack of tasks to be solved. These aspects require close attention of the society, formation and implementation of the “full life cycle” policy, within which a person becomes a “self-development investor” from birth: first – of his own, and later – of his descendants. The physical bounds of life must be expanded: a person lives as long as the memory of him is alive, his ideas and plans are realized.

It is also quite obvious that there are gender and age differences in the aging process. As a rule, men care less about their appearance and health, respectively, and their connection with age. They are more concerned with issues of a philosophical existential nature, achievements in the professional sphere and self-realization as a person. Women experience an age crisis more difficult emotionally, including due to changes in appearance. But they easier bear retirement because they always find things to do connected with help in raising grandchildren and housekeeping.⁶ Therefore, in order to maintain personal integrity, accept aging and related processes (concept: recognition of the past, acceptance of the present), support of relatives and friends is needed, as well as professional assistance.

In our country constant attention is paid to these issues. The Ministry of Health of the Republic of Belarus provides round-the-clock psychological assistance via helplines, provides necessary information and advice for relatives, who faced a particular problem (disease) of an elderly person.

The Republican gerontological center organizes and provides to their patients affordable advisory and diagnostic medical care on in-patient basis or in out-patient units at the modern level; determines their life potential based on their health status; motivates patients to take an active life position in old age.⁷

Three geriatric centers operate on a regular basis in the regions of the Republic. Medical care for the elderly is provided by all health organizations without age restrictions. Many of them employ specialized geriatricians.

“The Belarusian Republican Gerontological Public Association”, which has been a member of the International Association of Gerontology and Geriatrics since 2013, is actively functioning. In 2017 it became part of the European Geriatric Medicine Society (EUGMS) and the International Association of Gerontology and Geriatrics for the European Region.⁸ I would like to note that in March 2019, a specialized international scientific and practical conference “Academic gerontological readings for the 80th anniversary of academician Evgeni Konoplya” was held. It was organized by the National Academy of Sciences of Belarus (State Scientific Institution “Institute of Radiobiology of the National Academy of Sciences of Belarus”) and “The Belarusian Republican Gerontological Public Association”.

⁵https://015.by/news/obshchestvo/chem_zhivut_pozhilye_lyudi_v_belarusi_70_gorozhane_3_iz_10_iz_polzuyutsya_internetom_polovina_ishche/?sphrase_id=19274

⁶ <http://innosfera.by/node/512>

⁷ Republican gerontological center- <https://giv.by/respublikanskij-tsent-gerontologii>

⁸ The Belarusian Republican Gerontological Public Association - <http://www.gerontology.by/publik.html>

It is also important to create conditions for realizing the potential of older people, their active participation in the life of society, maintaining social contact with the younger generation, and a sense of belonging – through the transfer of life experience. In 2019 there were 91 public associations for disabled workers and servicemen, for veterans. These organizations make a great contribution to strengthening intergenerational ties and social integration of older citizens. They organize meetings with young people for patriotic and moral education, provide assistance in recovery, medical and commercial services, promote leisure and volunteer activities of senior citizens.

A network of non-stationary social service institutions has been established and is being developed in the system of the Ministry of Labor and Social Protection. It is represented in each administrative region as a territorial social service center. Such centers together with educational institutions have organized work to provide volunteer assistance to single and lonely-living elderly and disabled people. Student volunteer assistance is provided both throughout the school year and during the summer.

Since 2011 the social project “the Senior – to the Elderly” has been implemented. It is aimed at developing the volunteer movement among people of “early” retirement age. Within the framework of the project volunteers of senior age provide assistance to elderly, single, non-mobile citizens as well as initiate the activity of communication clubs, take part in organizing cultural events.

It should be noted that the involvement of older people in helping people of their age group is very effective. A volunteer and an elderly person who need help have largely similar interests, common backward-looking attitude to life, similar levels of communication. It allows them to understand each other better and interact as equals. Participation of older people in volunteer activities allows them to realize their physical and intellectual potential, build contacts, exchange experience, express themselves creatively, get a sense of their own value, social and personal pertinence. And these are the components for strengthening their own physical and spiritual health and increasing social well-being.

Foreign language courses for the beginners and training in modern IT technologies are organized at territorial social service center in order to help people to gain a sense of “inclusion” and integrity with culture, time, civilization. There are also dance, music, theater, poetry coteries and clubs operating for developing creative potential, emotional and aesthetic self-expression, maintaining physical activity.⁹

However, negative social stereotypes about the elderly which have been formed for many years continue to exist at present. The positive perception of old age largely depends on what kind of information we receive from the environment. Prevention measures against ageism are actively developing in Belarus.¹⁰ First of all, the Basic Law - the Constitution of the Republic of Belarus - enshrines the equality of all citizens before the law and the right to equal protection of rights and legitimate interests without any discrimination. It means that citizens of our country, regardless of age, should be provided with equal opportunities to exercise their rights in various spheres of life and they shouldn't be subject of degrading discrimination.

I would like to note that, according to a sociological survey conducted in 2019 to study the situation of elderly people, the majority (72.3%) indicated that the rights of older citizens are

9 Organization of club work for the elderly - <https://sov.minsk.gov.by/social/organy-sotsialnoj-zashchity/klubnaya-rabota-dlya-pozhilykh-lyudej>

10 <http://www.gerontology.by/docpdf/protiv.pdf>

generally respected in Belarusian society. An interesting fact is that in 2019, 879 marriages were concluded in which the bride and groom were 60 years old or older.¹¹

Recently, the desire to keep a healthy lifestyle has become increasingly popular both among young people and people of retirement age, which is called “biohacking”. It is a lifestyle, medical and wellness practice aimed at prolonging life and improving its quality. According to the World Health Organization human health is 50-55% dependent on lifestyle and social conditions, 20-22% - on genetic factors, 19-20% - on the environment, and only 7-10% - on the level of the health system and the quality of medical care.

Key components of biohacking are:

- nutrition;
- physical activity;
- sleep;
- hormonal status (checking and adjustment depending on gender and age);
- genetics (identification of genetic risks, hereditary predisposition for diseases);
- cosmetological aspect (preserving the health and beauty of the skin. Its condition has a huge impact on a person's emotional state);
- brain activity (regulation and activation of thinking, attention and creativity);
- stress management (correction of emotional response to stressful conditions).

Belarus is monitoring all indicators developed by World Health Organization in the field of quality of life, including physical; psychological; level of independence (daily activity, working capacity); social life (personal relationships, social value); environment (safety, ecology, security, availability and quality of medical care, information, training opportunities).

We can see an urgent need to develop, expand and deepen fundamental and applied scientific research in the field of gerontology and geriatrics. In particular, the international project «GIRAFFE» is being implemented in Belarus. It represents “Gerontological international study against senile asthenia – ensuring good health”.¹² Also scientists from Sardinia and the National Academy of Sciences of Belarus conduct joint research on the genetics of longevity.¹³ Such collaboration contributes to the development of gerontology and geriatrics at the national and international levels. Because of it specialists receive information about the state of gerontology in the world and a wealth of experience for future use.

In 2020 the draft National Strategy of the Republic of Belarus “Decent longevity – 2030” was developed.¹⁴ The goal of the Strategy is to form a society for people of all ages, create conditions for the most complete and effective realization of the potential of senior citizens, sustainable improvement of quality of their life through systemic adaptation of state and public institutions to the aging of the population.

The strategic vision defines the directions of actions on creation of conditions for healthy and safe life, active longevity and motivation for a healthy lifestyle. Another aspect is the issues of stimulating a longer working life and adapting the labor market to the needs of older citizens. In order to use the labor potential of older people they need to be provided with lifelong learning

11 <https://www.belta.by/society/view/brachnyj-voznrast-v-belarusi-prodolzhaet-rasti-390751-2020/>

12 International project «GIRAFFE» - <http://www.gerontology.by/proekti.html>

13 <https://www.belta.by/society/view/uchenye-belarusi-i-sardinii-provodjat-sovmestnye-issledovaniya-po-genetike-dolgoletija-321798-2018/>

14 On the approval of the National Strategy of the Republic of Belarus “Decent longevity – 2030” - https://forumpravo.by/files/Projekt_postanovlenie_SM_strategia_dolgoletia.pdf

opportunities, including expand the coverage of skills training in information and communication technologies.

The National Strategy defines tasks that raise the issues of social integration of senior citizens, their occupation, creation of a comfortable income level, provision of lifelong learning opportunities, development of health care and creation of a favorable living environment.

The main principles of the Strategy are accordant with the leading directions developing at the global level:

- harmonization of efforts of the state, society and family for the most complete and effective inclusion of senior people in all spheres of society;
- respect for the rights and legitimate interests of older citizens, gender equality;
- involvement of senior citizens and their participation in decision-making at all levels of government;
- equal access to opportunities, rights and services for senior people in urban and rural areas;
- intergenerational solidarity;
- evolution of society taking into account the interests, needs and opportunities of older citizens;
- promotion of sustainable economic development of the country; interagency and intersectoral cooperation.

The list of tasks and priority areas of action for the implementation of the Strategy proves balanced and comprehensive approaches in ensuring productive longevity. Let us cite shortly the most important of them.

1. Protection of older people rights and dignity, creation of conditions for their social inclusion and full participation in the life of society. The solution of the task involves:

- coordination of issues related to population ageing at the national level;
- development of legislative and organizational measures, scientific research, educational programs and civil initiatives on countering violence against older citizens;
- formation of “engagement mechanisms” both in the processes of discussion and decision-making at all levels (including through the creation of advisory councils for senior citizens) and in the activities of public associations, clubs and centers for different age groups, the volunteer movement;
- promotion of the image of healthy aging and active longevity in the media, information of society about the importance of the senior citizens quality of life, fostering respect for them;
- conduction of regular sociological research on the participation of seniors in the life of society;
- development and implementation of methodologies for calculating indicators used in international practice for monitoring population ageing coefficient at the national level.

2. Stimulation of a longer working life and creation of a comfortable income level for senior citizens includes:

- expansion of employment opportunities by creating conditions for continuing labor activity of retirement age people, taking into account their professional skills and physical capabilities;
- assistance in finding job and employment for citizens of pre-retirement and retirement age; countering age discrimination and encouraging continued working career;

- support of economic activity of pre-retirement age citizens, development and support of self-employment of senior people especially in rural areas, including training in entrepreneurial skills, financial literacy, facilitating access to financial resources, etc.;
- development of mentoring to strengthen intergenerational ties in labor collectives;
- development of voluntary supplementary pension savings, including corporate pension insurance.

3. Provision of lifelong learning opportunities, expansion of access to education and advanced training. Here the most important areas are:

- capacity development of educational and cultural institutions, implementation of training programs of additional education on professions and specialties that are in demand on the labor market for citizens of pre-retirement and retirement age;
- increase of the range of services and resources for the self-development of senior citizens, especially those who live in rural areas;
- improvement of the financial and computer literacy of seniors.

4. Creation of conditions for a healthy and safe life as well as active longevity includes:

- elaboration of a comprehensive, personalized and integrated approach to medical care; improvement of the quality and accessibility of health care services focused on the needs of older citizens;

- encouragement of health-saving standards of behavior at all stages of life, including in order to reduce gender differences in health indicators and life expectancy of the population; targeted work on promoting and motivating a healthy lifestyle, including on the basis of “health schools”/“active longevity”;

- elaboration of new forms and methods of rehabilitation of senior citizens to maintain their level of physical activity; creation of conditions for physical exercises, taking into account the characteristics of this group;

- development of geriatric services as a unified system of long-term medical care;
- training of medical personnel in the field of geriatrics, gerontology; development of medical and social assistance to elderly people;

- creation of specialized clubs and sporting interest groups for seniors on the basis of sports & recreation and fitness centers; partial compensation of sports and wellness services costs to older citizens.

5. Development of social services to ensure a decent quality of life for older people is aimed at:

- improvement of the state social mandate mechanism and expansion of social services availability;

- promotion of stationary-substituting technologies for providing social services;

- transition to determining the need in social services based on the individual requirements of senior citizens and the capabilities of their families; application of the revealing principle of social support for single elderly citizens;

- promotion of informal care for older people who have lost the ability to self-service;

- introduction of social service models for elderly citizens with cognitive impairments;

- improvement of the training and skill improvement system for employees providing social services to seniors.

6. Creation of infrastructure adapted to the needs of older citizens and favorable living environment implies:

- improvement of priority social infrastructure facilities and services availability and their adaptation to the needs of older people, including in rural areas;
- re-equipment / further equipment of housing for the maximum possible extension of independent safe living of senior citizens in their familiar environment;
- adaptation of vehicles, development of transport services and accompaniment system for seniors with reduced functional capabilities;
- implementation of initiatives aimed at creating “senior-friendly” towns and settlements.

Analysis of strategic principles, measures and mechanisms applied in Belarus in the field of ensuring productive longevity, shows the qualitative aspects of the socially oriented economy model that we are implementing. The productivity of the Belarusian model, including as applied to solving humanitarian problems, is also confirmed by the high places of Belarus in the Human Development Index ranking (*according to the Human Development Report – 2019 Belarus falls in the category of states with a very high level of human development ranked 50th out of 189 countries and territories*), by Sustainable Development Goals results (*Belarus ranks 18th out of 166 countries in the global Sustainable Development Goals index*).

From the point of view of the development of scientific support for longevity issues, it seems necessary to organize their comprehensive study on the basis of combining efforts at the national and international levels. It will give us comprehensive characteristics of situation in the world and we will be able to predict changes in the global context in cooperation with other countries as well as to define the points of effort. It appears that at the initial stage it is necessary to create common access information resource on population processes accumulating information from states and international organizations, taking into consideration all aspects of social development: from gender and age to economic and socio-cultural.

It seems to us that a systematic scientific approach to the development of longevity issues should include a number of interrelated blocks. Concisely, their chain can be represented as follows: “material security – medical support – favorable environment/living conditions – vision of perspectives”.

Material security can be achieved both by continuation of labor activity as well as on the basis of creation and maintenance of the “efficiency” of the pension system. The world practice here is quite extensive and includes options from social protection funds, formed at the expense of deductions from wages, to pension funds, the value of which increases on the basis of investments in stocks, bonds, commercial projects. The development model of a particular state determines its participation in the regulation of pension protection, including through the payment of social pensions. As world experience shows, in times of crisis, guaranteed pensions are often the only regular source of funds for households in case of loss of work by young people.

Medical support should be aimed at the highest attainable level of physical and mental health. Older people should have access to systems for promoting health and ensuring a healthy lifestyle, preventing and delaying diseases, treatment, rehabilitation and long-term care, including access to relevant information resources. In this context, it is important to train nursing staff and health care workers, as well as to support people who are involved in caring for people, especially older people and people with limited legal capacity.

Favorable living environment is especially needed for elderly people who have limited mobility, vision and hearing impairment. It should provide opportunities for an active lifestyle, maintaining independence and social contacts, including housing adapted to these requirements, infrastructure (business premises, pharmacies, elevators, escalators), and modes of transport. It is important to ensure that there is no discrimination against older people from the freedom of movement and the range of services available to the prevention of violence. It requires the development and adoption at the international level of human rights instruments aimed at solving the problems of older people.

Vision of perspectives requires a clear understanding of the changes that will accompany the development of humanity and the place of older people in them. First: it is obvious that the bounds of this age will gradually shift upwards with increasing life expectancy. Second: health promotion is the main response of society to the problem of population aging. Third: demographic changes, family composition and migration processes (between countries, cities, and rural areas) require adjustments of the social security, healthcare, housing and communal services systems. In fact, the entire economic mechanism must be transformed based on demographic changes, as well as trends in scientific and technological progress changing the very understanding of employment due to the development of digital technologies and robotization.

And further on: It is necessary to invest in young people by encouraging a healthy lifestyle, getting an education and highly qualified demanded work, by creating conditions for comprehensive high quality health care and social insurance thereby improving the living conditions of future generations. It is essential to promote activities in line with the concept of “life-long education”. People who have received training in professions that are in the “risk zone” should quickly acquire the competencies that are in demand in the emerging digital space and the neo-industrial complex. Finally, changes in public consciousness are needed. Each member of society is valuable and equal, fulfills its mission. Even the weakest physically can give mankind a discovery or serve the cause of humanism. Thus, general involvement is the future of society; society of active, worthy, respected, and intelligent people.

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