

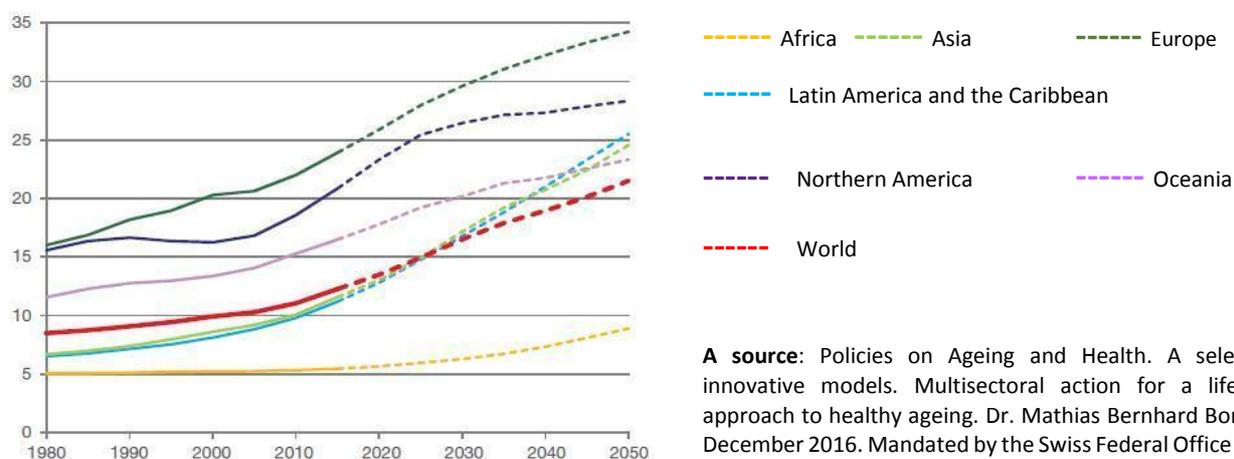
Ageing and Health

The world is getting older. The ageing of the population is one of the most obvious and stable demographic trends. We already live in a relatively aged country, persons over working age constitute a quarter of Belarusian population, and the proportion of this group has been growing steadily. This means that the health and health care issues become even more relevant. Today it is necessary to create conditions to ensure that older people can lead an active, healthy, and fulfilling life. WHO declared the years 2020-2030 the Decade of Healthy Ageing.

Ageing in Numbers

The population is ageing everywhere, but the highest ageing rates have been observed in Europe. According to the UN forecast, more than a third of Europeans will be 60 years or over by 2050. Presently the percentage of older people is highest in Europe and North America. The fastest growth rates in this age group during the next 15 years will be observed in Latin America and the Caribbean (+71%), Asia (+66%) and Africa (+64%).

Figure 1: Percentage of the population aged 60 years or over for the world and regions,%

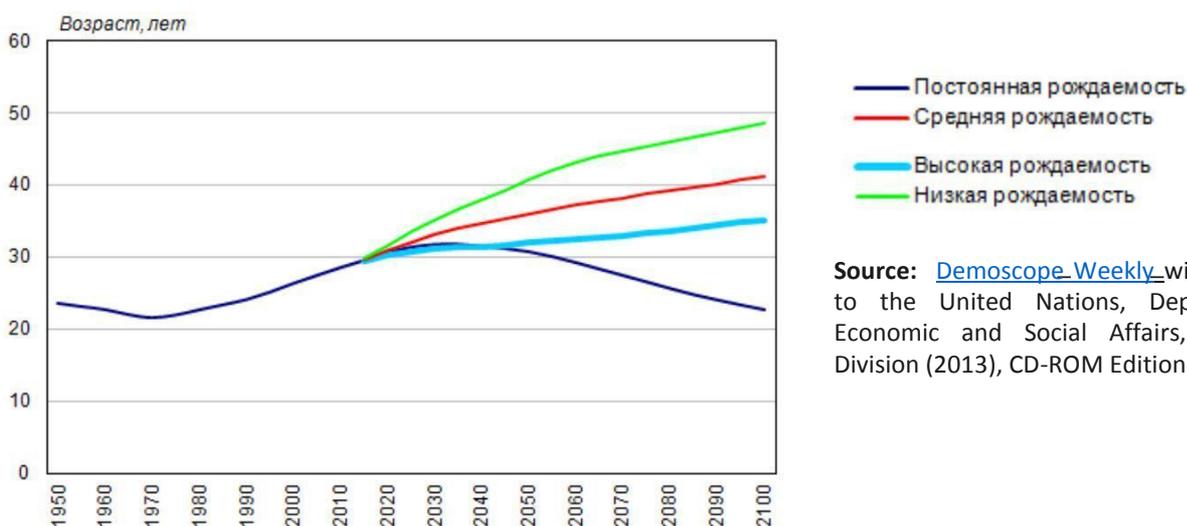


A source: Policies on Ageing and Health. A selection of innovative models. Multisectoral action for a life course approach to healthy ageing. Dr. Mathias Bernhard Bonk. Bern, December 2016. Mandated by the Swiss Federal Office of Public Health (FOPH), Division of international Affairs with reference to the United Nations, World Population Prospects: The 2015 Revision.

One of the indicators of the population ageing is the median age, that is, the age at which half the population is older and half is younger. With population ageing, this figure is increasing. In 1950, half of the world population was under the 23.5 years, in 1970 half of the world population was under 21.5 years, while in 2010 the median age raised to 28.5 years. By 2050, the median age will reach, based on the medium variant of the forecast, 36.1 years, and by 2100 it will reach 41.2 years.

In Belarus, the median age of the population was 39.6 years in 2015. This indicator has been [growing](#) steadily has increased by half since the post-war years.

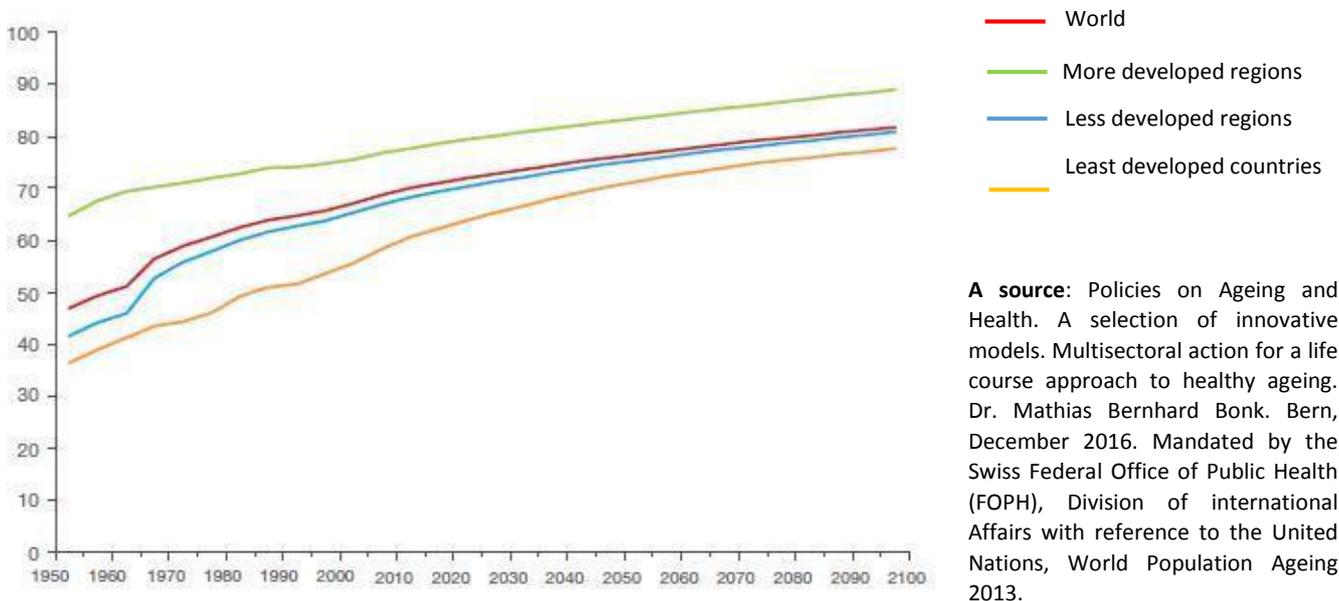
Figure 2: The median age of the world population in the four variants of the forecast, 1950-2100



Source: [Demoscope Weekly](#) with reference to the United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2013), CD-ROM Edition.

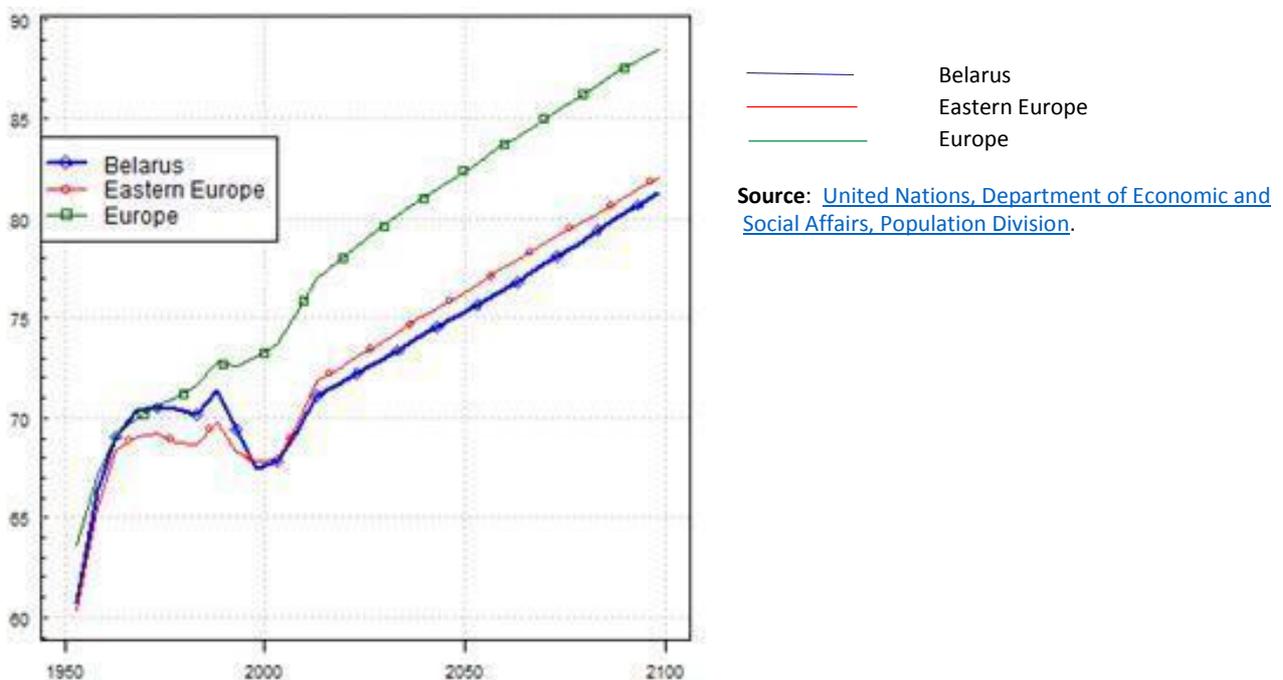
The ageing of the world population is largely due to the increase in life expectancy. According to the National Statistics Committee of Belarus [data](#) for 2015, life expectancy at birth in Belarus was 73.9 years (68.6 years for men and 78.9 years for women). This figure has grown steadily and has increased by 5.3 years in 20 years. According to [UN forecast](#), the steady growth will continue in Belarus, as well as in Europe.

Figure 3: Life expectancy at birth, world and regions, 1950-2050



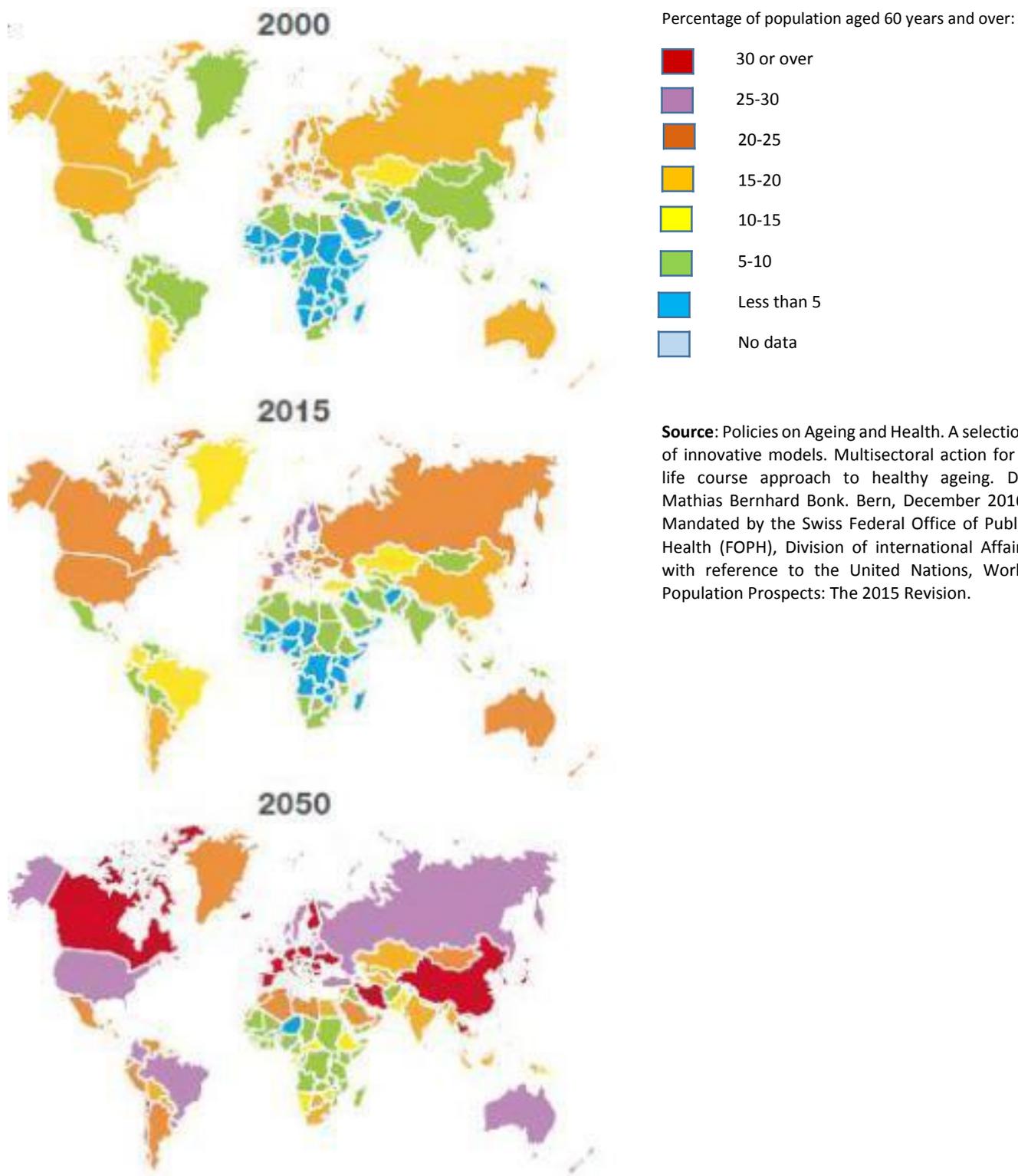
In Belarus, an average life expectancy increase is projected, if to compare to the corresponding Eastern Europe indicators.

Fig. 4. Life expectancy at birth: Belarus, Eastern Europe, Europe, 1950-2100 years



Thus, Belarus will remain a relatively old country in this century, that is, one in which more than 20% of people will be 60 years or over. The number of relatively aged countries will increase significantly in the upcoming decades. In 2050, 44% of the world population will live in such a relatively aged country.

Figure 5: Maps of percentage of population aged 60 years or over in 2000, 2015 and 2050 respectively



What happens at an older age

In the biological sense, ageing is the result of accumulated damage at the molecular and cellular levels. This leads to a gradual decline in physical and mental capacity and increase in the disease risk. The changes are not linear, not permanent and are related to age only indirectly. One man in his 70s is healthy and active, while another one is in need of constant care.

Typical diseases of older age include hearing loss, cataracts and high refractive errors, back and neck pain, osteoarthritis, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, diabetes, depression and dementia. Older age increases the risk of having several diseases simultaneously. At older age, people also suffer from so-called geriatric syndromes.

Apart from biological changes, ageing is closely related to major changes in life: retirement, moving to more suitable accommodation, the death of friends and relatives. Therefore, health system need to consider the needs of older people in adaptation, rehabilitation and psychological state improvement.

One might say that nowadays staying healthy in older age is easier than ever before. Nevertheless, there are not so many proofs of the fact that today older people feel better than their parents did at the same age. The proportion of people with severe impairments in high-income countries has decreased over the last 30 years. However, in regard to mild and moderate impairments, no major changes have occurred during the period.

To maintain both physical and mental health the elderly need to remain independent and involved in social life, instead of being socially isolated, as it often happens. This requires at least an easy access to buildings, developed transport infrastructure and assistive technology for persons with disabilities.

In addition, we all need to change our personal attitude towards ageing and health.

“Professional and life experience acquired by the older age is a huge potential,” says Tatyana Haplichnik, the Swiss Red Cross Country Coordinator in Belarus. “Those years and decades that a person will live after retirement can and should be fulfilling and joyful. But to achieve that, the system in which an older person lives should take into account their needs, provide conditions favorable for active and healthy ageing, and be friendly to any age.”

What to consider in response to ageing?

So the number of older people grows every year. Population ageing is called the next global challenge to the world health. Health care and social systems should be developed considering the needs of older people and bearing in mind the following facts:

- Noninfectious (stroke, diabetes) and neurodegenerative diseases (dementia) considered the main challenges today.
- The number of patients with multiple diseases, including hearing and seeing impediments, locomotor disorders, has been increasing.
- There is a growing demand for geriatricians, doctors who specialize in the prevention and treatment of diseases of older persons.
- The number of older people in need of constant care has been increasing. It is necessary to train and support the relatives and volunteers who care for the elderly.
- These days, it is especially important to improve the quality of medical and social services.
- Noncommunicable diseases prevention and the promotion of a healthy lifestyle at any age become even more relevant.
- According to the WHO, [a "typical" older person does not exist](#). Some 80-year-olds have the physical and mental abilities of a 20-year-old. Some other persons' health deteriorates much earlier than they enter old age.☒

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- This difference is not accidental and is largely due to the natural and social environment, the possibility to make health-oriented choices. Apart from that, our relations with the environment are largely influenced by the family in which one grew up, one's gender and ethnicity.
- Older people often feel weak and dependent, a burden to society. This leads to a negative attitude towards older people and age discrimination (ageism) – phenomena to be overcome.
- Globalization, technology development (including the spheres of transport and communications), urbanization, migration and changing gender norms affect the lives of older people directly and indirectly. For example, though a modern family might consist of more generations than one did before, older persons are more likely to live alone. Accordingly, the issue of home care and assistance to the elderly arises more often.