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THE MIGRATION OF BELARUSIANS TO POLAND AND THE EUROPEAN UNION:

The Situation after August 2020

Oskar Chmiel Piotr Kaźmierkiewicz Karalina Sauka Agnieszka Kulesa (ed.)





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Introduction

The situation in Belarus after the rigged presidential elections in August 2020 have been negatively affecting the economic condition of this country. In this context, a question may be asked about the further possible increase in the scale of migration from Belarus to Poland. In this paper – which is a summary of the report under the same title available in Polish on www.case-research.eu – we highlight main aspects related to labour migration paths of Belarusians to the European Union (EU), and especially to Poland. As evidence shows, this path is still the most popular one for those wishing to leave Belarus for the EU.

The summary consists of three parts. The first lists the most crucial solutions introduced at the

European Union (EU) level and specific solutions implemented in Poland, as well as – in a nutshell – in Lithuania and Germany. The second part includes a description of pull and push factors as well as an overview of the migration dynamic from Belarus to Poland in the years 2016–2021. It also presents the results of a research survey conducted amongst migrants from Belarus concerning, amongst other aspects, reasons for leaving and the migrants' situation in their countries of destination, especially in Poland. The document concludes with drafting possible scenarios of migration from Belarus to the EU and with description of Poland's potential to attract Belarusian migrants.

1. Legal conditions of labour migration from Belarus to the European Union and selected European Union Member States

1.1. European Union migration instruments

When analysing legal migrations of Belarusians to the EU, the following instruments of EU migration policy have to be taken into account: visa policy and the common Visa Code, the single permit directive (2011/98/EU), the seasonal workers directive (2014/36/EU), the 'EU Blue Card', the directive on long-term residents in the EU (2003/109/EC), and the directive on intra-corporate transfer (2014/66/EU). In relation to the co-operation framework with third countries in respect of the external dimension of EU migration policy, the issue of the mobility partnership concluded between Belarus, the EU and its seven Member States (Bulgaria, Finland, Lithuania, Latvia, Poland, Romania and Hungary) has been mentioned as well

The analysis of information and data suggests that Belarusians' interest in migration to the EU is generally increasing; nevertheless, some of the above-mentioned EU migration policy instruments

have been of limited use in their case. It is worth noting that in the analysed EU Member States, the scale of using individual instruments and tendencies in that area differed, sometimes dramatically.

1.2. Legal conditions of migration to Poland

1.2.1. Strategic framework

A priority of attracting labour migrants (especially in terms of circular and seasonal migration) from Poland's eastern neighbourhood has appeared in the following Polish government strategy documents: in the first comprehensive migration strategy adopted in 2012 (and then revoked in 2016)) and in the 'Sustainable development strategy until 2020 (including the perspective up to 2030)' adopted on 14 February 2017². This issue was also highlighted in the draft document presented in July 2021, outlining policy assumptions in the area of migration 'Migration Policy of

¹ The Council of Ministers, *Polityka migracyjna Polski – stan obecny i postulowane działania*. Document in force in the years 2012–2016.

² Strategy for sustainable growth until 2020 (including the perspective up to 2030), https://www.gov.pl/ documents/33377/436740/SOR_2017_streszczenie_en.pdf (access: 23 November 2021).

Poland - directions for action 2021–2022' (Polityka migracyjna Polski – kierunki działań 2021–2022)³.

1.2.2. Instruments regulating access to the labour market

There are three main ways Belarusian citizens can take up legal employment in Poland: by applying for a work permit; by using special arrangements through which an employer acts on behalf of an employee from Belarus and applies to the relevant authority; or by acquiring the right of free access to employment linked to the possession of the relevant residence status.

Belarusians' interest in acquiring a work permit in Poland has been growing fast – while in 2016 this group of foreigners accounted for 4,870 positive decisions, in 2019 27,130 permissions were issued⁴. However, this path to legalise employment has still been less popular than other instruments.

The most popular way to legalise employment of Belarusian citizens in Poland is still a simplified procedure in the form of an employer's declaration on entrusting work to a foreigner. In the years 2016 and 2017, there was significant growth of interest in this form of employment. Since then

steady growth in the number of registered declarations has been noted – in 2020 78,905⁵ declarations issued for migrants from Belarus were registered by relevant offices in Poland.

1.2.3. Solutions implemented in reaction to the 2020 crisis

As a response to the political crisis in Belarus, Poland introduced some solutions to facilitate migration from Belarus. For instance, on 25 November 2020 the Minister for Development, Work and Technology issued a regulation⁶, according to which holders of Schengen or national visa issued for 'entry due to humanitarian reasons, due to state interest or due to international obligations'⁷ or holders of visas annotated 'Poland. Business Harbour' are not required to apply for a work permit.

Before 2020, humanitarian visas for Belarusians were being issued on relatively rare occasions – for example in 2019 they were issued to just seven Belarusian nationals. However, between June and December 2020 there were 3,275 such visas issued in total, while during the first seven months of 2021 this number increased to 8,844. In the period between June 2020 and July 2021

³ Polityka migracyjna Polski – kierunki działań 2021–2022, https://www.gov.pl/attachment/d6fe13b6-96ca-4f16-a196-a63d064e41ba (access: 23 November 2021).

⁴ GUS, Work permits for foreigners in Poland in 2019; 20 May 2020, https://stat.gov.pl/download/gfx/portalinformacyjny/pl/defaultaktualnosci/5821/18/2/1/informacja_sygnalna_zezwolenia_na_prace_cudzoziemcow_w_polsce_2019.docx (access: 23 November 2021).

⁵ Ministry of Labour, Family and Social Affairs, Department of the Labour Market, 'Oświadczenia o powierzeniu wykonywania pracy cudzoziemcowi, wpisane do ewidencji zaświadczeń (obowiązujące od 2018 r.); https://psz.praca.gov.pl/web/urzad-pracy/-/8180211-oswiadczenia-o-powierzeniu-wykonywania-pracy-cudzoziemcowi-wpisane-do-ewidencji-oswiadczen-obowiazujące-od-2018-r. (access: 23 November 2021).

⁶ Regulation of the Ministry of Development, Work and Technology of 20 November 2020 amending the regulation on cases in which entrusting the performance of work to a foreigner on the territory of the Republic of Poland is permitted without a need to acquire a work permit (Journal of Laws No. 2081).

⁷ Article 60 (1) (23) of act of 12 December 2013 on foreigners (Journal of Laws from 2020 no. 35 and 2023).

alone, Poland issued a total of 12,119 such visas to Belarusian citizens⁸.

The 'Poland.Business Harbour' programme was launched in September 2020 and initially only included Belarusian citizens. It aims at freelance IT specialists, small or medium-sized enterprise owners as well as people ready to launch a start-up under the programme of the Polish Agency for Enterprise Development offering a chance to acquire a national visa under special conditions. During the first nine months 13,565 visas° were issued under this programme.

1.3. Migrations to selected EU Member States

1.3.1. Lithuania

According to Eurostat data, at the end of April 2020 24,434 Belarusian citizens had a valid residence permit in Lithuania, what put that country in the second place in this respect in the EU (behind Poland and before Germany). This number implies a significant growth in comparison with the situation from a year before. That upward trend is noticed over the whole of the last decade, especially in its second half, which was characterised by higher growth dynamics¹⁰.

The Lithuanian government reacted quickly to the Belarusian political crisis – already on 11 August 2020 a special programme was launched to issue entry permits on humanitarian grounds to Belarusian citizens who were persecuted by the Belarusian regime or became victims of repression. The Lithuanian authorities also introduced a number of initiatives to support immigrating Belarusian citizens.

Struggling with labour shortages, Lithuania wants to become more attractive in the eyes of potential immigrants. Therefore, in recent years measures have been taken to reform regulations on their employment, their access to work and settling in, which may also influence Belarusians' migration decisions.

1.3.2. Germany

Seemingly, Germany is becoming a more important target of Belarusians' migration. Between 2010–2020 the number of Belarusian citizens staying in Germany was steadily growing, and in 2020 the total was already 24.250".

Despite the lack of specific measures undertaken by the German authorities in relation to the Belarusian political crisis after it erupted, many Belarusian citizens sought refugee in Germany. In terms of the number of Belarusians seeking

⁸ Information provided by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to the Polish Press Agency, quoted in: 'MSZ: Polska przekazała ponad 90 tysięcy wiz Białorusinom w tym prawie 9 tysięcy wiz humanitarnych w 2021 roku,' Gazeta Prawna, 4 August 2021, https://www.gazetaprawna.pl/wiadomosci/kraj/artykuly/8220648,msz-polska-bialorus-wiza-humanitarna-legalna-praca.html (access: 23 November 2021).

⁹ Polish Trade and Investment Agency, 'Poland Business Harbour – cieszący się popularnością rządowy program zostaje rozszerzony!', News 14 July 2021, https://www.paih.gov.pl/20210714/poland_business_harbour (access: 23 November 2021).

¹⁰ Data source: Eurostat, All valid permits by reason, length of validity and citizenship on 31 December of each year [MIGR_RESVALID].

¹¹ Data source: Federal Statistical Office, Foreigners: Germany, reference date, sex/age years/marital status, country groups/citizenship, access: https://www-genesis.destatis.de.

asylum in EU Member States in 2020, Germany was in the second place (behind Poland; 165 applications)¹².

Like many other countries, Germany aims to attract educated and experienced workers, and actions undertaken by the authorities in relation to this aim may in the future influence decisions made by Belarusians planning labour migration.

¹² Data was rounded to the nearest five. Data source: Eurostat, Asylum applicants by type of applicant, citizenship, age and sex annual aggregated data (rounded) [MIGR_ASYAPPCTZA].

2. Migrations of youth from Belarus to Poland – what changed in 2020

2.1. Migration push and pull factors

2.1.1. Long-term factors

The following factors may be listed as push factors impacting migrations from Belarus to Poland and other EU countries: the difference in GDP value and dynamics between Belarus and the destination country, a lower standard of life in Belarus, high unemployment in Belarus, loss of attraction of the Russian Federation for migrating workers, the situation concerning political rights.

Amongst general pull factors influencing migrations from Belarus to Poland and other EU countries, the following factors may be distinguished: higher wages in the EU in the majority of professions combined with a higher standard of life, including better developed infrastructure and public services, as well as policies of the destination countries aimed at attracting foreign workers.

In addition, pull factors in the road transport sector, such as access to bigger market, are also among the important specific migration factors from Belarus to Poland and other EU countries. The main reason for moving business to the EU is the willingness to extend access to foreign markets, which is limited for Belarusian companies.

Also crucial are factors related to the policy of the EU countries in terms of accepting certain migrant groups, such as for example Pole's Card or 'EU Blue Card' holders

2.1.2. Leaving motivations since 2020

In August 2020, Belarus was hit by a severe political crisis. This was accompanied by unprecedented repressions which affected tens of thousands of people. Economic stagnation, a decrease in exports due to the imposition of sanctions and an increase in the fiscal deficit are forecasted, contributing to new factors appearing to push Belarusians abroad.

A new pull factor is the actions of countries neighbouring Belarus, such as Poland, Lithuania, Latvia and Ukraine, in terms of pulling companies from IT and high-tech sectors (for example under the programme 'Poland.Business Harbour').

There are three main groups of Belarusian citizens for whom the changes taking place in Belarus since August 2020 may become crucial in terms of potential migration decisions: active protesters, IT sector employees and small entrepreneurs.

2.2. Dynamics of migration from Belarus to Poland

2.2.1. Migrations from Belarus to Poland during the years 2016–2020

Poland became a destination country for a larger group of workers from Belarus fairly late – even in 2015 there were only 2,037¹³ declarations on entrusting work to a foreigner registered, while since 2016 the scale of registered declarations has rapidly increased. Already in 2018, the Polish labour market became the most important destination of Belarusian labour migration in the EU, accounting for roughly half of total work permits issued to Belarusian citizens by EU Member States¹⁴. The rapid change in an interest in finding employment in Poland after a long period of a relatively stable low migration level suggests that pull factors were not strong enough for Belarusian labour migrants and had to be complemented by push factors.

The analysis of labour migration from Belarus through the prism of issued documents permitting employment points to three main tendencies. First of all, starting from 2017 the scale of general work permits has been growing continuously – by 2020 by approximately 56%. Secondly, the main form of employment in Poland is still a simplified procedure, based on the declarations on entrusting work to a foreigner, although its share in the general number of permits decreased in years 2018 and 2019. Thirdly, there was a significant increase in the importance of the long-term work sector, which can be observed through the fast

growing number of work permits issued. This last trend is being strengthened by an increase in a growing interest in the forms of legalisation of stay that do not require applying for a work permit – a permanent residence permit and national visa issued to Pole's Card holders

2.2.2. Migrations from Belarus to Poland in the vears 2020 and 2021

Limitations resulting from the pandemic lowered the demand for workers in some sectors, mainly in the construction and food processing. However, there is a growing demand in the transport sector, as well as in the handling and storing sectors.

Breaking the downward trend related to the pandemic restrictions introduced in spring 2020 may be evidenced by the dynamics of registered declarations on entrusting work to migrants from Belarus in the second half of 2020 and in the first half of 2021. Already in June 2020 a larger scale of registered declarations compared to the corresponding period in 2019 was noted, while in the second half of 2020 as many as 50,948 declarations were registered (65% more than in the second half of 2019). The statistics from the first months of 2021 show a steadily growing trend during that period 34% more declarations were registered than two years earlier and 55% more than in the first half of 2020 when COVID-19 pandemic regulations came into force.

In absolute terms, a rapid growth in the number of Belarusian citizens who got work permits and

¹³ A. Kulesa, P. Kaźmierkiewicz (eds.), In Search of New Opportunities. Circular migration between Belarus and Poland, Slovakia and the Czech Republic – state of play and prospects for cooperation, CASE, 2021, p. 38, https://case-belarus.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/circmigr-raport.pdf (access: 23 November 2021).

¹⁴ Transformations of Labour Migration from Ukraine to the EU During the Pandemic, http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/kiew/17373.pdf (access: 23 November 2021).

are being employed as qualified workers was noted. An interest in office work grew especially fast – in 2020 the growth was three times higher compared to 2018. Employment of Belarusian IT professionals and specialists increased rapidly as well

In the first half of 2021 a positive change in the area of long-term work of Belarusian citizens in Poland could be observed – in that period the growth registered was 17% higher compared to the corresponding period in 2019.

2.3. Youth migration from Belarus

2.3.1. Reasons for leaving

Amongst the main factors influencing the migration of young people is the political situation in Belarus, including increasing repression. A crucial impact on the decisions of young people to migrate are issues connected with the higher education system. Belarusian youth who want to get a higher education increasingly choose studying in the EU. Amongst other issues specific to young people that have an impact on their migration decisions, one can distinguish access to housing, and for men of recruiting age (18 to 27-year-olds) there is also a reluctance to be conscripted into the army. In the near future, a decline of the Belarusian economy may become an additional factor motivating people to emigrate.

2.3.2. Migrants' characteristics – survey research results

In the period from 2 to 10 August 2021 a research survey was conducted amongst Belarusian migrants with the use of snowball sampling (N=140).

The analysis of responses received made it possible to distinguish two main groups of responders, provisionally called 'new' and 'old' emigration. The term 'new' refers to migrants who left Belarus just before and after the presidential elections in 2020 (so at the time of conducting the survey, for a period not longer than a year). On the other hand, the term 'old' emigration refers to people who left Belarus earlier.

The main reasons for leaving the country by the 'old' emigration highlighted by respondents are 'the socio-economic situation' (78% of respondents indicated this reason) and 'the political situation' (62%). For 48% of respondents, one of the main reasons to leave was 'a prospect of professional self-realisation'; for 30%, 'personal reasons'.

In case of 'new' migrants, the most important reason for leaving was 'the political situation' (81%), while 64% of respondents felt threatened by criminal prosecution. 'The socio-economic situation' fell to third place in the rankings of reasons for leaving (36%); respectively 10% and 9% of respondents left because of professional or personal reasons. Therefore, the main reasons to leave for this group were the political crisis and a desire to get more extensive civil and political rights, not pursuit of the need for 'a better life' in economic terms

The majority of respondents did not perceive emigration as a permanent choice and considered the possibility of going back home. The vast majority (88%) of people being granted or applying for humanitarian visas or international protection wanted to go back home. Migrants who have chosen 'a humanitarian path' are ready to go back to Belarus in case of the end of repression (23%) and if new democratic presidential elections are held

(70%). However, the longer the time spent abroad, the lower the percentage of those willing to go back. Amongst those who have stayed abroad for over 10 years, going back was being considered by only 21%.

3. Prospects of migration from Belarus to Poland

3.1. Scenarios for Belarus

On the basis of the available data and information, three possible scenarios of the development of migration movements from Belarus to the EU in the coming years may be outlined: 'neutral,' 'negative' and 'catastrophic'. None of them is beneficial for Belarus from the point of view of economic growth and building the country's social capital.

The 'neutral' scenario assumes that the current political and economic trends will continue, which means that repression would be limited mainly to active protesters and civil society, the business climate would not deteriorate significantly, Western sanctions would be in force, and other external factors such as, for example, the global market conditions and the economic situation in the Russian Federation would remain unchanged. In such conditions, total migration flows to the EU would most probably not exceed 300 thousand people by 2025.

The 'negative' scenario would develop in the case of a significant deterioration of the political and economic situation in Belarus compared to the current situation. A source of deterioration of the situation could be economic crisis in the country or a sudden increase of repression of non-selective character. Economic crisis could also be connected with crisis in Russia or in the region. According to this scenario, most probably

between 0.5 and 1 million people would leave for the EU.

The 'catastrophic' scenario assumes the possibility of military conflict in the country or in the region, occupation of Belarus by Russia (like in case of Crimea or Donbas) or a serious confrontation between 'Western' and 'Eastern' blocks which would result in the creation of a new 'iron curtain'. In that case, an inflow of migrants from Belarus could reach 1 million people or more, depending on the intensity of the conflict.

To that list, a 'neutral positive' scenario may be added. This predicts a moderate inflow of immigrants to the EU in the case of the overthrow of the current political regime in Belarus and the start of market reforms in the country.

3.2. Poland's migrant-attracting potential

Analysing Poland's potential to attract Belarusian migrants, three crucial conclusions may be drawn:

There is evidence of priority treatment of Belarus in Polish migration policy. In the second half of 2020 for the first time Poland introduced comprehensive solutions aimed at Belarusian citizens interested in coming to Poland or having the right to stay in this country. Further evidence is the availability of infrastructure enabling migrants

to apply for visas to enter Poland as well as the introduction of a new solution facilitating access to visa procedure.

Poland has the chance to become the main destination country for Belarusian labour migration. In this context favourable trends in the Polish labour market are of key importance. These are crucially: a difference in wage level, better quality of public services, and, for young people, an opportunity for career development and getting a good education¹⁵.

Finally, there is general agreement regarding persistent demand for employing citizens of Belarus, Ukraine and other countries from Poland's eastern neighbourhood. Such a picture of the situation in Poland is suggested by an analysis of strategic documents adopted in the years 2019–2021, as well as statements from many Polish entrepreneurs and employment agency representatives. These tendencies may be strengthened by the implementation of the Polish government initiative adopted on 19 October 2021¹⁶.

In conclusion, in the short and medium term, the trend of labour immigration from Belarus on a larger scale and for a longer period may be fostered by a noticeable increase in interest among workers from Belarus in coming to Poland and a proactive approach on the part of Polish authorities and entrepreneurs to attract and retain these workers.

However, there are also a number of risk factors that may limit the effectiveness of Polish instruments in regulating migration flows, which may translate into difficulties in stabilising the stay and employment of Belarusians in Poland. Amongst them, the following factors may be highlighted:

- A lack of cooperation, and recent tensions between Polish and Belarusian border guards, make the movement of people between these two countries more difficult.
- The need for the Polish government's strategic priorities to balance economic rationale with issues of border security and protection, raised not only by the Ministry of Interior and Administration but also arising from commitments under the Schengen system.
- Problems with implementing new solutions, resulting among other factors, from prolonged administrative procedures in district and provincial offices, connected with insufficient personnel.

¹⁵ A. Kulesa, 'Białorusina przyjmę', Opinie ekonomiczne, Rzeczpospolita, https://www.rp.pl/opinie-ekonomiczne/art109911-bialorusina-przyjme (access: 23 November 2021).

¹⁶ Draft law UD275 on amending the resolution on foreigners and other resolutions. Access https://archiwum.bip.kprm.gov.pl/kpr/form/r513313140830, Projekt-ustawy-o-zmianie-ustawy-o-cudzoziemcach-oraz-niektorych-innych-ustaw.html (access: 23 November 2021).

