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# **Belarusian migrants in Poland and Lithuania: general trends and comparative analysis**

2022

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The political crisis which started in Belarus in 2020 after the falsified presidential election, mass protest and subsequent state violence, caused a wave of migration from the country. This report is based on quantitative and qualitative research conducted in two countries – Lithuania and Poland – which became (together with Georgia and Ukraine before the war) the most popular destinations for Belarusian migrants. Russia's war in Ukraine became a huge challenge for Belarusian migrants, especially when they had chosen Ukraine as their first destination country and were forced to flee for the second time after February 24, 2022.

Due to the dynamic character of migration from Belarus alongside some statistical constraints, it is difficult to determine exactly how many Belarusian migrants live in Lithuania and Poland. It is estimated that there may be around 40 thousand Belarusian citizens in Lithuania at present. Polish authorities estimate the number of Belarusians at around 100,000–150,000 people.

This study was conducted between June and October 2022, by means of a quantitative survey and in-depth interviews. It is aimed at determining the main reasons for Belarusians for coming to Lithuania and Poland, the challenges and needs they face in everyday life and integration in the new countries of residence. A survey on an online platform was conducted, with 335 respondents participating in Lithuania and 777 in Poland, as well as 11 in-depth interviews in Lithuania and 15 in Poland supplementing the quantitative data analysis.

According to the survey, a majority of respondents (86% in Lithuania and 94% in Poland) left Belarus for political reasons and a feeling of deep insecurity of staying in their home country. The second set of reasons consists of economic and job-related issues. As for the reasons for choosing Lithuania and Poland as host countries, respondents mentioned the possibility of obtaining documents for the legalization there (46% in Lithuania and 75% in Poland). Other influencing factors were closeness of culture, absence of a language barrier and personal experience of visiting the countries in the past.

The sense of security in the host countries is high in both cases (8.81 in Lithuania and 8 in Poland), while the evaluation of the quality of life is a bit lower (7.62 and 7.4 respectively). In both countries, the main source of income of Belarusian migrants consists of salaries obtained via job contracts (79.31% and 53% respectively). Social support programs, healthcare and education in the host countries are not widely used by Belarusian migrants: in Lithuania only 55.71% used the healthcare system and 29.62% used education services . In Poland the situation is similar: 54% in healthcare and 36% in education. This indicates that, contrary to the widespread myth that migrants put severe pressure on the social system of the receiving country, the influx of Belarusians to Lithuania and Poland does not put a significant burden on public expenses from the state budget.

As the survey demonstrates, the biggest group of respondents in Poland are those who have a humanitarian visa (23%), while in Lithuania it is those who have obtained a temporary residence permit (67,75%). The residence permits (although for the purpose of getting social benefits they should go together with labour contracts) provide migrants with more opportunities to receive social services in host country. This difference might explain certain distinctions between the answers of Belarusians regarding the general feeling of security in the host countries (8,81 in Lithuania versus 8 in Poland ), but also regarding the evaluation of standards of life and social services (education, healthcare).

The assistance needed by Belarusian migrants is closely interconnected with very practical aspects of everyday life in the hosting countries. Language courses were reported as most required. The role of diaspora organizations is evaluated as important in both countries, although the share of those who know about the existence of these organizations is much larger than the share of those who participate in their activities.

# Summary

This survey highlights that many Belarusians came to Lithuania and Poland together with their families (parents and children), which means that they need more profound and diverse social support. In addition, a significant group of Belarusian migrants does not use the healthcare system, although respondents declared the need for medical and psychological assistance. This clearly requires a widespread information campaign about available opportunities targeting migrants in both countries.

The plans and prospects of returning to Belarus are uncertain. Respondents are divided between several options – to return, not to return and ‘difficult to answer’ – and the shares are approximately equal. The war in Ukraine, severe repression in Belarus, and a lack of certainty definitely limits the ability of long-term planning by Belarusian migrants.

# Introduction

In 2020, along with the presidential election campaign and mass protests, the biggest mass repression in the region since the time of the Soviet Union began in Belarus country. During the period from August 9, 2020, to the middle of 2022, almost 0.5% of the entire population (about 40,000 people) were detained in Belarus for political reasons. Mass cases of torture and inhumane treatment in detention and prison facilities were recorded. Currently, there are more than 1,300 political prisoners in Belarus.<sup>1</sup> Given this context, it is understandable that a lot of people decided to leave the country. Both the political and non-political reasons for mass migration from Belarus demand special research.

Regarding the main directions of Belarusians' migration in 2020 and after, we can name with great certainty such countries as Lithuania, Poland, Georgia and Ukraine (before the war). Some Belarusians also migrated to Russia, however, this happens traditionally more on economic grounds.<sup>2</sup> Those afraid of political prosecution prefer to move further, as staying in Russia retains all the risks of being arrested and/or being sent back to Belarus.<sup>3</sup>

From a chronological point of view, the two biggest periods of escape from Belarus can be distinguished as follows: 1) fall 2020 – February 2022; 2) February 24, 2022 up till now (the period from the beginning of Russia's war against Ukraine).

The first period might be characterized as a time when many of those who participated in mass protest in Belarus and, in particular, newcomers to Belarusian politics, were faced with actual or perceived threats of physical repression and were forced to leave the country. It was also a time of a profound solidarity of the democratic countries (Lithuania and Poland in particular) with Belarus and democratically – minded Belarusians. This solidarity brought some practical political implications. For example, the Government of Lithuania made decisions to simplify urgent migration from Belarus, despite the pandemic<sup>4</sup>. The Polish government introduced simplified visa regulations (particularly on humanitarian visas), in particular, regulations on humanitarian visas<sup>5</sup>, created a special program for Belarusian entrepreneurs ('Poland. Business Harbour')<sup>6</sup> and supported students and civil society.<sup>7</sup> Within this period, we can also distinguish a separate sub-period after July 2021 when Belarusian authorities started massive repression against institutionalized civil socie-

ty and civic activists in the country, which caused a migration of activists and even entire civil society organizations.

The second period is connected with the war in Ukraine, and it is characterized by the Belarusian regime becoming a co-aggressor in Ukraine. At the same time, the repression inside the country increased further with the tightening of criminal measures applied to protest participants, an expansion of the search for protest participants and repression on citizens who support Ukraine. All these political developments caused a new wave of migration of Belarusian citizens. However, the context in the host countries has changed. Despite a presumed understanding that there is a difference between Lukashenka and the people of Belarus who largely do not support the war<sup>8</sup> by politicians and governments of host-countries with big Belarusian diasporas, public opinion towards Belarusian migrants became way less positive.<sup>9</sup> Understandably, Lukashenka's support of Putin in the war also caused security concerns for the host countries, which resulted in a more cautious attitude and a tightening of legal procedures towards migrants from Belarus.

In parallel, the outbreak of Russia's war in Ukraine also marks the beginning of a new phenomenon that hasn't yet been sufficiently discussed. Since 2020, Ukraine was one of the most popular destinations for migration or *relocation* (as emigrated people from Belarus call this process themselves)<sup>10</sup> from Belarus; both for individuals facing (or at risk of) repression, and for civil society organizations and independent media. Moving to Ukraine was easier due to geographic proximity, simpler conditions for entry, lower living costs, and the virtual absence of a language barrier. After February 24, 2022, said groups of people found themselves in a field of greater risk, that is in a *de facto* war zone, without consular support from their country and under the threat of crackdown in case of occupation. Therefore, a large part of Belarusians who had moved to Ukraine in 2020–2021 had to flee again. As a result, many of these people found themselves in other countries and, in particular, in Poland – a popular destination for those who were forced to leave Ukraine.

All this complicated context causes many questions which are at the focus of this study: what were people's reasons for leaving Belarus? How do Belarusians feel about living in Lithuania and Poland? What determined their choices of Lithuania and Poland as the destinations for migration? Are Belarusians a unique group facing specific challenges, or do they

face similar problems as residents of host countries or other migrant groups? How to facilitate integration in host societies for Belarusians? What are the social and other needs of Belarusian migrants abroad? The conducted research aims to answer these questions at least partially. In the study, questions were asked on the following thematic blocks:

- 1) Reasons for leaving Belarus;
- 2) Reasons of choice of Lithuania and Poland as host countries;
- 3) Legal basis for being in host countries;
- 4) Sense of security in the host countries and impact of war in Ukraine;
- 5) Sources of income and assessment of key public services and social support of the host countries;
- 6) Assessment of education, healthcare and other social services;
- 7) Assistance needed;
- 8) The role of diaspora organizations;
- 9) The plans and prospects of a return to Belarus.

At the beginning of this report, we present the existing (limited) data regarding the number of Belarusians who ended up in Lithuania and Poland as of October 2022. After that, we describe the research methodology and its limitations. Then we take turns examining the cases of Lithuania and Poland as host countries for migrants from Belarus, compare them and draw conclusions and recommendations about the main economic, social and political aspects of adaptation of Belarusians in these countries. At the end of the report, we present some recommendations for national governments and other stakeholders.

## Belarusians in Poland and Lithuania: how many of them?

The study focuses on two countries neighboring Belarus, to which Belarusians have been emigrating after 2020 – Poland and Lithuania. Both countries have large diasporas of Belarusians, which increased further after the events of 2020. However, there is no completely reliable and exact information on the

number of people who moved from Belarus to Lithuania and Poland due to the high fluidity of arrivals from Belarus to these countries, the recent and temporary character of Belarusian migration, and statistical constraints (related to people who stay on visa, not on residence permit).

However, certain data and figures might still be provided. According to the data of national visas and permits for temporary residence in Lithuania issued by Lithuanian consular offices and the assessment of Belarusians themselves, it can be assumed that there may be about 40,000 Belarusian citizens in Lithuania at present. These preliminary estimates take into account the fact that the same person can be issued both a national visa and a residence permit in Lithuania, that there is also internal migration between Lithuania and Poland as well as, to a lesser extent, Latvia, and that some Belarusians may have repatriated to Belarus. According to the official data of the Lithuanian Migration Department, 31,280 Belarusian citizens lived in Lithuania as of the beginning of 2022<sup>11</sup>. Geographically Belarusians mainly reside in the capital (Vilnius) and in the two big cities Kaunas and Klaipėda.

In Poland, Belarusians form without doubt the second immigration group in Poland whose number has grown quickly (after Ukrainians). According to the data of the Office for Foreigners, a significant increase in the number of Belarusian citizens obtaining residence permits in Poland can be observed since August 2020. As of June 2022, more than 50,000 Belarusians possess residence permits in Poland (55% in the age group of 20–39, 28% older than 40, and 17% youth and children). The official statistics show that a majority of Belarusians reside in two regions: *Masovian Voivodeship* (with capital city Warsaw) and *Podlaskie Voivodeship* (the region bordering with Belarus).<sup>12</sup> In the period of August 2020 to June 2022, more than 3,000 Belarusians received refugee status or subsidiary protection.<sup>13</sup> Additionally, within the year and a half after the Belarusian presidential elections in 2020 (August 2020 – March 2022), Poland issued almost 30,000 humanitarian visas to Belarusians.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, until July 2022, more than 44,000 business visas with the right to work were issued to Belarusian citizens. In 2021, 78,000 permits for short-term labor were issued to Belarusian citizens, and in 2022 this number is expected to be much higher.<sup>15</sup>

Nevertheless, we understand that these numbers cannot be considered sufficient. From a methodo-

logical point of view, it means that we do not know the size of the general population of Belarusians living in these countries. This imposes certain limitations on the research results, and thus it cannot be considered representative. Nevertheless, we can claim that the obtained data help us to see trends in Belarusians' assessments of the reasons for their departure from the country, the conditions of stay in the host countries and communities, the difficulties they face, and the needs they have.

## Methodology

The research was conducted in parallel in Lithuania and Poland during June–September 2022. It included a quantitative survey and qualitative in-depth interviews with representatives of different social groups and professional occupations. In both cases, the study targeted representatives of the Belarusian diaspora that arrived at the host countries in 2020 or later.

In Lithuania a total of 335 respondents answered the questions by filling out a quantitative questionnaire on an online platform in the Russian language. Additionally, 11 in-depth interviews with Belarusians living in Lithuania were conducted. For the purposes of this study interviews were conducted with representatives of different social and professional groups of migrants: 5 interviews with professional human rights defenders and journalists; 3 interviews with business representatives, and 3 interviews with individuals who were not involved in civic activities until 2020 but who later on faced repression or the risk of repression due to their political views.

The absolute majority of individuals who participated in the survey in Lithuania are in 2 age's groups, 18–29 (30%) and 30–45 (69%), while the amount of those aged 46–62 is only around 6%. Women respondents (57,72%) composed a bigger group than men (41,61%), while several respondents abstained from mentioning their gender identity. Around 65% of respondents arrived in Lithuania with their families, among whom 69% arrived with spouses, 25% with children, and only a minority with parents (3%) or other family members (3%). 35% of respondents answered that they are in Lithuania alone.

The presented survey addressed to Belarusians living in Poland since mid-2020 was conducted in

September 2022. To ensure the highest possible response rate and to address the language duality of Belarusian migrants, the questionnaire was prepared in two languages, Russian and Belarusian. Some Belarusians residing in Poland prefer not to use the Russian language, while others do not speak Belarusian fluently and still opt to communicate in Russian. The questionnaire was completed by 777 people (496 people chose the Russian language version and 281 Belarusian one) in the period of September 7 to October 3, 2022. The results presented below are counted for both groups together.

Among respondents, women are a slightly larger group (50%) than men (49%) (N=628). Most of the respondents (59%) are in the age range of 30–45, 26% are younger (18–29 years old) and 14% are older (46+) (N=628). The prominence of middle-aged respondents may explain the fact that many of them arrived in Poland with their relatives (53% came with a spouse, 39% with children, 3% with one or more parents, and 6% with one or more other family members). Only one third (33%) of respondents stated that they traveled alone (N=628, multiple answers possible). This is noteworthy information from the point of view of possible further plans of Belarusians to settle down in Poland, and it also determines integration pathways and social assistance needs.

In Poland, 15 additional interviews were conducted in September and October 2022 with activists, business representatives and individuals who were not involved in civic activities until 2020 but later on faced risk of repression.

There was no obligation to answer all the questions in the survey, and therefore the number of responses to different questions may vary. Some questions in the questionnaire included an option to add descriptive answers or provide additional comments. This solution allowed for more in-depth analyses of the dynamics of migration, key reasons behind migration decisions and the complexity of needs of Belarusians in Lithuania and Poland.

Because of the space limitations of the report, we analyze and focus mostly on the outcomes of the quantitative survey in both countries. Materials from the interviews are mainly used for understanding nuances and providing context to the answers and their interpretations. However, in both case studies we use citations to illustrate the main ideas and conclusions of the text.

# Case study 1: Lithuania and the migrants from Belarus

**The immigration of Belarusians to Lithuania after the 2020 political crisis: social and economic integration, key issues and challenges**

## The reasons for leaving Belarus

Irrespective of the migration time and method (i.e. business relocation or individual decision to leave the country), the absolute majority of migrants from Belarus leave the country for political reasons: this reason was stated by 86.07% of the respondents (several options were available).

In parallel, 31.07% of the respondents stated that they left for job-related or economic reasons. In the context of this study, this is not necessarily a typical economic migration of individuals, but rather associated with the relocation of businesses, non-governmental organizations and independent media to Lithuania.



*In a KGB police station, they interrogated: Do you know that your friend is already in Warsaw, maybe you need to go to Warsaw, too? There are many such stories of making pressured to leave. If you don't like it here, just go.*

Interview with a respondent

Although the factor of insecurity as a reason to leave the country wasn't named directly by the respondents, according to their answers we see that they evaluate their staying in Belarus as non-secure. The respondents rated the sense of security in Belarus before leaving as 4.17 points out of ten. In the comments, more than half of the answers were related to personal fear or experience of arrest, imprisonment or torture, or concerns that this could happen to people in the immediate environment (family, workplace, etc.). The answers related to fear of the future, the war in Ukraine, and the lack of law enforcement in

Belarus are indicated in the second, third, and fourth places. During the in-depth interviews, respondents indicated that active citizens in Belarus were deliberately pressured to leave.

## Reasons of choosing Lithuania as a country of destination

The answers to the survey demonstrate that around 47% of respondents arrived in Lithuania within a year term, 19% in 2020, while one third (34%) of survey's participants arrived in 2022. It is likely that, together with the flow of secondary emigration from Ukraine, this will be the largest wave of Belarusians who have arrived in Lithuania so far.

Reflecting on the reasons of choice of Lithuania as a destination country almost half of the respondents indicated the possibility of obtaining a visa and/or a temporary residence permit in Lithuania (45.96%). "Other reason" was stated by 32.72% of the respondents. This category (with additional explanations) is absolutely dominated by answers related to the absence of a language barrier and personal experience in Lithuania (respondents have previously visited or lived in Lithuania, know Lithuania, the country seems closer in terms of mentality, respondents have personal or business connections here). The second most frequent reason in the "other" category is the transfer of the workplace (business, non-governmental organization or media outlet) for working from Lithuania. The less frequently mentioned reason is geographical proximity (opportunity to meet relatives, the possibility to return more easily if and when such an opportunity arises) and also a few answers "I didn't choose" or "There was no other option".



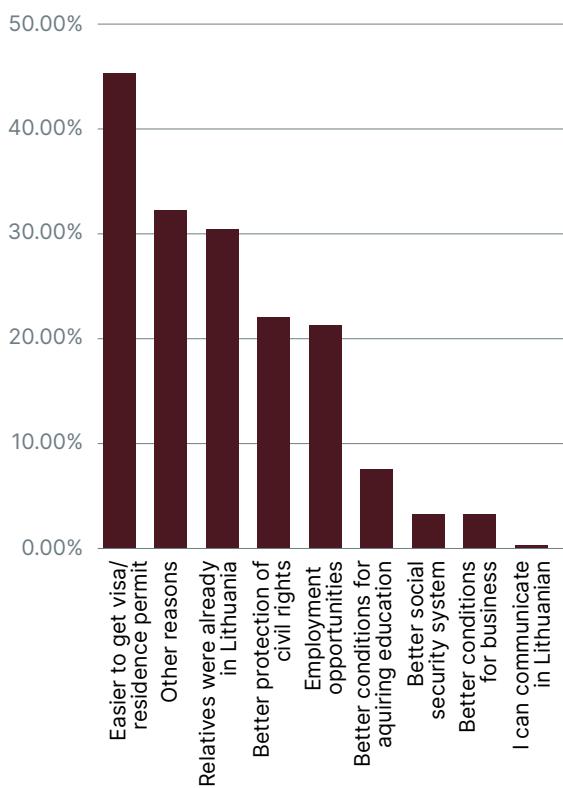
*We moved to Lithuania because we saw that Lithuania offers opportunities for legalization. After all, you go, roughly speaking, where you are treated in a friendly way. The main argument was the moment when the Prime Minister said that discrimination would not be allowed in Lithuania. Maybe it doesn't seem important to you [laughs], but Lithuanian politicians seem to us like people who stand by their words.*

Interview with a respondent

The third most frequent reason (30.88%) is related to the fact that the persons who decided to leave already had relatives or a potential support system (of friends or family members) in Lithuania. People were also mentioning more friendly environment. Thus, 22.43 % stated a better political climate (the opportunity to engage in political or civic activities) as the reason. 21.69% noted better employment opportunities.

**Chart 1.** Reasons for choosing Lithuania as a host country

### Why did you choose Lithuania, and not some other country?



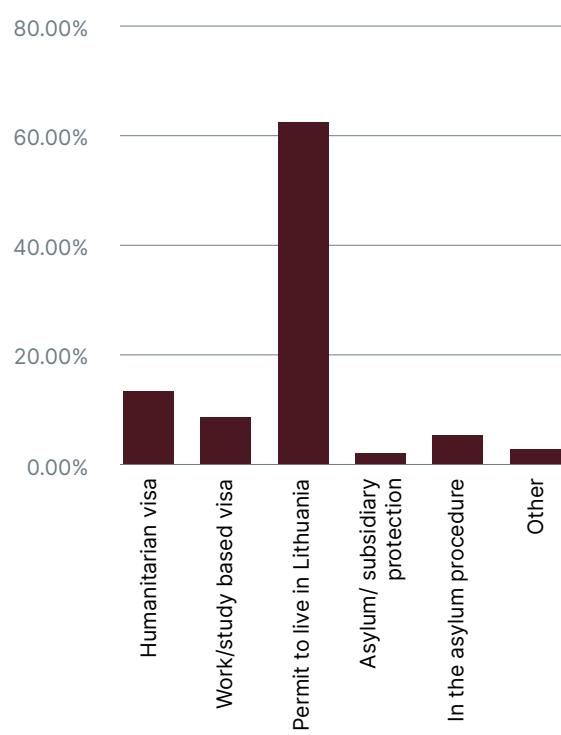
### Legal status of Belarusians in Lithuania

When it comes to the legal status, 67.75% of the respondents answered that they have a residence permit in Lithuania, 14.58% arrived with a humanitarian visa, 9.49% came with a study or work visa, slightly more than 8% of the respondents were granted asylum or temporary protection in Lithuania (or the procedure for granting asylum is still ongoing). There is also an information that 502 Belarusian citizens

submitted their first or repeated asylum applications in Lithuania from the beginning of 2020 to the end of July 2022<sup>16</sup>. It should be noted that persons who are still subject to the asylum procedure as well as persons who are in Lithuania with a D visa issued by another Schengen state or type C visa, are not entitled to obtain a work permit using the simplified procedure and are, therefore, the most vulnerable group in a social and financial sense.

**Chart 2:** Type of legal status

### At the moment, what is your legal status in Lithuania?



### Living in Lithuania: feeling of security, war in Ukraine and discrimination

The sense of security is unequivocally one of the most important factors in assessing the quality of living in Lithuania. Respondents rate the sense of security in this country at an average of 8.81 points out of 10. In general, the quality of living in Lithuania is also assessed positively by respondents: at an average of 7.62 points out of 10. About a third of

the respondents indicated that they are not in danger of repression in Lithuania for their political views or direct professional activities. One fifth of the respondents indicated that Belarusian agencies would not reach them in Lithuania. About a third noted a functioning rule of law.



*Some are worried because they see that Belarusians have big problems in Ukraine: their cards are disabled, people are left without funds, residence permits are no longer issued to them, they are sent out of the country. I think there is a fear that this could happen here as well.*

Interview with a respondent

In parallel, among the factors that reduce the sense of security, those mentioned most frequently include financial challenges and the possible loss of job (and, accordingly, migration status), high inflation, difficulties in finding housing (especially housing where one can declare a place of residence as this is required to obtain a temporary residence permit in Lithuania), changes in the migration system (difficulties in obtaining a temporary residence permit after the outbreak of the Russia's war in Ukraine), the risk of war, the risk of an energy crisis, and a high crime rate. During the in-depth interviews, the respondents often emphasized that the sense of security does not appear immediately after arriving from Belarus, the adaptation period takes up to several months (the psychological impact on the relationships in couples and families requires special attention).



*There are concerns and many discussions with colleagues about [possible] Russia's aggression against Lithuania. There is a general understanding that aggression is impossible because Lithuania is a member of NATO. But sure... No one expected an attack on Ukraine either. So, of course, we are discussing what we would do. Someone is thinking of leaving, someone says he will stay to buy a field kitchen trailer and join volunteers, someone says we will stay and fight.*

Interview with a respondent

In other words, one of the most important factors determining the sense of security and, to a large extent, the quality of living in Lithuania is independence from Belarusian agencies. However, one of the main differences in the situation of Belarusians compared to Ukrainians (but not necessarily to refugees

from other countries) manifests itself here: Ukrainian citizens can apply for consular support to the institutions of their state, while consular services to Belarusians (or their non-provision) often become a means of pressure of the Belarusian regime against Belarusian citizens in Lithuania.

The problem of discrimination is not particularly pressing in Lithuania, but it still exists. 49.2% of the respondents said that they did not face discrimination in Lithuania on the basis of their being Belarusians. 28.9% did not encounter discrimination personally but indicated that they had heard of such cases. 8.5% of the respondents faced discrimination when searching for housing, 5% faced it in the labor market (reluctance to hire after learning that the person is Belarusian, reluctance to hire with a humanitarian visa, other inappropriate treatment from employers).

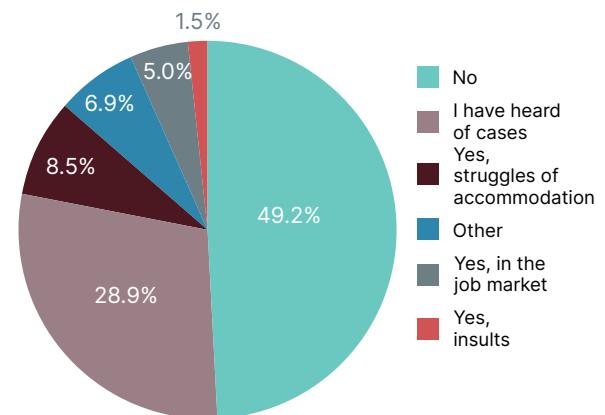


*In Belarus, during the active phase of the protest, those of us who were involved... the police and special services came to people actually every morning, most often this is done at 6 o'clock in the morning, to make sure they are at home. And accordingly, sleep was very bad, worry was high. I got up at six in the morning and waited for them to come for me. Not too good for mental health. After relocation, the paranoia about unfamiliar cars and being watched went away after about two weeks.*

Interview with a respondent

### Chart 3. Manifestations of discrimination

Did you ever encounter discrimination in Lithuania based on the fact that you are from Belarus?



The answers "other" also mentioned mistreatment in public institutions, hooliganism in public places, and difficulties related to bank accounts.



*If you hold a passport of any country, that country should protect you, but it is absolutely not the case of Belarusians. Also, there are no international protection mechanisms, you need to constantly communicate with the Belarusian authorities, you cannot become divorced or get certificates without them. Control does not end after you leave. I know two stories: people went to the Belarusian consulate to change their passports, they were told that the passports need to be collected at a registration point in Belarus, and it is not safe for a person to go there. Legalization in Lithuania requires various certificates (for example, a certificate of clean criminal record), for which you have to stand in lines and pay money to the regime.*

Interview with a respondent

As shown by the results of the survey, Russia's war in Ukraine adversely affected the well-being of more than half of the respondents in Lithuania. Individuals who stated that their situation had changed positively since the beginning of the war (4.7%) emphasized that they volunteered, helped refugees in Lithuania or went to the Ukrainian-Polish border, to Ukraine, and that helped them overcome the feeling of fear, gave them the opportunity to answer accusations about Belarus' involvement in the conflict. The absolute majority of those who indicated the adverse effects of the war (57.7%) stressed inflation and difficulties in renting housing, rents, and fear of war. Some of the respondents also emphasized queues in customer service departments of the migration institution. Problems with temporary residence permits in Lithuania are often mentioned.<sup>17</sup>



*Belarusians do not raise any questions to Ukraine or Ukrainians. Now Ukraine is the most important thing, but it should be taken into account that not all the measures applied to prohibit Belarusians from doing something benefit Ukrainians. As for business, I would support it, we would all support it, if there were some quotas for Ukrainians to participate in tenders for financing start-ups, but Belarusians in Lithuania could participate in tenders on an equal footing with others.*

Interview with a respondent

Belarusians living in Lithuania drew attention to the fact that Ukrainian citizens in this country have a different status: obtaining a work permit, support for studies remain the main issues.

## Sources of income and social security of Belarusians in Lithuania

When asked about sources of income 69.49% of the respondents have a permanent source of income in Lithuania. 79.31% of persons with a permanent source of income in Lithuania work under employment contracts, and another 21.67% work independently.

Among Belarusians who do not have a permanent source of income in Lithuania, 61.11% live on their savings or are supported by relatives living in Belarus or other countries. 43.33% are supported by his or her partner or spouse. It should be noted that among those who do not have a permanent source of income in Lithuania, there are more women (39.41%) than men (18.70%), in turn women are a much more financially vulnerable group.

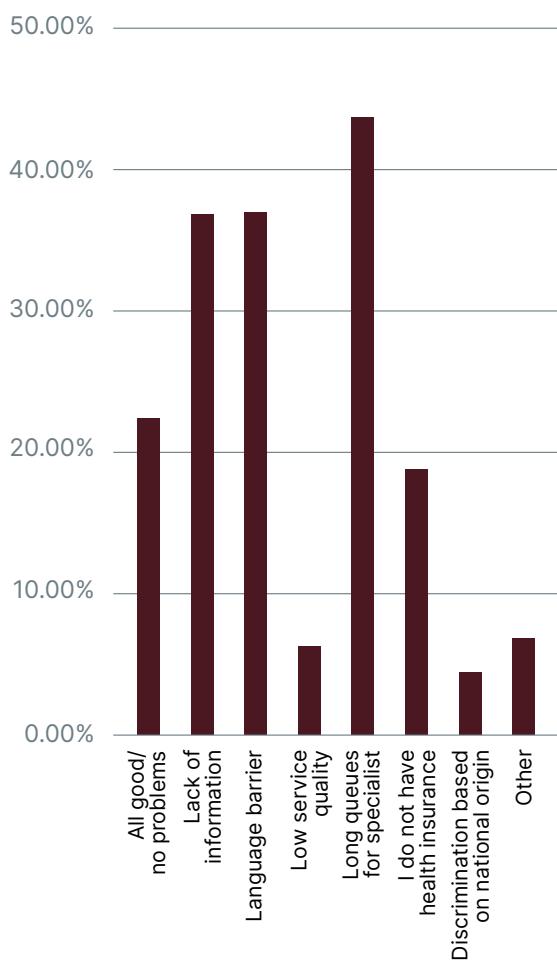
Social programs in Lithuania are used by only 10% of Belarusians. A quarter of them use support provided by the Belarusian diaspora's and other non-governmental support funds at no cost to the Lithuanian budget.

## Assessment of healthcare and education in Lithuania

Only slightly more than half of the respondents (55.71%) used the services of the healthcare system in Lithuania, 29.62% used the services of the education, training or guardianship system of minors. The persons who used these state services, when asked to assess the services according to the 10-point system, assessed the quality of the services positively. The respondents assessed the work of the healthcare system at an average of 7.3 points, and the education and training services at an average of 8 points.

**Chart 4.** Encountered difficulties in the healthcare sector

### What kind of difficulties did you face in the healthcare sector in Lithuania?



The fact that the aforementioned services are used by a rather small part of the individuals is related to the relatively young age of the respondents as well as the fact that women are more likely to administer issues of children's activities and health issues (i.e., only about half of the respondents). However, the challenges that Belarusian citizens face in those areas are likely to be universal for all residents of the country, not specific to this particular group.

A fifth of the respondents (22.50%) stated that they had not faced any difficulties in the field of healthcare. Long specialist waiting time remains the main challenge in the healthcare sector (43.75% of the respondents encountered this problem). 36.88% of the respondents answered that they encountered a language barrier and the same share of the re-

spondents stated that they faced a lack of information (how and when they can register, who and when can receive free medical assistance, it is not always possible to immediately find a specialist who speaks a foreign language). For about a fifth of the respondents (18.75%), the most pressing problem is that they do not have health insurance. This problem is topical for individuals who have humanitarian or Schengen visas and who are not yet employed. Persons who do not have a temporary residence permit in Lithuania do not have the opportunity to register self-employment and pay health insurance and social insurance contributions themselves. Pregnant people are the most vulnerable in such a situation (without health insurance, the costs of prenatal care and childbirth services are particularly high). Among other problems, study participants cited the fact that private health insurance (especially if purchased in Belarus) virtually never covers the cost of treatment. Challenges in obtaining the COVID-19 vaccine and staff misconduct were also mentioned.

In parallel, during the interviews, the respondents also highlighted specific problems (such as dealing with cases of domestic violence or treatment of serious illnesses) that are difficult to identify quantitatively or assess their prevalence in this study. On the other hand, even if these problems are relevant only for a small part of individuals who arrived from Belarus, their solution, if possible, would require additional governmental or non-governmental efforts.



*It is very difficult, of course, for those who come with serious health problems, when the treatment is very expensive, for the elderly people. If a person has a humanitarian visa, medical services are chargeable and very expensive. Similarly, in a situation when there are children in the family, the treatment costs are very high. A separate group, although it may be quite small, is people with HIV and tuberculosis. In this situation, the person needs to continue treatment to survive.*

Interview with a respondent

In the field of education, approximately half of the respondents who had experience in using these services (50.62%) did not encounter any problems. About a fifth of the respondents (19.75%) indicated a language barrier and difficulties in adaptation as the main problems in schools and preschool facilities. The lack of information is a smaller challenge in this

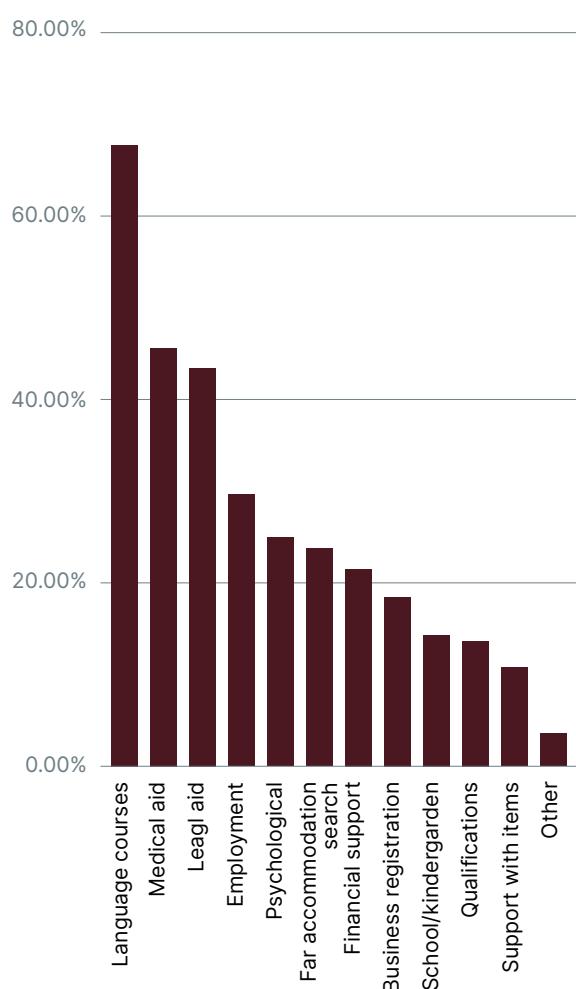
area than in receiving medical services (it was faced by 9.88% of the respondents) but administrative challenges and a complicated admission procedure are relevant for 14.81% of the respondents. 8.64% of the respondents named the lack of psychological support for children as a pressing challenge, another 8.64% mentioned other challenges, such as the general lack of places at educational institutions where the language of instruction is Russian, especially after the outbreak of Russia's war in Ukraine, the quality and content of textbooks in Russian, and the lack of high-quality Lithuanian language courses for children).

## Assistance needed

The main needs for support are related to very practical aspects: entering a job requires skills, self-employment and paying taxes require information and opportunities; besides, understandable information about medical services, more places at Russian-language educational institutions are needed.

**Chart 5.** Sought support from Lithuanian state

### What type of support do you need in Lithuania?



68.42% of the respondents named Lithuanian language courses as the mostly needed type of support: first of all, this is important when looking for employment opportunities, and also as a way to integrate, network and orientate oneself in Lithuania more quickly. 46.24% mentioned medical assistance as one of the main needs. In parallel, 36.88% indicated the lack of information about medical services and a language barrier as the main problems in dealing with the healthcare sector. In addition, 43.98% stated the need for legal advice, especially advice on migration status, employment and tax issues.



*Paying taxes and Sodra state social insurance contributions is not complicated, but we pass information from person to person. Those who know how teach others what to do. The system itself is not complicated, but due to the lack of information, so far we are learning through personal experience.*

Interview with a respondent

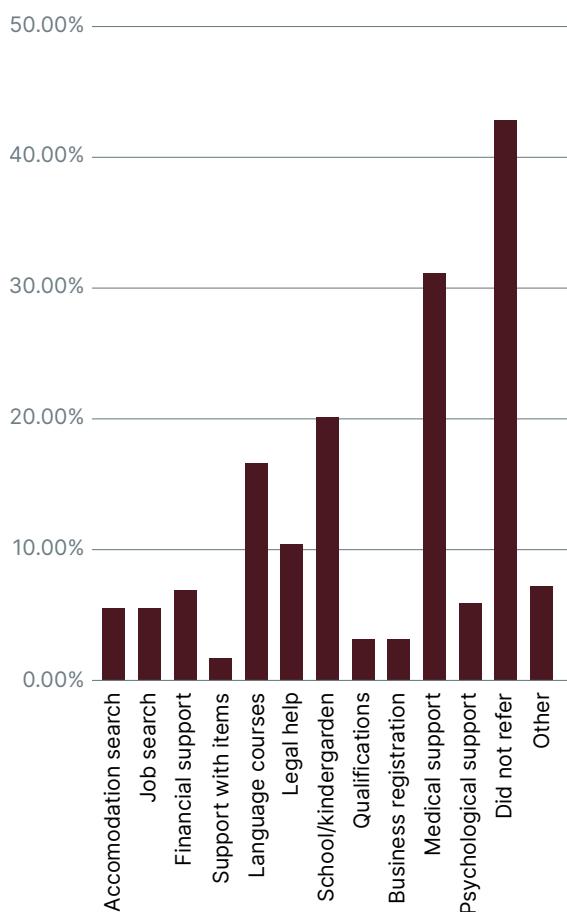
For 30.08% of the respondents, assistance in finding a job is relevant; 25.19% pointed out the need for psychological help; 24.06% indicated assistance in finding housing as an important need. In this regard it should be noted that women face discrimination more often than men when looking for housing: 12.24% of the women stated that they had encountered this type of discrimination, and this may be associated with landlords' discriminatory attitudes regarding women's financial stability. A large share of illegal rents and the reluctance to allow declaring the place of residence, especially for persons who have minor children, remain the main obstacle. 21.80% indicated the need for financial support (it is also more relevant for women, as they less often have a permanent source of income), 18.8% stated the need for assistance in registering a business, 14.66% mentioned registering children in educational institutions (a higher need for places at Russian or Belarusian-language education institutions is emphasized). 13.91% of the respondents highlighted the need for consultations on the recognition of qualifications (it is especially relevant for specific occupations, for example, in the medical field).

In parallel, these needs have at least partially been addressed in Lithuania. Thus, answering to the question about kinds of support they've already received in the country, migrants emphasized medical support (32%), education services (school/ kindergar-

ten) (20%) and language courses (18%) alongside with some other services which were mentioned by less than 10% of respondents. However, more than a half mentioned that didn't refer for any support. Thus, the needs (especially in language courses) need to be better addressed.

**Chart 6.** Types of support which Belarusians got in Lithuania

For what type of support do you refer to the national, municipal institutions or non-governmental organizations?



During the interviews, interviewees also highlighted specific problems (such as dealing with cases of domestic violence or treatment of serious illnesses) that are difficult to identify quantitatively or assess their prevalence in this study. On the other hand, even if these problems are relevant only for a small part of individuals who arrived from Belarus, their solution, if possible, would require additional governmental or non-governmental efforts.



*I think that the problem of domestic violence is also topical. It may not be very common, it is not visible and I have no idea how to solve it. If you have moved with your family and you have nothing, no income, then you are very vulnerable, sometimes you are even prohibited from working. When you are in another country, you don't know where and whether you can turn to somewhere, where you can stay temporarily.*

Interview with a respondent

According to the study, one of the needs is more opportunities to work on a self-employment basis (possibly with a humanitarian visa or to obtain a residence permit in Lithuania for self-employment) and more consultations and opportunities to receive financing for starting a business.

In other words, the Belarusian diaspora is interested in the possibility of creating a job for themselves and others. When assessing business relocations, according to the preliminary calculations of Invest Lithuania, in 2021 companies that have relocated their employees paid more than EUR 20 million in taxes related to employment relations (taking into account only personal income tax, without other taxes and economic efficiency multiplier, such as goods, services purchased in Lithuania and others)<sup>18</sup>. Summing up, the economic impact of the influx of Belarusians to Lithuania might be considered as a positive one.

## Role of diaspora organizations

Doubts about the prospects of returning to Belarus is the impact of Russia's war in Ukraine which is not directly reflected in the survey but became evident during the in-depth interviews. In in-depth interviews, the respondents named the fact that they manage to continue to engage in activities aimed at changes in Belarus as one of the biggest achievements after moving to Lithuania. These activities include restructuring of relocated organizations, new projects, participation in protests, implementation of educational activities intended for the diaspora or assistance to newly arrived persons etc.



*There are three types of relocatees. The first come and forget Belarus. The second remain completely on the political agenda and do not assimilate. And the third, who adapt but keep politics in their lives, want to influence opinion.*

Interview with a respondent

The broken ties with relatives, friends and colleagues who left in Belarus, as well as the fact that some of the Belarusians who arrived do not have time or other resources to continue participating in civic activities, were indicated as one of the biggest losses. Nevertheless, involvement in the diaspora's initiatives remains high among the Belarusians. 76.25% of the respondents stated that they know the diaspora organizations operating in Lithuania, while 35.77% stated that they were involved in their activities.

## Plans and prospects to return



*Before February 24, if the government had changed, we would have returned. After February 24, the situation is no longer the same. Even if the regime changes, the prospects for the country will be very, very poor. Belarus is involved in a very terrible story, and we will hardly be able to launder the reputation of the country in our generation. In the past, for example, Belarusian IT companies were a certain quality mark, or, as they say, were a positive connotation. Now the situation is obverse. Even if Putin left, Lukashenka left, there would be many years of transformation ahead.*

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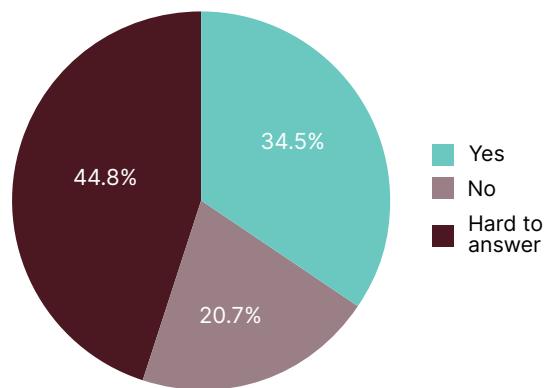
*I won't go back until many changes happen: full independence from Russia, change of the regime, and free elections. Until the activities of NGOs become safe, until when there are no repressions in general.*

Interview with respondents

34.48% of the respondents answered positively to the question of whether they intend to return to Belarus if the opportunity arises, 20.69% of the respondents answered negatively, and 44.83% indicated that they could not answer. During the in-depth interviews, a deeper context of the answers was revealed: the role of Belarus in the war with Ukraine raised serious doubts as to whether the current regime in Belarus (and the attitude of Western countries towards Belarus) could change in the near future.

**Chart 7:** Plans to return

Are you planning to go back to Belarus?



In other words, the involvement of the Belarusian regime in Russia's war in Ukraine became a signal to Belarusians that the factors hindering the success of the revolution are not only the regime in Belarus, but a local change of the regime would also not necessarily be transformative, and the events of 2022 will leave long-term political, social and economic consequences, relevant even after the change of the political system.

# Case study 2: Poland and the migrants from Belarus

**The immigration of Belarusians to Poland after the 2020 political crisis: social and economic integration, key issues and challenges**

## The reasons for leaving Belarus

The average rating of personal security in Belarus (before emigration) voiced by the respondents in Poland was 3 on a scale from 1 to 10, wherein the 31% of respondents assessed it with the lowest score (1) (N=543). Repression, intimidation, arrests of close friends and raids by the police and security services were mentioned as main reasons to leave the country. The political oppression affected various dimensions of everyday life in Belarus. Respondents mentioned an inability to continue conducting business due to both governmental limitations of entrepreneurial activities and EU sanctions on Belarus. A few respondents also highlighted a growing fear and responsibility for family members, especially children.

A significant majority (94%) of respondents in Poland declared political reasons as their motivation to leave Belarus (N=553, multiple answers possible). The discord with the regime, intensified repression and the deepening economic and political crisis caused mass migration of Belarusians primarily to neighboring safe countries: Poland, Lithuania and Ukraine. It hastened the decision of people who had considered emigration earlier and/or who already had migration experience. Notwithstanding, the decision to leave Belarus was also made by those who had not considered this option so far.



*I was sent to prison for participating in protests, so I came under supervision [of the security services] ... And as an IT specialist, I understood that everything good that was in the country had ended.*

Interview with a respondent

The second reason for leaving Belarus, declared by 20% of respondents, was the economic situation. Only 3% of respondents mentioned that they migrate to Poland encouraged by the support programs dedicated to the Polish minority in Belarus. In additional comments to the question about reasons for leaving Belarus, the Russian aggression in Ukraine was also mentioned as a motivation for departure from the country.

Special attention should be paid to the Belarusians who in 2020 moved first to Ukraine, and only afterwards to Poland. In the comments, some of the respondents mentioned that they applied in Ukraine for the Polish Business Harbour program or humanitarian visas, as Poland was the only EU country which issued visas to Belarusian citizens at that time. After February 24, 2022, Belarusians in Ukraine were forced to escape together with others through humanitarian corridors to Poland. The rapid and massive inflow of hundreds of thousands of people to Poland from Ukraine affected the legal status of newcomers, especially in terms of obtaining residence permits and access to social support programs. A smooth processing of humanitarian visas and humanitarian stay permits has been obtained with some delay, which left people in precarious and uncertain situations at the start of the Russian aggression.

## Poland as destination country: reasons and dynamics of arrival

The survey purposely addressed migrants who left Belarus after the August 2020 mass protests to better recognize the needs of that specific category. Among other things, the survey's intention was to find out when exactly the people from this category came to Poland. This question has been answered by N=625. It turned out that for the majority of respondents, migration to Poland is a rather new phenomenon. Almost half of the respondents arrived within the last year (46%), whereas 19% declared entering Poland two years ago. Over one third of the respondents (35%) arrived in Poland within the last few months; some of which escaped Belarus to Ukraine and then (after Russian aggression) had to leave Ukraine and moved to Poland together with hundreds of thousands of war refugees. This means that the respondents could be described as newcomers who are still in the initial phase of organizing life in a new country.

The majority of the respondents (85%) are settled in the big cities in Poland, which is the typical decision of immigrants in a new country (N=628). Cities are usually perceived as a place where there are more opportunities to find a job, to receive assistance from the state and non-governmental institutions, and to find diaspora organizations and other Belarusians.

First of all, Poland attracted Belarusians through relatively accessible legalization procedures, in part due to introducing governmental programs, the Polish Business Harbour and scholarships for students and academics, or facilitating entry through application of humanitarian visas. A majority of respondents (75%) highlighted facilitation in obtaining visas and residence permits as the main reason for choosing Poland as a country of destination (N=535, multiple answers possible). Some respondents also mentioned possession of a Pole's Card (a document confirming Polish origin), which facilitates entry to Poland and assistance with settling in the country, and guarantees access to a stay permit.



*I have been in Poland before as a tourist. I left Belarus in August 2020 and changed several countries for several months. Now I am in Poland with my girlfriend, she has a Pole's card. And I'm on Business Harbour. This is a developed country, and there is cultural, linguistic, and geographical proximity [with Belarus].*

Interview with a respondent

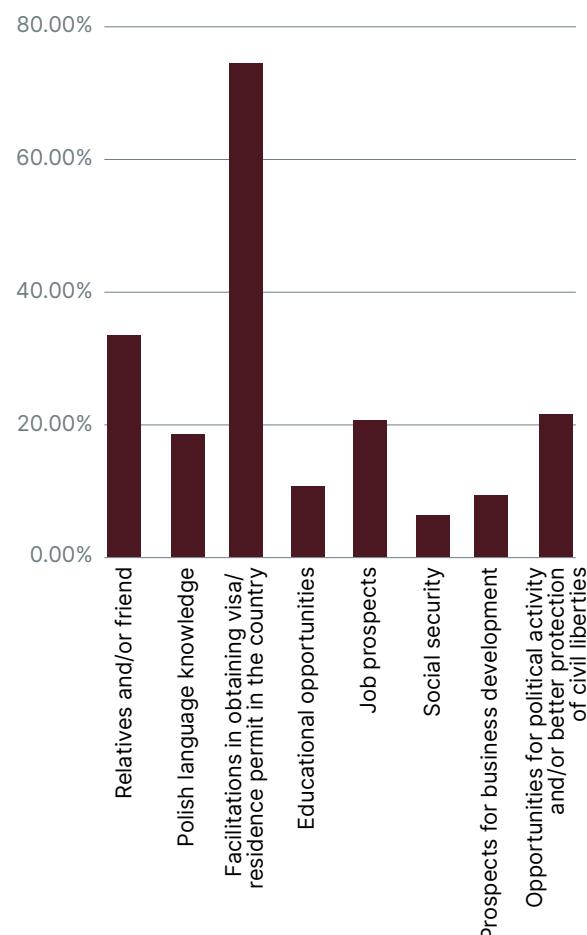


*The choice was obvious: Poland. Poland has provided excellent conditions for IT specialists. We managed to get a Poland Business Harbour visa.*

Interview with a respondent

The presence of a social network (friends and relatives who live or have lived in Poland earlier) also had a significant impact on migration decisions for 34% of respondents. Poland was also associated with good perspectives for work and business (31%), and political and civic freedom (22%). Respondents also referred to linguistic and cultural similarities, the openness of Polish society and its supportiveness in the process of adaptation and integration. The general references to Poland as a democratic country with guaranteed freedom of speech and opinion was used to confront the authoritarian regime and lawlessness of the security services in Belarus.

**Chart 8.** Reasons for choosing Poland as a host country



## Legal basis for being in Poland

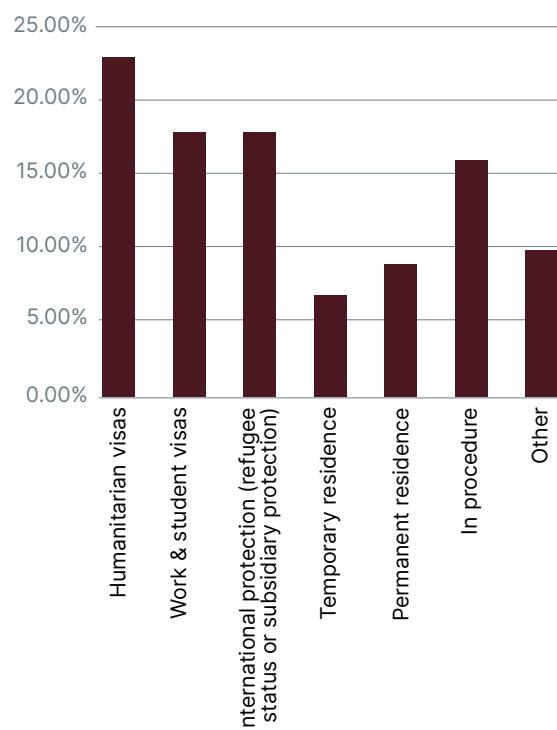
Insightful results were obtained regarding the respondents' legal status and economic situation. The survey has demonstrated that Belarusian migrants often use other than labor-based forms of legalization of their stay, including humanitarian and international protection. Yet, in the majority of cases they are self-sufficient economically and do not benefit from social assistance programs. It remains an open question, however, whether this is due to lack of information about the available opportunities.

The survey results (N=628) demonstrated that respondents use different legalization possibilities and that it is not always clear for them from which legal title they derive their right to legally stay in Poland, possibly as a result of the complicated migration regulations.

The humanitarian visa is the most popular legal base the respondents use to obtain a legal stay: 23% of respondents declared they remain in Poland on the basis of humanitarian visas (national Polish visas granted on the basis of humanitarian concerns, which entitles holders to work without permission). As much as 18% of respondents declared possessing international or humanitarian protection (refugee status or subsidiary protection). Almost the same number of respondents declared that they remain in Poland either on a work visa and an employer's declaration (via the Polish national system of simplified employment of short-term labor migrants), or on a student visa. A much smaller number declared having a temporary stay (6%) or permanent residence (8%). Official data indicate that as a rule, Belarusians in Poland possess one of the biggest numbers of long-term residence permits in relation to the group's size, which is strongly related to the popularity of the Pole's Card. However, the group covered by this survey is a 'new' migrant community and 16% of all respondents declared that they are still going through the procedure (they applied for official documents and are waiting for them to be issued) while 10% declared "other" (which may include e.g. a tourist visa or an irregular stay).

**Chart 9:** Type of legal status

### Types of legal status



Some respondents who added comments to their answers, emphasized that the procedures for the legalization of their stay are complicated. Especially the difficulties in understanding nuances related to different bases of stay and a long waiting period were highlighted. Obtaining legal status and related access to social assistance is especially challenging in the case of forced migrants, who arrived from the territory of Ukraine.

## The sense of security in Poland and the impact of the war in Ukraine

The study demonstrated a significant improvement in the respondents' sense of personal security after their migration to Poland. The average rating of the sense of individual security in Poland was rather high and gained an average of 8, wherein 46% of the respondents attributed the highest scores (9–10) and less than 1% gave the lowest scores (1–3) (N=549).

Respondents mentioned that in Poland they feel more confident and freer in expressing their opinion and in engaging in civic and entrepreneurial activity. They also highlighted the positive role of the police and the protection of citizens' rights. The role of the diaspora and its activity in Poland was also mentioned as an aspect that strengthened respondents' sense of security.

This rather strong sense of personal security is probably correlated with the economic picture. Most of the respondents (65%) declared that they have a regular source of income in Poland (N=628), which might be interpreted as regular employment. It shows that Belarusians make an effort toward economic integration in the labor market in Poland and, moreover, that they are successful. Further evidence supporting this thesis on socioeconomic integration is that only 29% of respondents indicated that they have used any form of social assistance programs while living in Poland (N=616).

Nevertheless, the sense of security is significantly disrupted by the ongoing crisis in Ukraine and Belarus. As one of respondents commented: "*They [Poles] forgot that Belarusians are victims and not aggressors.*" Another person added: "*The attitude towards Belarusians has become worse both on the part of the Poles and on the part of the Ukrainians.*"

Some of them also feel stress and uncertainty about their further situation in Poland, as well as fear of discrimination from Poles and Ukrainians. Some respondents shared their experience of an immediate change in public attitudes towards them and their children at schools: “*conflicts with Poles because of nationality, even children at school say nasty things to my son because he communicates in Russian with other Belarusians.*” A few respondents mentioned that they feel guilty and psychologically deprived due to the fact that Belarus is recognized internationally as an aggressor.



*There is still no sense of security due to the fact that Belarusians began to be considered accomplices in aggression. Attacks in the form of comments on social networks from Ukrainian citizens (including someone I know), damage to property (the car on white numbers was scratched twice), and aggression from Ukrainian children against my daughter. The fear of speaking Russian is still present. Overall, I don't feel completely safe.*

Comment in the questionnaire



*I had an unpleasant conversation with a Ukrainian woman, when she found out that I was from Belarus. She said that she really hopes that soon Ukraine will start sending missiles toward Belarus, and then the war will end. After all, Belarus is to blame for the fact that Russian troops entered their territory. What could I say ... of course, she was right. But I am not personally responsible for it. If I could do something...*

Interview with a respondent

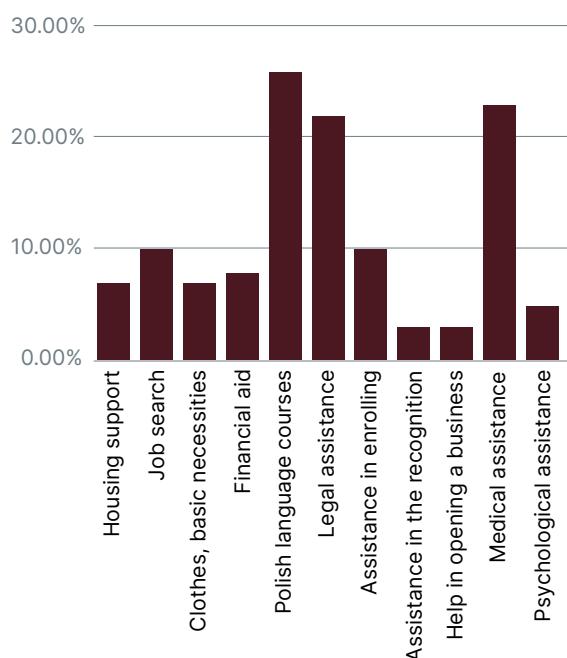
The difficulties with long -lasting legalization procedures, bureaucratic requirements related to self-employment and establishing a business, the complex taxation system and language barriers negatively affect the sense of security and stability among Belarusians in Poland.

## Assessment of key public services and social support

Respondents were asked to assess their standard of living in Poland, on a scale from 1 to 10. In general, the assessment was positive: 37% of respondents gave an 8; the lowest scores (1-3) were provided by only 3% of respondents (N=556).

The respondents were also asked whether they used any social assistance programs addressed to migrants while living in Poland (including programs implemented by the Polish state, local authorities, NGOs and diaspora organizations). Most of the respondents (71%; N=616) answered negatively. Among those who replied to the more specific (multiple choice) question related to types of social assistance programs they used, the most popular types were legal consultations (22%) and Polish language courses (26%).

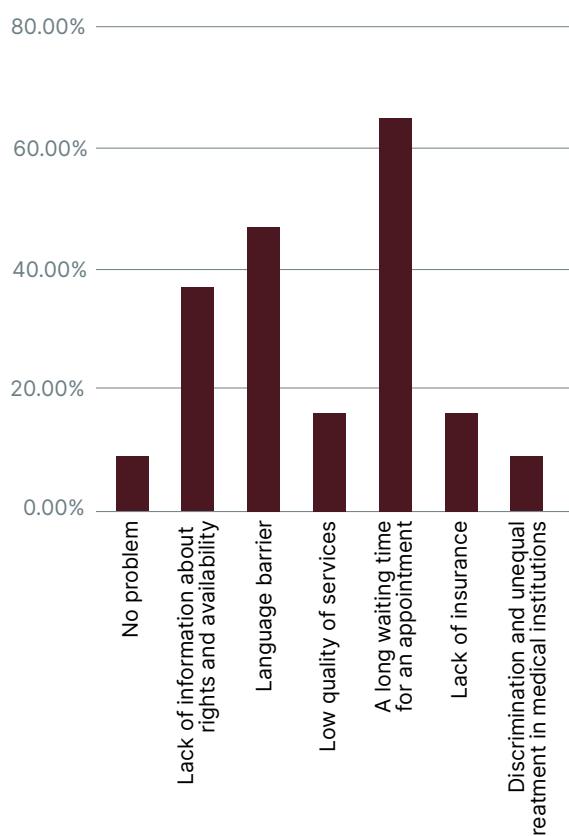
**Chart 10.** Types of social support Belarusians receive in Poland



## Assessment of healthcare and education in Poland

More than half of all respondents (54%) declared using the healthcare system while being in Poland (N=556). On the one hand, this seems like a rather small number, but one should remember that these are recently arrived migrants. Interestingly, when asked about the main obstacle to using the healthcare system in Poland, 16% of respondents indicated a lack of health insurance, while 37% cited insufficient information about access to the healthcare system (N=317, multiple answers possible).

**Chart 11.** Encountered difficulties in the healthcare sector



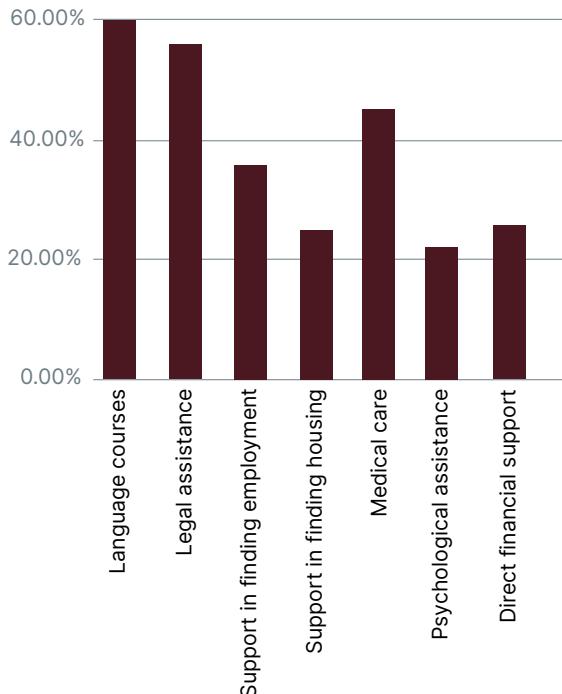
The education and care system for children was claimed to be in use by 36% of Belarusians in Poland, while 64% have not used it (N=573). The main problems in this sphere are language (lack of knowledge), difficulties with adaptation, difficulties with registering children to the school or kindergarten and lack of information about services. In parallel, 33% respondents mentioned that they like the system of education and do not see any particular problems in it (N = 197).

## Assistance needed

According to the majority of respondents, the most supportive activities provided to migrants are language courses (60%), legal assistance (56%), support in finding employment (35%) and housing (25%) (N=558, multiple answers possible). A significant group of respondents also indicated the need for medical (45%) and psychological assistance (22%). Only 26% of respondents declared that they expect direct financial support from Polish institutions.

**Chart 12.** Sought support from the Polish state

## Expected forms of support



Simultaneously, respondents demonstrated quite a high level of knowledge about the availability of child benefits accessible in Poland. Almost half of respondents (48%) indicated they made use of the “500+” program (child allowance paid in cash, available to all foreign parents with a residence permit in Poland)<sup>19</sup> (N=172).



We used the 500+ program. We learned from some chats of Belarusians who moved here. It was easy to get [the financial support] – we sent all the documents online (...).

Interview with a respondent

Some special programs dedicated to Belarusian migrants have been implemented by the Polish authorities, such as Poland Business Harbour for the IT sector and entrepreneurs running from 2020, the Kalinowski program for repressed students launched in 2006, the “Solidarity with Belarusians” program for NGOs and diaspora organizations assisting prosecuted migrants. One of the goals of the survey was

to obtain insights into the level of knowledge and usage of those support measures among Belarusians. The results of the survey showed that less than one sixth (16%) of respondents used the programs dedicated to Belarusian nationals (N=604). The question remains why the interest in supporting mechanisms was so scarce. Is it insufficient proliferation of information about the programs, or a limited need for extra help? However, it should be taken into account that those programs are directed to two specific groups: people who were repressed, and highly qualified migrants (relocated businessmen and IT specialists).

## The role of diaspora organizations

Since 2020, the Belarusian diaspora in Poland has undergone an intensification of civic and political activity. The number of diaspora organizations significantly increased in bigger cities (Warsaw, Gdańsk, Wrocław, Łódź etc.) but also in other locations. Social organizations and informal initiatives diversify their involvement into political, educational and aid activities. Also noteworthy are the specialization and professionalization in particular areas, such as legal assistance for international protection and legalization of stay procedures, Polish language courses for children and adults, and cultural activities. An important part of diaspora support is focused on providing assistance to Belarusians who arrived in Poland after the 2020 presidential elections. The study provides clear evidence that the diaspora has become a significant source of social support to that group (legalization consultations, psychological assistance, Polish language courses etc.).

Diaspora organizations are well-recognized among Belarusians. A significant majority of respondents stated that they know Belarusian organizations and initiatives in Poland (81%; N=549), and 33% (N=549) are actively involved in various activities.



### Educational and democratic projects

*for Belarusian leaders are useful because they mobilize and also create such a network. When you return to Belarus, you will not be alone in your activity. Well, the second [priority] is to establish contacts with local governments and activists, with the Polish government, with the Lithuanian, I think it works well.*

Interview with a respondent



*To ensure informational support; our population is brainwashed through television and radio, and often there is false information. People have a distorted vision of how life in the West looks like. Information – to support those who remained there [in Belarus].*

Interview with a respondent

Although the majority of respondents declared that they do not participate in activities of civic organizations, this may mean that there is an unwillingness to share such information, or that their participation is sporadic. Interviews brought evidence that Belarusian migrants are involved in volunteering and are participating in cultural events (exhibitions, concerts, workshops, film screenings, etc.) and integration events (for entrepreneurs, start-uppers, etc.).

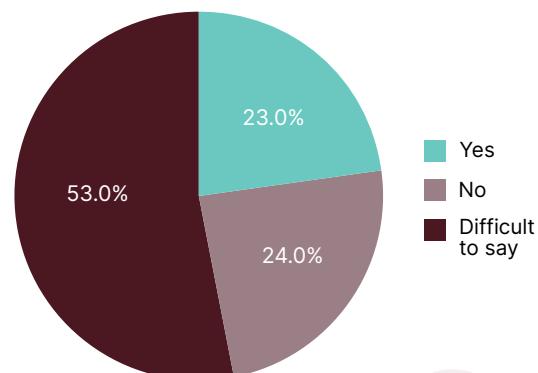
According to respondents, the diaspora plays a significant role in opposing the regime, although in their opinion, it should focus more on internal consolidation and cooperation. Among the tasks that the diaspora should focus on, respondents mentioned democratic education and cultural activities, information and anti-propaganda, and support for activists who remained in Belarus.

## The plans and prospects of returning to Belarus

The question about further plans is difficult for Belarusians; more than half of respondents (53%) were not able to give a clear-cut response. 23% of respondents indicated that they are planning on returning, while a similarly sized group (24%) declared that they do not have such plans (N=550).

**Chart 13:** Plans to return

**The prospects of return to Belarus, are you planning to return?**



Uncertainty in decision-making is related to the anticipation of changes in Belarus and understanding that it may not happen in the nearest future.



*Will I return to Belarus? Not in the near future, but if there is a new Belarus, I will be happy to come back.*

Interview with a respondent

Moreover, what should be taken into consideration is the fact that the group participating in the study consists of migrants who arrived within the last two years and are undergoing the process of adapting to the conditions and requirements in a new country. Belarusians face challenges such as legalization of stay procedures and language barriers, and their current individual sense of security and stability, influenced by the war in Ukraine, might negatively affect their perception of further plans. Some of the respondents are separated from their families and friends, or left their houses or business in Belarus, but cannot return under the current regime. At the same time, the perception of opportunities for personal development and a positive rating for the general quality of life in Poland argue for settling in Poland.



*It's hard for me to answer. I like Poland and its possibilities. I think I would not want to return, but I would like to be able to visit relatives as often as possible and without problems.*

Interview with a respondent

The assessment of prospects for career growth appeared as a strong argument for not returning to Belarus.



*I do not plan to return. My mother plans, she wants to be able to travel between two countries. And I see that there [in Belarus], neither now nor in the near future, even if something changes, there will be no opportunities for me like in Poland or another [European] country. I think I'm over-qualified for Belarus.*

Interview with a respondent

## Conclusions

Studies on the integration of people forced to emigrate from their country is not a completely objective and easy experience for the participants in the interviews and surveys. They have to balance between a multifaceted sense of responsibility (comparing their situation to the situation of those who remain in the country, the situation in Ukraine, etc.), the necessity to take advantage of the opportunity to express their needs, the worry about appearing ungrateful and doubts that expressing their needs will not be used for the purposes of domestic politics. Nevertheless, although the conducted research was just a pilot, reliable conclusions for both countries can be drawn from it.

In terms of comparison between two countries:

- 1) The reasons for leaving Belarus coincide and demonstrate the same tendencies in both countries. The main reason is a deteriorating political situation inside Belarus which is interconnected with severe repression and numerous real and/or perceived security threats. Expectedly, Belarusians evaluated their feeling of security in the country before emigration as rather low. A second set of reasons to migrate consists of economic and job-related issues. We also see that job-related migration is not necessarily a typical economic migration of individuals, but rather associated with the relocation or resettlement of businesses, civil society organizations (CSOs) and independent media. After 2020, a lot of Belarusian business (IT first of all) and civil society organizations were forced to relocate to other countries, causing their workers to migrate as well. These processes were accompanied by large-scale individual migration.
- 2) When it comes to the reasons for the choice of Lithuania and Poland as host countries, the main reason is in the options of obtaining documents for legalization. In the Lithuanian case it is a visa and/or a temporary residence permit, which might mean that the Lithuanian visa policy of issuing visas to repressed Belarusians looks attractive and understandable for migrants. Poland attracts Belarusians also with its governmental programs such as humanitarian visas, Polish Business Harbor and scholarships for students and academics. A majority of respondents highlighted the facilitation in obtaining visas and residence permits as the main reason for choosing Poland as a country of destination.

In both cases, closeness of culture, the absence of a language barrier, the existence of social networks and personal experience of visiting the countries in the past also influenced the decisions to migrate there.

In addition, Lithuania and Poland are associated by Belarusians with the rule of law and a more free and secure environment for any activity, making the countries attractive for everyday lives.

- 3) Analysis of the legal basis of stay in the host countries demonstrated certain differences.<sup>20</sup> In Lithuania, the main ground for obtaining legal stay in the country is residence permits, with a low (8%) number of respondents granted asylum or temporary protection. In Poland, respondents declare that a humanitarian visa is the main legal ground of stay, but also a relatively big percentage of respondents (18%) said that they apply for refugee status or subsidiary protection.

In the case of Lithuania, the unpopularity of political asylum as a way of legalization can be explained by pragmatic reasons, as during the process of application people do not have the right to work and travel.

In the Polish case, some respondents reported that legalization of residence is complicated. The difficulties in understanding legal nuances related to different bases of stay and a long waiting period were highlighted. Obtaining a residence permit and related access to social assistance is especially challenging in the case of forced migrants who arrived from the territory of Ukraine.

- 4) The sense of security in the host countries is high in both cases, while evaluation of the quality of life in Lithuania and Poland is a bit lower by comparison. In the case of Poland, the main factor that decreases respondents' feeling of security has been the Russian war in Ukraine. Additionally, respondents mentioned difficulties with long-lasting legalization procedures, bureaucratic requirements related to self-employment and establishing a business, the complex taxation system, and language barriers that negatively affect the sense of security and stability among Belarusians. In Lithuania, among the factors which reduce the sense of security are financial challenges and the possible loss of

job (and, accordingly, migration status), high inflation, difficulties in finding housing (especially housing where one can declare a place of residence as this is required to obtain a temporary residence permit in Lithuania), changes in the migration system (difficulties in obtaining a temporary residence permit after the outbreak of the Russian war in Ukraine), the risk of war, the risk of an energy crisis, and a high crime rate.

Russia's war in Ukraine became a huge challenge for Belarusian migrants; first and foremost for those who had chosen Ukraine as their first destination country and were forced to flee for the second time. They faced problems of legalization of stay and access to social protection (especially in Poland). However, the war also has an indirect influence on all Belarusian migrants in Poland and Lithuania. In both countries respondents reported that the war adversely affected their well-being.

- 5) Regarding sources of income and the assessment of social support programs in the host countries, salaries obtained via job contracts are the main source of income in both countries. In parallel, Belarusian respondents reported that they still get support and/or spend money they brought from Belarus as a source of living.

The increased migration of Belarusians to Lithuania and Poland does not seem to put a significant burden on public expenses from the state budget. In addition, some of the programs used by the incomers are implemented by non-governmental organizations. As this study shows, social support programs in the host countries are not widely used by Belarusians. In the majority of cases, they are self-sufficient economically and do not benefit from social assistance programs. However, it remains an open question whether this is due to lack of information about available opportunities.

It is very likely that the economic impact of Belarusian migrants is positive: by becoming actively involved in the labor market and developing businesses, Belarusian migrants potentially create more benefits compared to the support provided by governmental institutions to those individuals who need it.

In Poland, some special programs dedicated to Belarusian migrants have been implemented by the authorities. However, the results of the survey show that less than one sixth of respondents (16%) use these programs. It is not clear whether this indicates the small popularity of those programs. One needs to remember that state-organized programs are directed to two specific groups – people who were repressed, and highly qualified migrants (relocated businessmen and IT specialists) – and this factor limits the demand. However, further evaluation of these programs is needed.

- 6) Assessment of education and healthcare. Approximately a half of respondents use the healthcare system in both countries, which is not an impressive indicator. In some cases, this might be explained by the lack of legal status and health insurance or by the recent arrival in the country and being in the process of legalization there. Educational services (for children) are used by a bit more than 30% of respondents in both countries. The level of satisfaction with education is the same and relatively high (8 out of 10) in Lithuania and Poland, but healthcare is evaluated lower with 7,25 points in the former and just 6,2 points in the latter case.

Regarding healthcare and education, respondents in both countries mentioned difficulties with language, access to information about educational and healthcare services, but also some general societal problems in Lithuania and Poland, such as long waiting times for a healthcare specialist. Moreover, in the Lithuanian case, respondents mentioned the need for more available places in Russian-language educational institutions.

- 7) Assistance needed for Belarusian migrants is closely interconnected with very practical aspects of everyday life in the hosting countries. One of the main reported needs is language courses. Other requests lay in the sphere of legal assistance, provision of educational and healthcare services (in Russian and Belarusian languages), assistance with everyday requests like apartment renting, but also the need for psychological support. Financial assistance might also be required in both countries, but it is not among the leading requests. In Poland, support in legalization was mentioned as a separate important request.

In Lithuania, the decision not to issue tourist visas to residents of Belarus became extremely acute and was emphasized in most of the interviews. The respondents talked about several important consequences, including the impossibility of meeting relatives in Lithuania and the fact that people facing repressions cannot leave Belarus unless they do so illegally (However, the latter point is more interconnected with the great deterioration of the human rights situation in Belarus, and less with Lithuania's visa policy). Unfortunately, in critical cases of criminal or administrative prosecution it might be difficult or even impossible for the person to leave the country with any type of visa, although indeed in some cases having visas in the passport helped people to leave the country and to avoid arrest.

- 8) The importance of diaspora organizations is evaluated as high in both countries, although the share of those who know about the existence of these organizations is much higher than the share of those who participate in them. However, for many Belarusian migrants it is important to have and to support activities of such organizations, and the involvement of the Belarusian diaspora in civic activities aimed at changes in Belarus remains high.
- 9) The plans and prospects of a return to Belarus by migrants in both countries are uncertain. They are divided between several options: to return, not to return and 'difficult to answer', and the shares are approximately equal. The war in Ukraine, severe repression in Belarus and a lack of certainty definitely influence the ability of long-term planning by Belarusian migrants.

In addition to the comparison above it should be mentioned that the biggest group of respondents in Poland were those who have a humanitarian visa (23%), while in Lithuania it is those who have received a temporary residence permit (67,75%). The residence permits (together with labor contracts) provide people with more opportunities to receive social services in their host country. This difference might explain certain distinctions between the answers of Belarusian migrants when it comes to the general feeling of security in host countries (8,81 in Lithuanian case and 8 in Polish one), but also to the evaluation of some services (such as healthcare and education).

The survey also demonstrates that, compared to previous migration waves of Belarusians to Lithuania and Poland, the most recent one (2020–2022) shows a significant increase of migrants arriving with relatives (children and parents). The visible change in migrants' profiles indicates a different scope of socio economic needs and expectations in terms of state support and integration pathways. It also creates challenges for their social provision in host countries and needs to be addressed properly.

One of the goals of this study is to encourage non-governmental and governmental institutions of Lithuania and Poland to pay attention to the needs expressed by and to sensitively evaluate the comments of the migrants/'relocatees'. People who have moved to Lithuania and Poland do not have the opportunity to vote, and a standard "social contract" between the government and the population is not an option for them. In such cases, one must rely on the needs expressed during surveys and assessments of the situation. Open, good-natured communication between state institutions and politicians about which needs can and cannot be met (and for what reasons) would be the next step in developing a healthy relationship of trust.

- While planning any programs of support focused on Belarusian migrants, governments should take into account the fact that many of them arrive in the countries with relatives (children and parents). This implies a different scope of socioeconomic needs and expectations in terms of state support, adaptation and further integration pathways. The family profile of Belarusian migrants clearly requires a widespread information campaign targeting their access to social services.
- According to the study results, a significant group of Belarusians in Poland and Lithuania does not use the healthcare system, while respondents did declare the need for medical and psychological assistance. Efforts might be put to inform migrants about existing opportunities.

#### To the Lithuanian Government

- The creation of more favorable conditions for Ukrainian citizens to integrate them into the labor market is totally understood by Belarusian migrants and did not cause tension between Belarusians and Ukrainians in Lithuania. However, this situation fueled mistrust between the Belarusian diaspora and Lithuanian institutions. It might be advisable to provide more communication and explanations about the reasons for these favorable conditions for refugees from Ukraine and whether this can change. In the long term, more certainty is needed regarding the application or non-application of a different status to those arriving from Belarus and those arriving from Ukraine.
- Although everyday discrimination of Belarusian migrants in Belarus (reluctance to employ or rent housing, inappropriate treatment in public places) has not been widespread since the beginning of war, it is important to stay focused on the issue of potential discrimination and to be ready to react accordingly.

#### To the Polish Government

- The authorities (national and municipal) should improve the accessibility of up-to-date and reliable information about the legalization requirements in various languages (Belarusian, Russian) with clear instructions and video tutorials. More efforts should be put into strengthening the cooperation with diaspora organizations to facilitate information campaigns targeting Belarusians in Poland.

## Recommendations

### To the Lithuanian and Polish Governments

- Improving the availability of national (Lithuanian and Polish) language courses for all Belarusian migrants, with a special focus on women (with children) and promoting self-employment, will provide opportunities for maximum employment.
- While obtaining migration status for the purposes of work, study and performing actions related to family status might require certain consular services of the Belarusian authorities, more flexibility and a nuanced attention to individual situations by the national migration services would be of great assistance to Belarusian migrants.
- Taking into consideration the ongoing war in Ukraine and the engagement of Lukashenka's regime in supporting Russia in military actions, both governments should focus specifically on preventing discrimination of Belarusians through information and awareness-raising campaigns in public institutions (administration and municipal offices, schools, hospitals etc.) addressed to the public.

- A significant group of Belarusians in Poland does not use the health care system, although respondents declared the need for medical and psychological assistance. This clearly requires a widespread information campaign targeting migrants on access to the health care system.

#### **To Belarusian, Lithuanian and Polish CSOs and media**

- CSOs that help individuals apply for humanitarian visas can take measures to raise awareness of the mechanisms of obtaining a humanitarian visa.
- There are several groups of Belarusian migrants that are relatively small in the overall context but face disproportionately greater personal challenges: these are individuals who are awaiting a decision on asylum and are deprived of access to the labor market and social security , individuals with critical and chronic illnesses, as well as pregnant people who do not yet have health insurance. More active cooperation of public institutions with the non-governmental sector should be encouraged in order to ease the situation of these most vulnerable groups.

- It is advisable to develop existing and establish new cooperation in the spheres of common interests, such as providing support to migrants, refugees and people, affected by war. In a short-term perspective, such cooperation ensures a better understanding of the political situation in Belarus, which can be vital. In a long term, high-quality and friendly coexistence can become an important basis for good relations between Belarusian, Ukrainian, Lithuanian, and Polish organizations and societies.

# Endnotes

1. Information about political prisoners in Belarus <https://prisoners.spring96.org/en>
2. Yeliseyeu, Andrei. *Emigration and diaspora policies in Belarus*. 2014. <https://cadmus.eui.eu/handle/1814/33140>
3. For the recent case when Belarusian female activist Jana Pinchuk was extradited from Belarus and charged there see <https://www.rferl.org/a/belarus-activist-pinchuk-charged-extradited-russia/32029924.html>
4. See on decision of Lithuanian Government <https://www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/1289952/lithuania-waives-visa-fees-for-belarusians-fleeing-repressions>
5. See on decision of Polish Government <http://www.forintegration.eu/pl/poland-simplified-visa-procedures-for-citizens-of-belarus>
6. For more about this program see <https://www.gov.pl/web/poland-businessharbour-en/poland-business-harbour-the-polish-governments-programme>
7. *Kalinowski program* <https://english.studium.uw.edu.pl/k-kalinowski-scholarship-program/> for repressed students launched in 2006, program *Solidar* with Belarusians for NGOs <https://solidarityfund.pl/en/gdzie-pracujemy/bialorus/>
8. For more on public opinion polls on war in Belarus see Chatham House Belarus Initiatives data <https://en.belaruspolls.org/wave-11>
9. For more on the discrimination cases and tendencies see <https://theconversation.com/belarusians-are-facing-discrimination-and-blame-for-russias-war-in-ukraine-192828?fbclid=IwAR2LDMNOi7PKXQpzB-7snzzFGyLWmETUVGyPUGRGebkwgRDBjaDmP2KbZ8>
10. Interestingly, that people who are migrating from Belarus because of political (but often and economic) reasons called themselves “*relocated persons*” emphasizing that they didn’t want to leave the country but were forced to.
11. BNS, Baltarusių opozicija: nuo režimo bėgantieji į Lietuvą gali patekti tik nelegaliai, August 9, 2022, <https://www.vz.lt/verslo-aplinka/2022/08/09/baltarusiu-opozicija-nuo-rezimo-begantieji-i-lietuva-gali-patekti-tik-nelegaliai#ixzz7gT4Zga8c>
12. <https://www.gov.pl/web/udsc/obywatele-bialorusi-w-polsce--raport2>
13. Ibidem.
14. Data of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Poland.
15. Data of the Ministry of Economic Development, Labour and Technology of Poland.
16. The Department of Statistics of Lithuania, Asylum Seekers, <https://osp.stat.gov.lt/statistiniu-rodikliu-analize?indicator=S3R039#/>
17. Although, in fact, the difficulty with temporary residence permits in Lithuania were short-term and related to the amendments to the Law on the Legal Status of Aliens, which were adopted in 2021 and came into force on February 1, 2022; however, many Belarusians who faced the problems regarded them as a “punitive measure” after the outbreak of the war in Ukraine.
18. Investuok Lietuvoje, 2021 m. veiklos ataskaita (Invest Lithuania, Activity Report 2021), <https://investlithuania.com/wp-content/uploads/IL-veiklos-ataskaita-2021.pdf>
19. For more on “Family 500+” program see <https://www.gov.pl/web/family/family-500-programme>
20. However, it should be remembered that the survey was not representative, and the distribution of legalization forms is different in case of administrative data.