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# Belarus in the Eurasian Migration System: The Challenges of the Last Decade and Their Consequences

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*This article presents the main recent developments in migration trends to and from Belarus. It studies these trends via the migration systems theory lenses, according to which Belarus belongs to the Eurasian migration system. The most significant migration flows are directed towards Russia, due to the existence of the Union State. However, over the last decade, Belarusian statistics have shown a gradual transformation in the direction of these migration flows. After the recession in Russia in 2015, the number of emigrants from Belarus to EU countries increased. The most significant changes have occurred in the migration dynamics between Belarus and Poland and Lithuania. The existence of the Pole's Card makes it more difficult to measure the number of Belarusian immigrants in Poland, therefore, I provide a comparative analysis of Belarusian and Polish statistics in order to show a more realistic picture of the number and structure of Belarusian emigrants and the problem of underestimation in the sending country. Particular attention is paid to the consequences of the political situation in Belarus after 2020; this has become an additional push factor for emigrants and may also lead to a further reduction of Belarusian migratory links within the Eurasian migration system. Thus, the statistics for 2021 show a significant increase in the number of Belarusian emigrants to the EU, while emigration to Russia has remained at the same level.*

*Keywords: international migration, Eurasian migration system, quantitative data, Belarus, migration flows*

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## Introduction

Belarus is a member of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS)<sup>1</sup>; geographically it is a transit country from the European Union (EU) to the CIS with transport links and economic ties to all neighbouring countries. Although migration flows are diversified, bilateral migration flows with Russia clearly outweigh the rest. According to official Belarusian statistics, the country's population of 9,255 million is relatively immobile in terms of international migration and Belarus is a country which sees net immigration (Belstat 2022). As already argued by other authors, Belarus belongs to the Eurasian migration system, which can be defined as a group of post-Soviet countries connected by strong and numerous migration flows that are determined by the interaction of several factors (Ivakhnyuk 2003; Ryazantsev and Korneev 2013). These include historical and cultural ties (use of the Russian language, common cultural history), legal regulations (visa-free regime, simplified access to citizenship, multilateral agreements on migration cooperation), economic compatibility, geographical proximity and an extensive transport network between countries. The creation of the CIS after the dissolution of the Soviet Union facilitated the preservation of these linkages and, in particular, the free movement of people between the selected post-Soviet countries. At the same time, Russia is constantly trying to increase its political and economic influence in the region (Galimova 2016). Apart from the association of a number of post-Soviet countries within the CIS, there are other integration entities in the region that facilitate the free movement of people, especially labour migration. Thus, in 2015 the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) was created, which provides for the free movement of labour, capital, goods and services between Russia, Belarus, Armenia, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. The formation of the Union State of Belarus and Russia in 1996, which ensures unhampered access to residence, employment, education and health care for citizens of the two countries on the territory of the Union State, has formed an additional incentive for Belarusians to migrate to Russia.

Despite the persistence of political and economic ties between the CIS countries, in particular those belonging to the EAEU, the continued future existence of the Eurasian migration system is far from clear-cut. Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, Moldova and Ukraine have been gradually decoupling from this system. Additionally, after Russia, Kazakhstan has become a new destination country for migrants from Central Asia. Labour emigration from Central Asia and the Caucasus to outside the Eurasian migration system has increased since 2015 (Ryazantsev and Ochirova 2019). Migration flows from Belarus, which traditionally have been directed towards Russia, have also started to reorient towards European Union states (Yeliseyeu 2018).

The aim of this paper is to evaluate changes regarding the place of Belarus in the Eurasian migration system and to examine the factors influencing these changes, with the focus being on political and institutional ones. Therefore, the main general research question relates to the dynamics of migration flows between Belarus and CIS and non-CIS countries in the twenty-first century. Special attention is paid to the case of Poland as an example of a non-CIS country constituting a central destination for Belarusian emigration, the country having grown in importance in recent years. Finally, the article attends to the most recent developments in emigration from Belarus observed after mid-2020. While this year should be considered as exceptional due to the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic and political events in Belarus, its consequences may significantly influence the direction of Belarusian migration flows in the future.

The article examines the main quantitative data on migration from and to Belarus, in particular data from administrative sources, the census and the Labour Force Survey. In addition, it refers to data from administrative sources in destination countries (Poland, Lithuania, the USA, Russia, Germany) to provide a comprehensive analysis of emigration from Belarus. It is structured as follows: in the first section, the main theoretical positions of the migration systems theory are considered, with the aim of explaining the place of Belarus in the international migration system through this approach. Next, based on Belarusian statistical data, the intensity and directions of migration flows from and to Belarus are examined. This part of the analysis allows us to

evaluate changes in the direction of migration flows in Belarus. The third section presents cross-country comparisons of migration in order to show the significant underestimation of emigrants from Belarus in Belarusian data and compares Polish and Belarusian statistics in detail. The example of Poland is relevant due to the country's significant popularity among Belarusian emigrants and as a result of certain difficulties in migration registration owing to the status of migrants with the Pole's Card. Finally, the changes and dynamics of emigration from Belarus after mid-2020 are presented, which might predetermine a tendency for the coming years and form possible reasons underlying new migration patterns.

### **The Eurasian migration system and the place of Belarus**

Mabogunje (1970) was the first to propose a systems approach to explaining migration, not as a linear, one-way movement but as a circular phenomenon included in a system of interdependent variables. In this approach, migration patterns took the form of a system of multiple flows of persons, goods and services between origin and destination places. Mabogunje applied the systems approach to rural–urban migration but this was later extended to cover international structures of both macro and micro levels, which have some sort of exchange in resources, capital and people (Bilan 2017). Sustainable linkages are necessary to form a migration system. As examples of this, Fawcett (1989) points to the economic and political ties between countries, the activities of migration agencies and the media etc. Kritz and Zlotnik (1992) differentiate between the social, political, demographic and economic contexts. They argue that the formation of the migration system is affected by a shared historical and cultural past and by contemporary economic and political ties. These components contribute to large-scale migration flows within the system, which are more intense than those outside it. Based on those principles, Zlotnik (1992) explains the existence of migration systems in the Americas and Western Europe, highlighting the importance of flows centred on particular countries. Massey *et al.* (1998) identify five migration systems: North American, European, Gulf States, Asia-Pacific and South America.

In line with the arguments of migration systems theory, Ivakhnyuk (2003, 2008) identifies migration flows and linkages between post-Soviet countries as a Eurasian migration system. Based on the existence of close historical and cultural ties, the continuous development of political institutions, mutual economic and demographic interests such as wage differences and changes in the working-age population between countries, she highlights features of the overall system and identifies several sub-systems. These latter are divided into those that develop within the system and those that link the Eurasian system with other systems or countries. The 'internal' sub-systems include the Central Asian countries (centred around Kazakhstan) and the migration between Belarus and Russia due to closer ties within the Union State. Ukraine and Moldova are defined as countries belonging to two migration systems because they exchange migration flows within the Eurasian system and the European countries simultaneously. After joining the EU and the redirection of migration flows, Baltic states are no longer considered as part of the Eurasian migration system. The core of the Eurasian system is represented by the countries with the highest share of intraregional migration flows: Russia, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Belarus, Armenia and Azerbaijan. More-recent works point to the transformation of the Eurasian migration system and more often consider it solely as migration between CIS countries (Ryazantsev and Korneev 2013). Brunarska, Nestorowicz and Markowski (2014) have, in turn, questioned whether post-Soviet countries are actually forming a Eurasian migration system, as this region is clearly integrated into global migration patterns. The authors found that some countries in the system have significant migration flows outside it. However, the study takes into account the Baltic states, although they are not part of the system according to other authors (e.g. Ivakhnyuk 2008). Moreover, Brunarska *et al.* (2014) argue that,

while assessing the presence of a migration system, labour migration flows should also be taken into account, as they show more objectively the density of links within the system.

The theory of migration systems has been criticised on many points. Firstly, the division of the world into migration systems is controversial, because the same countries may be part of different migration systems – this is particularly the case for sending countries. Secondly, it is difficult to empirically substantiate the existence of the system because of problems with publicly available migration data, especially on labour migration (DeWaard, Kim and Raymer 2012). Moreover, it has not been specified what minimal intensity of relationships between elements is needed to define a system (Brunarska *et al.* 2014). Fourthly, the theory explains that such a system exists but says nothing about how it forms and develops (Bakewell 2014).

Despite the above remarks, this paper uses the migration systems approach to evaluate changes in migration flows in Belarus. I argue that pre-2020 migration patterns, characterised by the long-term migration exchange with Russia, the overall low international mobility of the Belarusian population, the high level of interdependencies between Russia and Belarus and the advanced political-economic integration between them render migration systems theory relevant to study the migration dynamics of Belarus. Nevertheless, I also agree with de Haas (2021) that it is necessary to re-conceptualise migration as an intrinsic part of broader processes of economic, political, cultural, technological and demographic change, embodied in concepts such as social transformation, ‘development’ and globalisation. This wider understanding of the migration systems concept in particular guides the analysis of post-2020 migration from Belarus, inspired by the assumption that migration systems may undergo transformations. Modifications of migration systems can be associated with ‘exogenous’ changes in the macro-level factors that caused migration, such as income and other opportunity differentials, political transformations or migration policies (de Haas 2010). In addition to external causes, changes in the context of a migration system and the linkages between countries may also be caused by international migration itself. Thus, a large inflow of international migrants induces the development of profit and non-profit organisations – which can be formal or informal – to provide, for instance, transport, labour contracts, (counterfeit) documents, dwellings or legal advice for migrants.

### **Main sources of quantitative data on international migration to/from Belarus**

The combination of data from several sources is an accepted method by which to produce a coherent picture of migration processes (Willekens 1994). To assess the place of Belarus in the international migration system, Belarusian statistical data on the number of long-term and short-term migrants are analysed. In this article, labour migration is treated as an example of short-term migration, which is an important complement to long-term migration, because temporary migration can lead to long-term residence in a destination country (Global Migration Group 2017). Belarus has two different registers that separately collect and represent statistics on long-term and labour migration.

The National Statistical Committee is responsible for collecting and publishing data on long-term migration flows (Belstat 2022). Unfortunately, since mid-2020, data on long-term migration are not published. According to the methodology of the National Statistical Committee, long-term migrants are persons who either arrived or left Belarus for a period of more than 12 months. Belarusian statistics on long-term migration are based on the two forms, ‘P’ and ‘B’, filled in by immigrants and emigrants respectively (Bobrova, Shakhotska and Shymanovich 2012). The outflows are more difficult to monitor than the inflows as there are fewer incentives and legal obligations for emigrants to report their departures (Bircan, Purkayastha, Ahmad-Yar, Lotter, Dello Iakono, Göler, Stanek, Yilmaz, Solano and Ünver 2020). At the end of 2018 there were changes in the methodology of defining long-term migrants, which increased the number of migrants.<sup>2</sup> Two groups of countries are usually identified in the aggregation of statistical data: CIS countries and non-CIS countries.

Statistics on labour-migration flows are collected and published by the Ministry of the Interior of Belarus (MVD 2022). A labour migrant is a person who moves from/to Belarus for employment on the basis of an officially concluded labour agreement or contract. Many labour migrants prefer looking for a job directly in the destination country rather than through Belarusian intermediary firms, so these migrants are not counted in the labour-migration statistics, which significantly increases the underestimation of labour emigration. A more objective picture can be obtained from the Labour Force Survey (LFS), which has been conducted in Belarus since 2012 by the National Statistical Committee (Belstat 2022). The LFS is carried out in all Belarusian regions and covers 0.6 per cent of the total number of households. It provides data on the number of Belarusians working outside the country (up to 1 year). The population census also provides information on migration in general and labour migration in particular. To assess changes in the direction of migration flows, the data from the 2009 and 2019 censuses are analysed (Population Census 2011, 2021). There are no other representative data on migration in Belarus. Sociological surveys are carried out rarely, are not large-scale and tend to provide expert estimates rather than an accurate picture.

For a more comprehensive view of emigration, data from selected destination countries on the number of immigrants from Belarus are simultaneously studied. A number of authors and organisations have tried to compare the immigration and emigration statistics (Beer, Raymer, Erf and Wissen 2010; UNECE 2010; Willekens 2019). Thus, Poulain and Gisser (1993), on the basis of a comparative table of migration flows between EEC and EFTA countries, found that more than half of the countries had a difference between the emigration and immigration recordings in excess of 100 per cent. Wils and Willekens (1993) observed a tendency to overestimate immigration and to underestimate emigration, arguing that immigrants are often defined according to shorter periods of stay than emigrants are when it comes to leaving. Moreover, there may be a time lag between the publication of immigration statistics based on the actual duration of stay and the emigration statistics.

For a more complete assessment of emigration from Belarus to Poland in particular, this study compares statistical data from both countries. Data from Belarusian administrative sources are used to estimate the number of emigrants, whereas the number of immigrants from Belarus staying in Poland is estimated according to Polish statistical sources. There are two main sources of administrative data in Poland: the PESEL population register, which provides information on permanent-stay migration flows and the Pobył system, which collects data about all types of residence permits. Both sources are used for the preparation of estimates of immigrants in Poland by the Central Statistical Office (CSO 2011). For the purpose of this study, data on permanent residence permits and EU long-term residence permits, which together represent data collected by Eurostat, are used to estimate flows of long-term migrants (Eurostat 2022b). However, year-on-year data should be compared with caution, as permanent residence permits are usually obtained after a certain period of time.

There are different types of document issued to foreigners that can be used for the estimation of temporary migration in Poland. Firstly, there are temporary residence permits, which are issued for certain purposes but for no longer than two years. The majority of temporary residence permits for Belarusians are issued for work or study. An important source for estimating labour-migration flows is data on the number of Belarusians who have received work permits and a declaration from an employer to entrust a job to a foreigner (changed as from 1 January 2018) (MFSP 2021).

### **Belarus on the map of international migration in the twenty-first century**

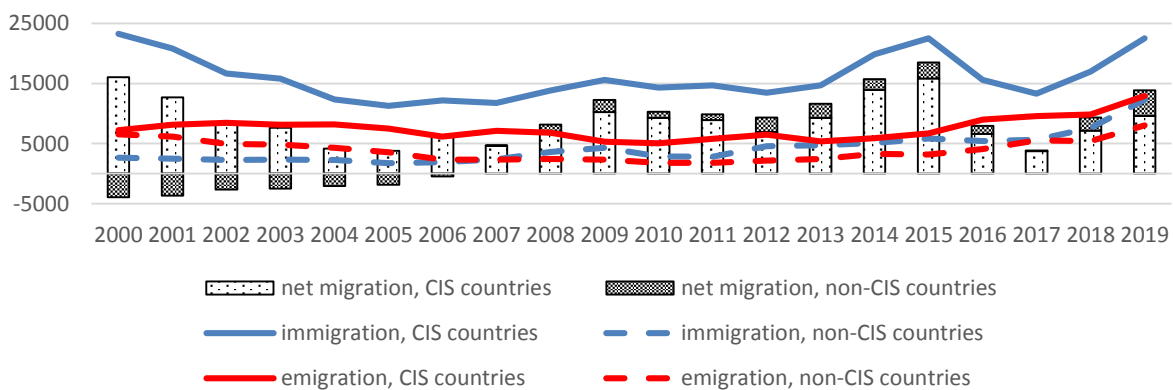
According to the assumptions of the migration-system concept, flows within the system dominate over flows outside it (Massey, Arango, Hugo, Kouaouci, Pellegrino and Taylor 1993). In Belarus, which is a member of

the Eurasian migration system, migration exchange with CIS countries prevails. However, there are a number of countries which are not part of the Eurasian migration system but which have, nonetheless, played a significant role in the migration exchange of Belarus.

### Long-term migration

Between 2000 and 2019, according to Belarusian statistics on long-term migration, Belarus remained a country with a constant migration growth (Figure 1). Throughout this period, migration flows to and from CIS countries dominated and accounted for 80 per cent of immigration, 66 per cent of emigration and 97 per cent of migration growth. The same proportions of migration flows remained for both rural and urban areas. However, there were slight internal variations among the regions of Belarus. Thus, the western regions and the capital – with a younger and more mobile population – had closer migration links with non-CIS countries than the rest of the regions (Belstat 2022).

**Figure 1. Long-term immigration, emigration and net migration based on registration of residence, Belarus 2000–2019**

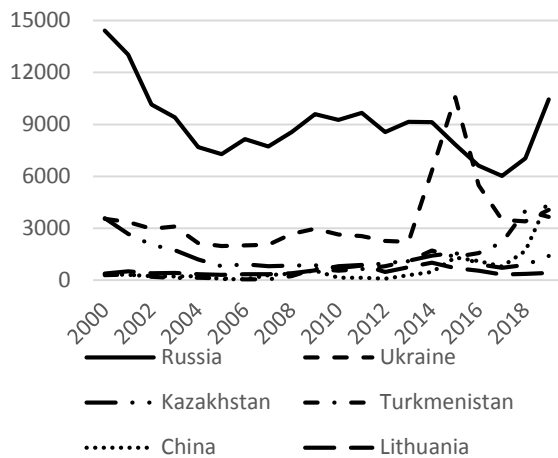


Source: author's elaboration based on the National Statistical Committee of Belarus (Belstat 2022).

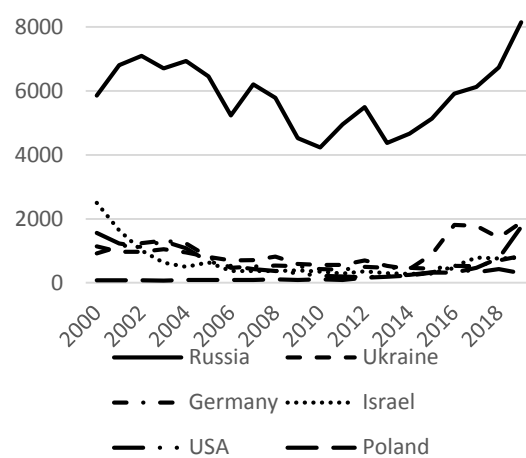
Among the non-CIS countries, Belarus had the highest migration turnover with Lithuania, China, the USA, Germany and Israel. In 2007, the migration balance with non-CIS countries became positive for the first time, due to a decline in emigration to traditional emigration countries (the USA, Israel, Germany) and a rise in immigration from economic partners of Belarus (China, Iran).

Despite close ties with CIS countries, the recipient countries for Belarus (emigration) differ from the sending countries (immigration). The latter were dominated by CIS countries (Figure 2), while the leading emigration countries included non-CIS countries (Figure 3). As noted by Ivakhnyuk (2003), the existence of sustainable migration links with countries outside one migration system is possible, especially for emigration from sending countries to classical immigration countries such as the USA or Israel.

**Figure 2. Main immigration countries, Belarus, 2000-2019**



**Figure 3. Main emigration countries, Belarus, 2000-2019**



Source: author's elaboration based on the National Statistical Committee of Belarus (Belstat 2022).

Figures 2 and 3 show the countries with the highest migrant flows with Belarus between 2000 and 2019. Russia was Belarus' main partner in migration exchange. Close historical and cultural ties, in addition to political and economic agreements, contribute to this. About 80 per cent of immigrants from Russia have Russian citizenship whereas, among emigrants to Russia, they are only about 35 per cent. Long-term migration between Belarus and Ukraine has always remained at a high level and increased significantly after 2014, due to the armed conflict in the east of Ukraine. The Belarusian authorities adopted a timely decree on the conditions for residence in Belarus of Ukrainian citizens from the Donetsk and Luhansk regions (Decree 2014), which made it easier for immigrants from these areas to legalise their stay in Belarus. Among CIS countries, migration with Kazakhstan was also significant yet, over the last decade, migration links have started weakening, despite the existence of free movement within the EAEU. Immigration from Kazakhstan predominates among flows from Central Asia and more than half of immigrants have Kazakh citizenship. Immigration from China and Turkmenistan is mainly driven by the immigration of students who study in Belarus. After completing their studies, most of them return home. In its migration exchange with Lithuania, as well as with other Baltic states, Belarus has always gained population but, in recent years, immigration has decreased while emigration, on the contrary, has increased.

The most popular countries for long-term emigration include non-CIS countries: the USA, Israel, Germany and Poland. Since 2015 there has been an increasing trend of emigration to neighbouring Poland and Lithuania, which increased by 4.6 and 2.3 times respectively, when comparing data for the periods 2010–2014 and 2015–2019. The statistics of the main receiving countries also show that emigration to Russia,<sup>3</sup> Poland and Lithuania has significantly increased over the last 5 years (Table 1). In general, the statistics of the most popular receiving countries for Belarusians demonstrate more significant changes in the directions of long-term emigration flows and the scale of underestimation in the Belarusian data.

**Table 1. Belarusian and receiving-country estimates of the numbers of long-term migrants, 2000–2019, per 1,000 persons**

	Emigrants according to Belarusian data				Immigrants from Belarus according to receiving-country data			
	2000–04	2005–09	2010–14	2015–19	2000–04	2005–09	2010–14	2015–19
USA	6.4	2.3	1.0	1.8	11.1	13.0	9.6	10.1
Germany	5.9	2.8	2.3	3.0	20.2	8.8	8.2	11.8
Russia	33.4	28.2	23.7	32.1	34.6	29.8	65.3	91.1
Poland	0.4	1.3	0.8	3.6	1.4	3.0	4.1	16.8
Lithuania	0.5	0.6	1.0	2.3	2.4	4.4	2.5	14.5

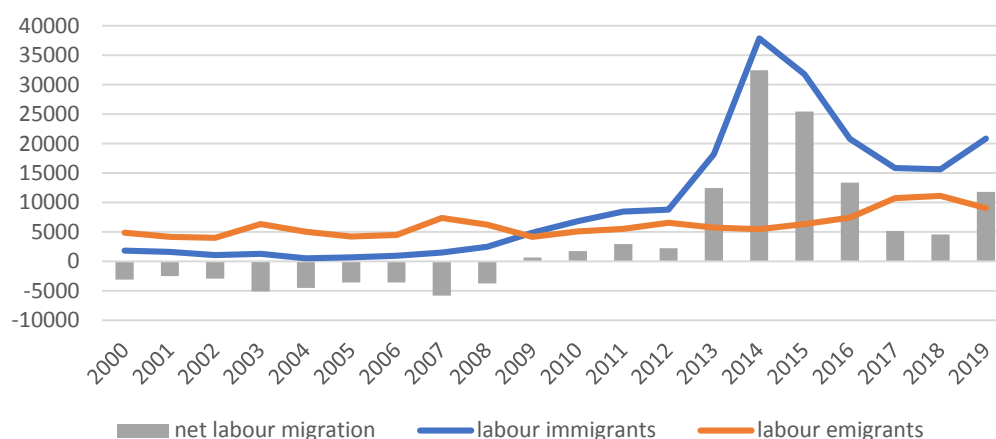
Source: compiled by the author based on the data of migration flows in 5-year periods (OECD, Eurostat, Federal State Statistics Service, Belstat).

### Labour migration

Existing research on Belarus indicates that the main reasons for labour migration are economic: wage differences, shortage of employment opportunities in the country of origin and attractive working conditions in the destination country (Jaroszewicz and Lesińska 2014). Labour migration typically takes place over shorter distances and the choice of destination country depends, apart from economic factors, on the possibility of access to the labour market. Existing institutional and economic conditions facilitate close migration links between Belarus and the CIS countries – primarily the EAEU countries with a single labour market, as well as Russia within the Union State agreements.

Official Belarusian data (MVD 2022) indicate that, since 2009, labour immigration has prevailed over emigration in Belarus (Figure 4). The highest migration growth was observed in 2014–2016 and was provided primarily by Ukrainian citizens arriving in Belarus.

**Figure 4. Labour migration flows in the Republic of Belarus, persons, 2000–2019**



Source: author's elaboration based on the Ministry of Interior of Belarus (MVD 2022).

Between 2000 and 2019 the main immigration countries for the Belarusian labour market were Ukraine, China, Russia and Uzbekistan. Most of the immigrants were skilled industrial and construction workers. Labour immigrants from Ukraine and China accounted for 50 per cent of all arrivals. Ukrainian immigration had



been gradually reducing since 2016, due to the declining economic attractiveness of Belarus for Ukrainian nationals (Rudnik 2017). Chinese labour migrants were usually employed in infrastructure projects built with Chinese loans, so their numbers do not depend on economic conditions in Belarus. The number of Russians constituted about 13 per cent of the foreign labour force but this is in no way comparable to the counter-flow of Belarusians to Russia.

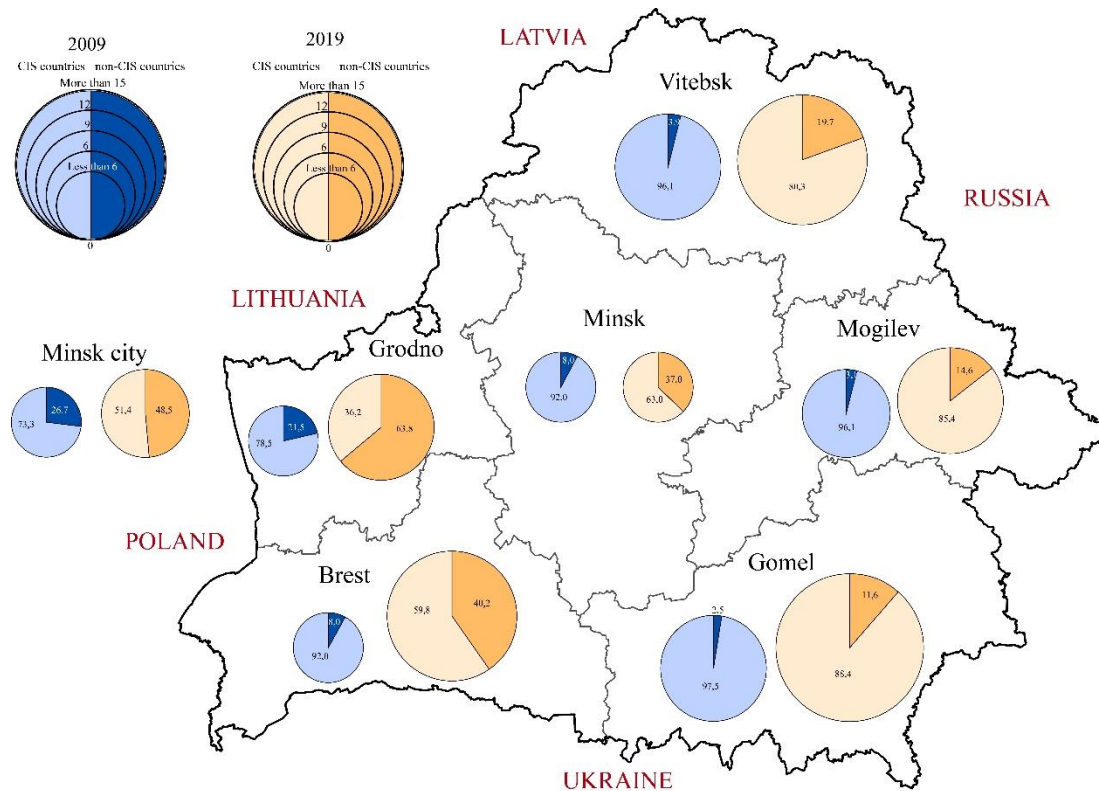
Russia has been the main destination country for Belarusian labour emigrants, accounting for up to 80 per cent (about 4,000–5,000 people annually) of the total outflows. After the economic recession in Russia in 2015, the number of emigrants remained the same at around 4,200, while the share decreased to 46.1 per cent in 2019. At the same time, there was a partial reorientation of labour emigrants to neighbouring Lithuania and Poland. Between 2015 and 2019, the number of emigrants from Belarus to Lithuania increased from 118 to 1,260 and to Poland from 150 to 1,600 – a share which increased from 1.9 to 13.9 per cent and from 2.4 to 17.7 per cent in the total outflow, respectively.

Administrative data on the number of labour emigrants do not reflect the real figures. More-reliable data are provided by the population census (Population Census 2011, 2021). According to the 2009 population census, 41,800 persons (0.9 per cent of the employed population aged 15 years and older) worked abroad, of whom 91.8 per cent worked in CIS countries, including 90.2 per cent in Russia. The remaining 8.2 per cent worked in non-CIS countries, including 1.7 per cent in Lithuania and 1.5 per cent in Poland. Data from the 2019 census also showed a significant increase in the number of labour emigrants (78,600 persons or 1.6 per cent of the employed population), with the fraction of migrants to non-CIS countries amounting to 31.2 per cent. The share and number of labour emigrants departing for CIS or non-CIS countries exhibits some differences by region (Figure 5) – the number of emigrants was higher in the eastern regions, where people prefer to migrate to CIS countries. At the same time, the share and the number of emigrants to non-CIS countries increased during the intercensal period, especially in the western and central regions.

While the 2019 census does not provide exact data on destination countries, given that emigration to Lithuania and Poland has increased significantly over the last 5 years according to administrative data, it can be assumed that these two states were the main non-CIS destination countries for Belarusian labour emigrants. Therefore, a significant increase in the number of emigrants from western and central regions to neighbouring countries during the intercensal period is logical and is caused by geographical proximity and the presence of closer social ties, which have strengthened in recent years (Yelisseyeu 2018).

The increase in the number of labour emigrants and the gradual reorientation westwards was also confirmed by the Labour Force Survey data. Unfortunately, there is no information about labour migration by country – only Russia is singled out, as it has been the main host country for labour migrants for a long time. According to the LFS, the number of Belarusians working abroad increased from 62,200 in 2014 to 98,400 in 2019, with Russia's share falling from 91.7 per cent to 75 per cent respectively (Belstat 2022). Thus, there is a growing demand among Belarusians for employment outside the country; however, Russia is no longer the single most popular destination country, having given way to non-CIS countries, especially Poland (Yelisseyeu 2018).

**Figure 5. Number (thousands; the size of the circles) and share (the numbers in the circles) of population working abroad, by regions of the Republic of Belarus**



Source: author's elaboration based on the census data (Population Census 2011, 2021).

Nevertheless, census and LFS data may underestimate labour migration, as people tend to hide their irregular sources of income, so it is important to take into account the data from receiving countries. Statistics from several European countries and from Russia show an increasing number of labour immigrants from Belarus – the number of first permits issued to Belarusians for remunerated activities in the EU increased from 5,800 in 2015 to 40,800 in 2019 (Eurostat 2022b). Most are issued in Poland for seasonal workers but their numbers have also increased significantly in Lithuania (from 351 to 6,725) and the Czech Republic (from 267 to 2,452).

### **Poland as an example of the underestimation of emigration to countries outside the Eurasian migration system**

In Belarus there are significant problems with the underestimation of migration, especially to Russia and Poland. The number of Belarusian emigrants in Russia cannot be counted due to the absence of migration restrictions and Belarusians' free access to the labour market. However, this paper does not focus on emigration to Russia since, in terms of the existence of the Eurasian migration system, there is still a substantial migration exchange between Russia and Belarus. In order to better assess the growth of emigration from Belarus to countries outside the CIS group, let us look at statistics of the receiving country in question and compare them with Belarusian statistics. Firstly, Poland is one of the non-CIS countries to which emigration increased significantly in last decade, according to the Belarusian data. Secondly, there is a procedure for obtaining the Pole's Card, which provides Belarusian citizens with Polish roots with a quick legalisation path (Brunarska

and Lesińska 2014) and introduces additional factors into the study of migration statistics between the two countries.

Belarus leads in the number of Pole's Cards issued, with a total of 144,000 such documents distributed in 2008–2019. Additionally, the number of the Pole's Card-holders is growing every year – the changing of the criteria for obtaining one (EC 2016) has only served to stimulate its issuance in 2017 (12,500 were issued in 2016 and 16,200 in 2017). The card provides its holders with a range of entitlements, such as work permit exemption, the right to set up a business enterprise in Poland on the same basis as Polish nationals, the right to study in Poland, as well as the right to receive health care in emergencies (ISAP 2007). The fact that Belarusians obtain the Pole's Card does not directly imply actual emigration to Poland but, rather, an assessment of migratory potential – many Belarusians apply for the card for a free short-term stay in Poland and other EU countries (Yeliseyeu 2018). At the same time, however, most Belarusians granted a permanent residence permit in Poland or Polish citizenship are holders of the Pole's Card. Since the possession of the card exempts Belarusians from the obligation to obtain a work permit or an employer's declaration, the real number of Belarusian workers in Poland is higher than shown in the official statistics on labour migrants (Brunarska and Lesińska 2014).

### *Long-term emigration to Poland*

The emigration flows from Belarus to Poland in the first decade of the twenty-first century were relatively insignificant, with Polish data showing only 4,400 migrants between 2000 and 2009. Only since the middle of the second decade has emigration markedly increased. Górny (2017) notes that immigration to Poland can be conventionally divided into pre-2014 and post-2014 periods. Therefore, in this section I focus on emigration to Poland from 2010 to 2019 in order to show the period of transformation.

The number of migrants who arrived in Poland from Belarus between 2010 and 2019 was 4,400 according to the statistics from Belarus and 20,900 according to Polish sources (the number of permanent residence permits and EU long-term residence permits issued). In particular, the number of immigrants from Belarus to Poland increased significantly in 2017. Thus, according to Belarusian statistics (Belstat 2022), the emigration of Belarusians to Poland in 2010 was 113 persons; by 2015, it increased to 319 and by 2017 to 472. In 2018 and 2019, the intensity of emigration grew markedly, to 765 and 1,751 people respectively. According to official Polish statistics (Pobyt 2022), the number of immigrants from Belarus rose from 664 persons in 2010 to 1,469 in 2015 and 3,924 in 2017. At the same time, the number of immigrants in 2017 increased by 2.3 times compared to 2016. In subsequent years this rising trend continued, reaching 4,666 in 2018 and 5,059 in 2019. One of the reasons for this was the simplification of the law on receiving a permanent residence permit based on Polish roots and the Pole's Card (ISAP 2016). Therefore, card-holders who had previously lived in Poland decided to secure their legal status and obtain a permanent residence permit.

On average for the period 2010–2019, Belarusian statistics (Belstat 2022) present the profile of the long-term emigrant as follows. The majority were men (77 per cent) and people aged 20–30 years (including 32.3 per cent aged 20–24). The emigration of people with higher education (45.4 per cent), general secondary education (27 per cent) and secondary specialised education (22.8 per cent) was prevalent. Territorially, 87 per cent of emigrants came from cities – predominantly from the Brest (29.5 per cent) and Grodno (37.5 per cent) regions that border Poland and the capital Minsk (20.8 per cent) – and were mostly directed to cities within Poland. After 2015, emigration from the eastern regions of the country increased by several percentage points.

A different picture emerges from the Polish statistics (Pobyt 2022). Among immigrants from Belarus, men form a slight majority (54.3 per cent). The age profile of the immigrants was more balanced than shown in the

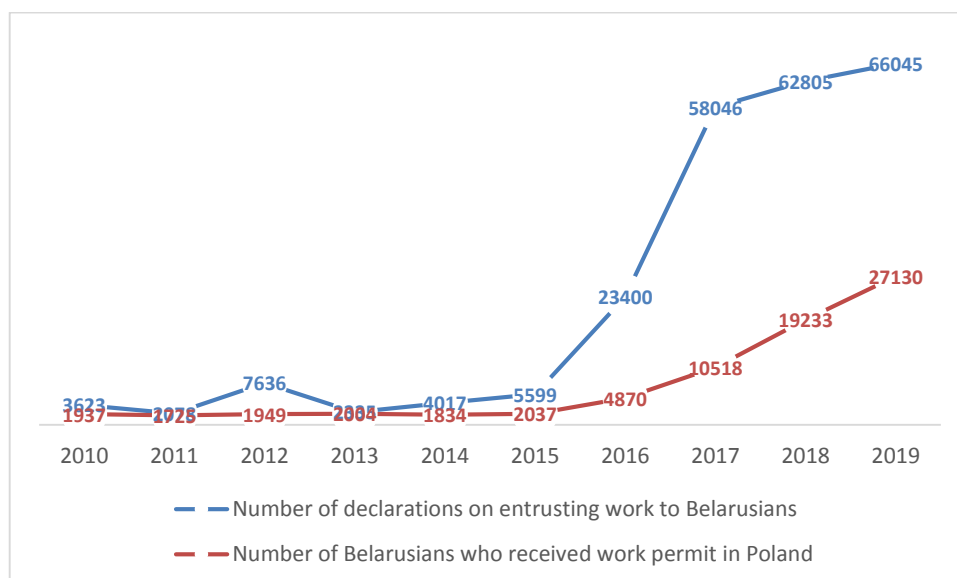
Belarusian data: persons aged 20 to 30 formed the largest group, with a share of 37.1 per cent, among whom young people aged 20–24, accounting for 18.5 per cent. Unfortunately, there were no characteristics for migrants by education level, though it seems that persons with higher and general secondary education predominate. Most immigrants from Belarus resided in the Mazovia (37.3 per cent) and the Podlasie region (20.6 per cent) that borders Belarus.

### *Labour emigration to Poland*

According to data from the Belarusian Ministry of the Interior (MVD 2022), 9 900 people left Belarus for Poland between 2010 and 2019. The number of emigrants grew significantly in 2017–2019. Until 2017, the average annual number of emigrants was around 200 while, in recent years, it has stood at around 3,000 per year. Together with the increase in numbers, there has been a change in the length of stay: prior to 2017, flows of 6 to 12 months dominated; after 2017 more than 90 per cent left for up to 6 months. However, this does not mean that workers return at the end of their current contract – realistically it is highly likely that they will extend their work permit in Poland. On average, between 2010 and 2019, about 70 per cent of emigrants were men and more than 80 per cent were employed in working professions.

A clear difference in the volume of labour immigration from Belarus is evident from examining the Polish statistics (MFSP 2021). There are several resources for estimating the number of labour immigrants in Poland. One can begin by looking at the data on the number of work permits issued. From 2010 to 2015, about 2,000 work permits for Belarusians were issued annually. Since 2016, the number has doubled every year (Figure 6). In terms of qualitative characteristics, more than half of those granted work permits in 2010–2019 were skilled workers employed in the construction and transport sectors (MFSP 2021).

**Figure 6. Dynamics of work permits and declarations on entrusting work to Belarusians, persons, 2010–2019**



Source: author's elaboration based on the Public Employment Services of Poland (MFSP 2021).

In addition to the work permits, there is another type of short-term labour permit, namely an employer's declaration on entrusting work to a foreigner. The number of declarations issued to Belarusians increased from

3,600 in 2010 to 66,000 in 2019 (MFSP 2021). On average, only 25 per cent of women received this type of document between 2010 and 2019. About half of the declarations were issued to migrants aged 26 to 40 and employment was the most often found in construction (27.9 per cent), administrative and support services (15.2 per cent), transport (22.9 per cent) and industry (22.3 per cent).

The simplification of the procedures for work permits and declarations of intent has led to a notable increase in the number of documents issued; however, the total figure does not match the number of foreign workers who arrived in Poland during the same period. For example, an employer may have completed several declarations for one employee or the employee did not appear to work on the basis of the received document. It has been estimated that only two-thirds of the declarations are used as intended (Górny, Kaczmarczyk, Szulecka, Bitner, Okólski, Siedlecka and Stefańczyk 2018).

An indirect indicator for estimating the number of migrants on the Polish territory is the number of foreigners claiming pensions and disability insurance. Their number increased for Belarusian citizens from 4,900 in 2010 to 42,800 in 2019 and, as with previous indicators, the highest growth was observed after 2016 (ZUS 2020).

Thus, both Polish and Belarusian statistics show an increasing number of migrants from Belarus on Polish territory. In addition, there were changes made in 2020 which have further influenced the increase of emigration flows from Belarus to non-CIS countries, especially to Poland.

### **The changing conditions and dynamics of emigration from Belarus after 2020**

The year 2020 began with a long-awaited event for Belarusians: the agreements between Belarus and the EU on visa facilitation and readmission were signed. These agreements represent an important step in EU–Belarus relations and pave the way for the improved mobility of its citizens, contributing to closer links between the EU and its Eastern Partnership neighbours (EC 2020). However, even before these agreements came into force, free movement between the countries was interrupted – the Covid-19 pandemic drastically affected all forms of human mobility, including international migration. Hundreds of thousands of migrants were stranded, unable to return to their home countries, while others were forced to return there earlier than planned, when job opportunities dried up and schools closed (UN 2020).

In response to the pandemic, most countries in the world placed restrictions on the free movement of people. The lockdown has affected many sectors of the economy, with the service sector, where many jobs are filled by migrants, being hit the hardest. In the first wave of the pandemic, Belarus did not impose severe restrictive measures to combat the spread of the virus. All sectors of the economy continued to function as usual and kindergartens and schools also stayed open. Between March and June 2020, a number of companies that were able to carry out their production activities remotely switched to this form of work, in whole or in part. In spite of the lack of administrative restrictions, people fearing for their health and feeling a social responsibility towards vulnerable groups curtailed their social activities and, wherever possible, kept their children out of kindergartens and schools (KB 2021).

The Belarusian authorities did not close the borders until the end of 2020. Nevertheless, entry restrictions in all neighbouring countries had automatically ceased movement across borders for Belarusian citizens. This affected the activities of certain sectors of the economy and labour migration. Belarusian labour-migration data showed a marked decrease in emigration, especially in the first half of the year. In total, 4,723 persons left Belarus in 2020, which is almost 50 per cent down from 2019 (MVD 2022). There was a decrease in the number of labour emigrants to many countries – but most of all to Russia – while the number of emigrants to Lithuania and Poland remained at the same level.

According to a sociological survey conducted in June 2020 by the Ministry of the Interior of Belarus, 47 per cent of labour migrants who had left the country in 2020 returned, while the rest stayed abroad. The return of migrant workers and their inability to freely leave to work in other countries increased the pressure on the domestic labour market. As the IOM (2021) study shows, the majority of labour emigrants who had to return to Belarus due to Covid-19 restrictions do not intend to stay in Belarus in the future; they simply await the removal of restrictions on movement and the emergence of employment opportunities abroad.

The political situation after the August 2020 presidential elections provided an additional incentive for emigration and led to a significant increase in the number of forced migrants.<sup>4</sup> Most of them moved to neighbouring Ukraine, where there is no visa regime, or to Lithuania, Poland and other European countries. According to Eurostat (2022c), the number of Belarusians who applied for asylum in EU countries for the first time tripled in August 2020. The total number of Belarusian asylum-seekers from August 2020 to December 2021 was 3,995, including 255 in France, 2,495 in Poland, 270 in Germany and 320 in Lithuania. This represents a small portion of all forced migrants, since most of them remained in the country of destination on humanitarian visas or applied for other forms of international protection. For example, Poland issued 33,342 humanitarian visas between August 2020 and April 2022 (OF 2022), while Lithuania issued 6,700 permits for specific humanitarian reasons between August 2020 and October 2021 (Troianovski 2021). Despite the absence of a visa regime, forced migrants do not depart for Russia because of the fear of deportation and the similar political system. Forced migrants do not typically plan to emigrate for good, regarding it as more of a temporary measure instead. However, the current political crisis in Belarus continues with no resolution in sight, while being exacerbated by an economic crisis. At the same time, forced migrants can end up settling down in the receiving country, so there is every likelihood that a short-term form of forced migration will turn into labour or even long-term migration.

An additional factor reducing the costs of emigration, especially forced emigration, is assistance in the destination country. The role of diasporas and migration policies in the receiving country plays a large part in this respect. The Belarusian diaspora has become more active since 2020 (Rudnik 2021), with financial and informational support being provided to all newly arrived migrants, particularly forced migrants.

The EU countries provide significant assistance to forced Belarusian migrants. A number have announced additional recruitment and scholarship programmes for students and scientists from Belarus. They are also interested in attracting highly qualified specialists and provide assistance in the relocation of business and IT employees from Belarus.<sup>5</sup> In September 2020, Ukraine, Latvia and Lithuania all started setting up programmes which offer certain conditions for the relocation of highly qualified specialists together with their family members (ERR 2020). Some of the most significant support for Belarusians is provided by Poland, where there are several support programmes for students and researchers, the opportunity of employment via a humanitarian visa and a large-scale programme for the relocation of business and IT specialists (Poland Business Harbour (PBH)). Under the PBH programme, individuals (and their family members) with an engineering degree or experience in the IT industry are able to take advantage of the fast-tracked visa procedure (PBH 2021).

The effectiveness of such programmes can be measured by the growth in the number of firms partially or fully relocated from Belarus, as well as the interest shown among employees in relocation. According to surveys of IT professionals (Kozhemyakin 2021), the number of respondents from this sector who wish to emigrate from Belarus increased from 33.7 per cent in September 2020 to 41.8 per cent in January 2021. The proportion of those who left during the same period rose from 3.8 per cent to 14.2 per cent. Poland was mentioned as among the countries to emigrate to by 64 per cent of those planning to move and 42.6 per cent of those who have already moved away. In addition, Ukraine, Germany and Lithuania were also high on the list. In March 2022, the proportion of respondents who had left had risen to 27 per cent, with 28 per cent planning to leave. Poland remains the top country for relocation, with Georgia and Lithuania also being considered

(DEV 2022). According to the Office for Foreigners in Poland, while – from mid-August 2020 to the end of the year – 1,116 visas were issued under the PBH, by April 2022 their numbers had risen to more than 33,000 (Grzegorzczuk 2021; OF 2022). In addition to the increase in the number of visas issued, between August 2020 and April 2022 the number of Belarusians granted different types of resident permit in Poland rose from 28,000 to 48,000 (OF 2022).

The support of European countries for the Belarusian people in resolving the political crisis affects how Belarusians feel about certain EU countries and their intention to emigrate to them. According to research conducted at the end of 2020, Belarusians rated Poland's policy towards the political crisis the highest (38.6 per cent), followed by Germany (37.6 per cent), Russia (31.2 per cent) and Lithuania (30.5 per cent). Poland also occupied the top spot among countries where Belarusians would like to work. As many as 40.6 per cent indicated a desire to work in Poland, ahead of Western Europe (36.7 per cent), Russia (30.3 per cent) and Lithuania (21.3 per cent) (OSW 2021).

Despite the great emigration potential and obvious push factors, the data for 2020 do not show a noticeable increase in emigration. Firstly, the pandemic influenced the decline in population mobility and, secondly, many Belarusians hoped for a resolution to the political crisis and the beginning of reforms in the country, which together restrained emigration. However, in 2021, emigration from Belarus increased significantly, for both political and economic reasons. Since 2020 there has already been a rise in inflation, a reduction of wages in certain sectors, the growth of unprofitable state enterprises, job losses and the closing down of private companies (Kruk and Lvovskiy 2020) – all factors which will lead to a reduction in household incomes and an increase in unemployment.

## Conclusions

According to the migration-systems concept, Belarus remains part of the Eurasian migration system; however, a gradual transformation of Belarus' place in this system is under way, particularly in the wake of the economic crisis in Russia since 2015. Throughout the twenty-first century, Belarus has had the closest migration exchange with Russia and this confirms the identification of a special sub-system consisting of the two countries within the larger Eurasian system. At the same time, migration links with other CIS countries have been weakening, despite the existence of all the requisite conditions for free movement and facilitated access to the labour market within the CIS. The exception is Ukraine, where the rise in immigration in 2014–2016 had a forced character. In parallel with these developments, there are countries outside the Eurasian migration system, such as Germany, the USA and Israel, with which Belarus has maintained stable migration links, especially with regards to emigration. It can be argued that this fact does not significantly influence the changes affecting the place of Belarus in the Eurasian system, as emigrants to these countries have been predominantly long-term and their numbers remain small and do not change much over time.

Labour migration has a more significant impact on the transformation of the migration system, which is determined primarily by economic reasons and can change direction in a short period of time. It is the data on labour migrants that demonstrate the transformation of Belarus' place in the Eurasian migration system. After 2015, there has been a gradual reorientation of labour migrants from East to West, particularly evident in the western and central regions of the country. The economic crisis in Russia triggered this phenomenon, while certain institutional and economic conditions in neighbouring Western countries stimulated its further development.

In order to better assess the changes taking place in emigration flows from Belarus, it is important to look at the statistics of the receiving countries. A comparative analysis of Polish and Belarusian statistics shows

a significant difference in the number and structure of emigrants from Belarus. Thus, in Belarusian statistics, men between the ages of 20 and 30 prevail among long-term migrants, while Polish data show almost equal numbers by gender and a more-even age profile. According to Polish data, both labour and long-term emigration are several times higher than the Belarusian administrative data indicate. It is problematic to measure this underestimation reliably, especially the number of labour migrants. However, the data show an increase in the number of immigrants from Belarus after 2015 – and especially after 2017 – due to institutional changes regarding the recruitment of foreign labour. An increase in the number of labour migrants, together with an accumulation of Belarusian long-term migrants in Poland, is likely to contribute to the growth of social links between the countries, which may further create an image of Poland as a new centre of attraction among the Belarusian population.

Prior to 2020, the direction and dynamics of emigration flows from Belarus were influenced primarily by external factors in the form of economic and institutional conditions in certain countries. In 2020, an internal political crisis co-occurred, which has led to the formation of a steady flow of forced emigrants and given rise to further alterations in the direction and scale of emigration from Belarus. The increased role of diasporas and support from several European countries also influenced the choice of emigration destinations after 2020. One of the most widespread instruments for emigration among Belarusians has been the Poland Business Harbour programme, as demonstrated by the steady increase in the number of Belarusians who have obtained this visa. At the same time, Russia is not suitable for political emigrants, which further contributes to the reversal of emigration flows.

It is possible that, in the coming years, Belarus will experience serious economic problems. Labour migration constitutes a good opportunity to solve these problems in the short term. The recovery of neighbouring economies and the opening of borders could lead to large-scale labour emigration. If the current position of Belarus in the geopolitical system is maintained (there is a possibility of severe restrictions on movement to EU countries after the outbreak of war in Ukraine) then the social and institutional determinants that emerged or intensified in 2020 might contribute to an increase in the number of Belarusian emigrants to neighbouring EU countries. Thus Belarus, as was previously the case for Moldova and Ukraine, will continue to expand the geography of emigration, primarily in terms of labour emigration. At the same time, this could lead to a further reduction of migration links within the Eurasian migration system and, above all, with Russia.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Includes all post-Soviet countries except the Baltic states and Georgia.

<sup>2</sup> Since 1 October 2018, foreign nationals who have received a temporary residence permit for more than 9 months are counted in the statistics while, before this, only those who received a residence permit for 12 months or more were included. <sup>3</sup> Russian statistics should be treated with caution, as the methodology of migration registration changed there in 2011 (Chudinivskikh 2016).

<sup>4</sup> Here, forced migrants are people who have left Belarus for fear of persecution for political reasons.

<sup>5</sup> Programmes for attracting highly qualified specialists existed in selected European countries until 2020. They were the part of immigration policies aimed at meeting the demand of the domestic labour market – for example, programmes to attract doctors in Germany and Poland or IT specialists in Germany, the Netherlands, etc. The specific situation of Belarus after 2020 is caused by push factors within the country, which have created a mass emigration of highly qualified specialists.



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No conflict of interest was reported by the Author.

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