



Migration from Belarus to Estonia, Germany, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland: Before and after 2020

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INTRODUCTION

The migration of citizens of Belarus to the EU is not a new process, it began immediately after the collapse of the USSR. For a long time, this process did not arouse much interest of researchers, and at present there are practically no publications on the nature and composition of this migration. The situation has changed significantly since 2020. The political crisis in Belarus, and later mass protests, led to a broad mobilization of the Belarusian diaspora around the world, turning it into an important political phenomenon in modern Belarus.

The reaction of the authorities to the protests was not only the criminal and administrative prosecution of political opponents, but also various forms of outstanding the disloyal or potentially disloyal. As a result, since 2020, tens of thousands of people, and according to some sources, even hundreds of thousands, have left Belarus, which has become the most massive migration from the territory of Belarus in the modern history of the country. The Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 only reinforced the political and economic emigration from Belarus. What made this migration process special was that entire sectors of civil, political, and cultural activities were forced out of Belarus, turning the “new” emigration into an important phenomenon of the cultural and social life of the country.

Over the past few years, the political, cultural, and economic importance of the diaspora has grown, but until now not much has been known about its size, social and political structure. In recent years, specialized studies of the Belarusian diaspora have appeared, but most of them are focused on the politically active part of the emigration. This study aims to at least partially fill this gap.

The study is devoted to the analysis of the migration of Belarusian citizens to five countries of the European Union—Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Poland, and Germany. Such countries have been chosen for several reasons. Firstly, Poland and Lithuania are the main destinations for Belarusian migration in the EU. Germany is the largest EU economy and could potentially attract a significant number of Belarusian citizens. Latvia and Estonia were chosen as post-Soviet countries with which Belarus has had a long migration track record and which could potentially attract migrants after 2020.

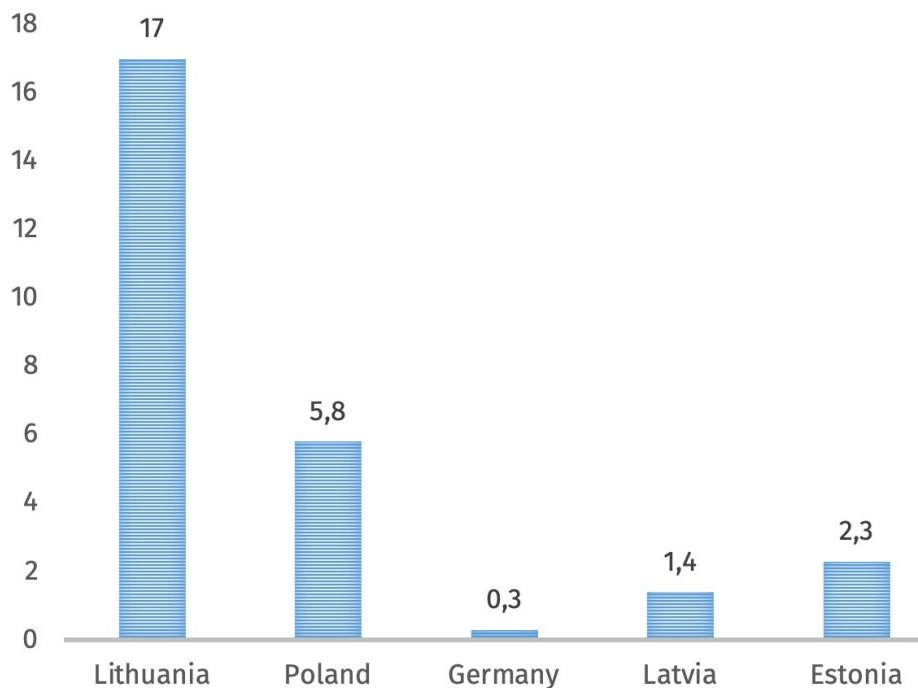
The study revealed that Poland and Lithuania are the dominant countries of destination for Belarusian emigrants. Germany has a relatively large Belarusian diaspora, but the events of 2020 and 2022 had little effect on its size. Latvia and Estonia, in turn, are examples of peripheral migration destinations that attract insignificant number of Belarusians.

TOTAL NUMBER OF BELARUSIAN CITIZENS ABROAD

In absolute numbers, Poland is by far the most popular destination for labor and political migrants from Belarus. In relative numbers, Lithuania leads the way—it is far ahead of other countries in the study. According to official data, there are about 17 citizens of Belarus per 1,000 inhabitants in Lithuania, 5.8 in Poland, 2.3 in Estonia, 1.4 in Latvia, and 0.3 in Germany (see Figure 1).

According to the Migration Department under the Ministry of the Interior of **Lithuania**, 48.8 thousand Belarusian citizens live in Lithuania. Of these, about 2.5 thousand have a permanent residence permit, more than 30 thousand have temporary permits, several hundred have been granted a refugee status, the

▶ **Figure 1.** Number of Belarusian citizens per 1,000 inhabitants of selected countries at the end of 2022



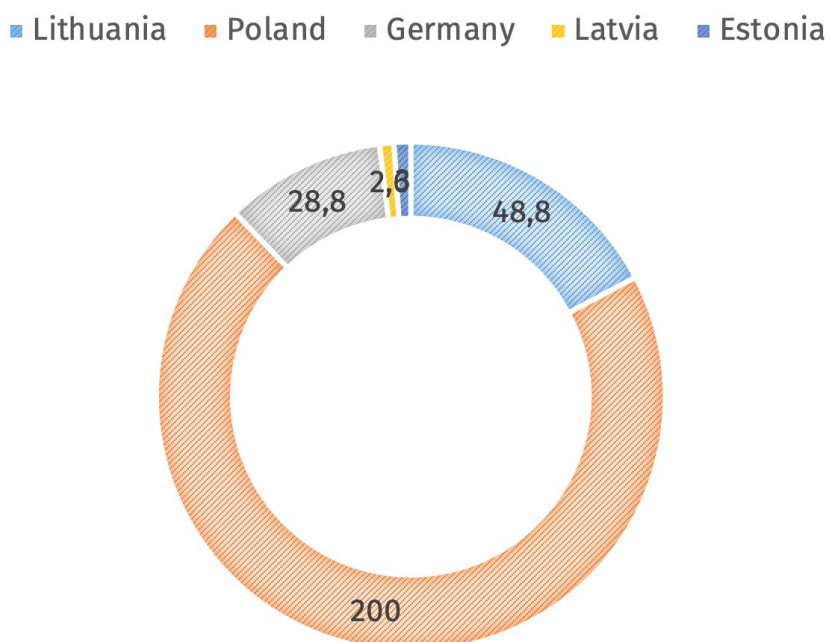
Sources: Authors' calculations based on migration data in Estonia: <https://www.stat.ee/en>; in Poland: <https://stat.gov.pl>; in Lithuania: <https://migracija.lrv.lt>; in Latvia: <https://www.pmlp.gov.lv>; in Germany: <https://www.destatis.de>. Countries' population data: World Bank database: <https://www.worldbank.org>.

rest stay with the D Type Visa. It should be noted that the D Type Visa is often used for circular migration, and such visa holders may reside most of the time in Belarus or other countries. Thus, the actual number of people living in Lithuania may be several thousand less.

Determining the exact number of Belarusian citizens living in **Poland** is a much bigger challenge. Accurate statistics are available only for Belarusians who have residence permits or similar statuses (temporary residence permit, permanent residence permit, subsidiary protection, refugee status, etc.). At the end of November 2022, there were 64.7 thousand such people in Poland, which is more than twice as many as in 2020. Additionally, the “gray zone” includes those who stay on humanitarian visas (including expired ones), work visas (their total number includes a significant share of the circular migration), business visas (it is not clear how many of them were used for migration and how many people have since received a new status), etc.

The general known statistics are as follows. In 2022, 18 thousand Belarusians received a work permit, and about 150 thousand more received invitations to work in certain, mainly blue-collar, professions. Based on the available data, it is difficult to establish the exact numbers of persons who came to work and stayed to live in Poland, but according to the estimates of field experts, their share could be as high as 50-66 percent or 82-110 thousand people.

► **Figure 2.** Belarusian citizens residing in the selected countries at the end of 2022, thousand persons



Sources: Official statistics available for all countries except Poland. Expert estimates are used for Poland instead. Statistics in Estonia: <https://www.stat.ee/en>; in Lithuania: <https://migracija.lrv.lt>; in Latvia: <https://www.pmlp.gov.lv>; in Germany: <https://www.destatis.de>.

From August 2020 to the end of 2022, authorities have issued 46 thousand humanitarian visas and 65 thousand business visas (Poland Business Harbor). Some of those who received visas (especially business people) used them not for migration, but as a substitute for short-term tourist visas, the issuance of which the EU countries have significantly reduced. Many Belarusians who had used them for migration since 2020 have already applied for residence permits or similar statuses. However, some of them are forced to stay in Poland on expired visas. The maximum estimate can thus reach up to 100 thousand people, but according to preliminary assessment, in reality it is only 30-40 percent of this number or 33-44 thousand. Add to that about 9 thousand people who left Ukraine for Poland after February 2022.

Thus, the total number of Belarusian citizens who live in Poland is about 180-220 thousand people, including labor migrants on short-term contracts.

At the end of 2022, 28.8 thousand Belarusians lived in **Germany**, the vast majority of whom were permanent residents meaning that they had been staying there for more than five years. A few thousand more Belarusians could be staying in Germany on the basis of their work visas, but in almost all cases that would be circular migration.

A statistical analysis revealed that the number of Belarusian citizens residing in **Latvia** and **Estonia** is just 2.6 and 3 thousand respectively. The events of 2020 and 2022 had little effect on this dynamic in absolute numbers. In Latvia, the increase was by 472, and in Estonia by 943 persons, but in relative numbers the increase was significant—starting from the end of 2019 until the end of 2022, the number of Belarusian citizens living in Latvia had increased by 22 percent, in Estonia by 45 percent.

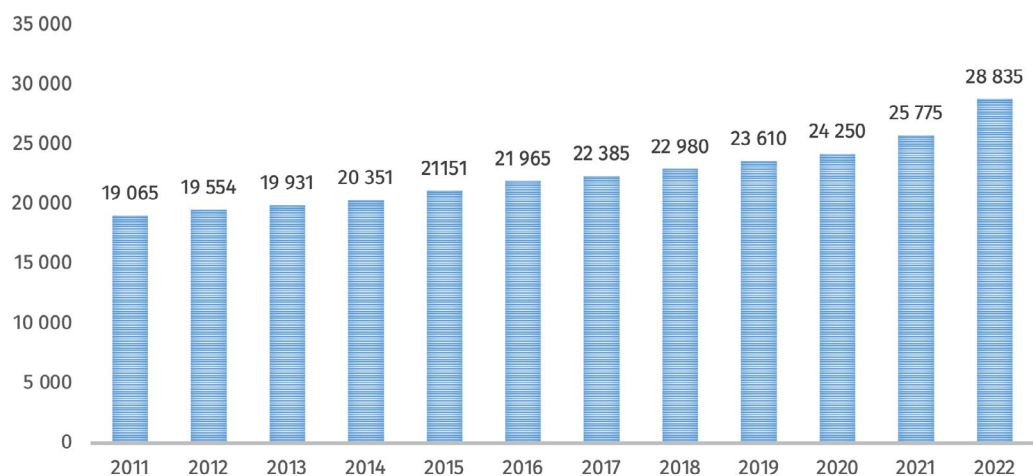
Thus, the estimated number of Belarusians who live in the five selected countries may be as high as 260-305 thousand people. This estimate includes both long-term residents and those who immigrated in recent years.

FORMATION OF THE DIASPORA

The emigration flows from Belarus to the selected countries share some common characteristics. For instance, they peaked in the last five-six years, and all countries demonstrated a significant increase after the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, as well as after the political crisis in Belarus in 2020. At the same time, each country followed their own unique path of Belarusian diaspora building.

The emigration from Belarus to **Germany** has flowed steadily since the 1990s and was initially characterized by a trend for long-term stay or permanent residence. Structurally, the emigrants were predominantly women; among the principal reasons for the resettlement were quoted family circumstances, as well as education, ethnical origin (German or Jewish), or professional opportunity. At the same time, the rates of migration had been quite steady, and the main body of the migrants' community shaped up in the last 10-20 years. The Belarusian diaspora in Germany is the oldest among the selected countries, and it is characterized by an absolute propensity for long-term residence in the country (five or more years). The events of 2020 and 2022 created a new wave of migration with a noticeable political component, which however did not lead to radical changes in the structure of the diaspora (see Figure 3).

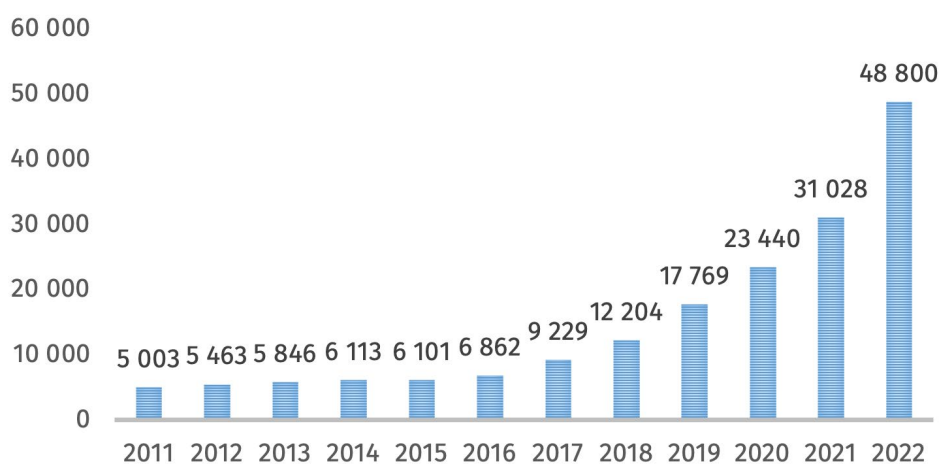
► **Figure 3.**
Number of
Belarusian
citizens
living in
Germany,
2011-2022



Source: <https://www.destatis.de>.

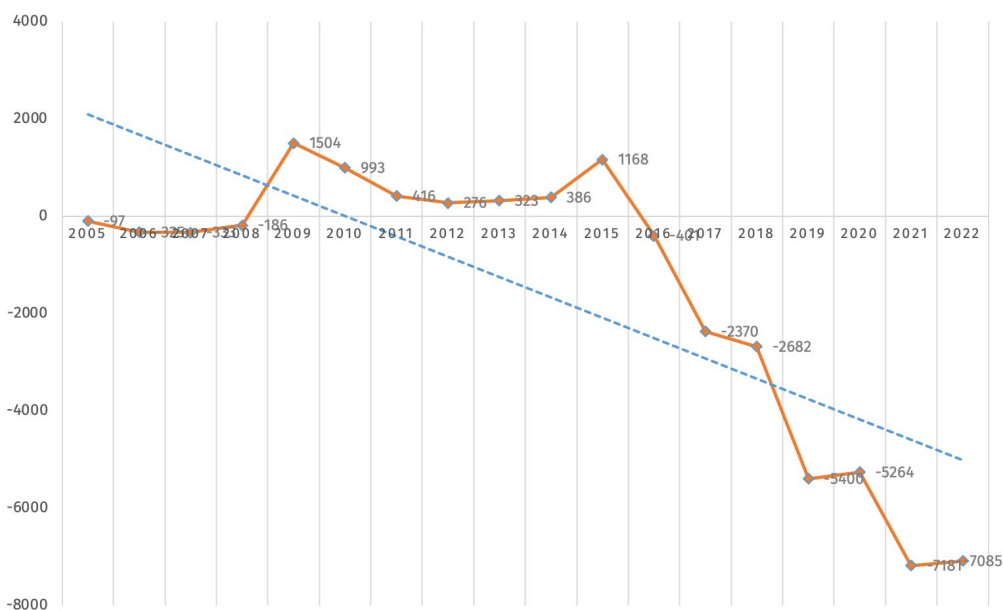
Poland and Lithuania display a slightly different structure of migration. It is dominated by job seeking in blue-color professions (logistics, construction, industry). Only in 2020 IT sector specialists and NGOs started to make up a significant part in the structure of migration. The migrants are predominantly men aged 25-40 years. Short-term employment and short-term stay in the country (temporary residence permit, work visa) continue to be the most prevalent practices, although after the political crisis of 2020 there has been a growing trend of long-term residence. In addition, Belarusian representatives of the Polish national minority moved to Poland in significant numbers after Belarus gained independence.

▶ **Figure 4.**
Number of
Belarusian
citizens living
in Lithuania,
2011-2022



Source: <https://migracija.lrv.lt>.

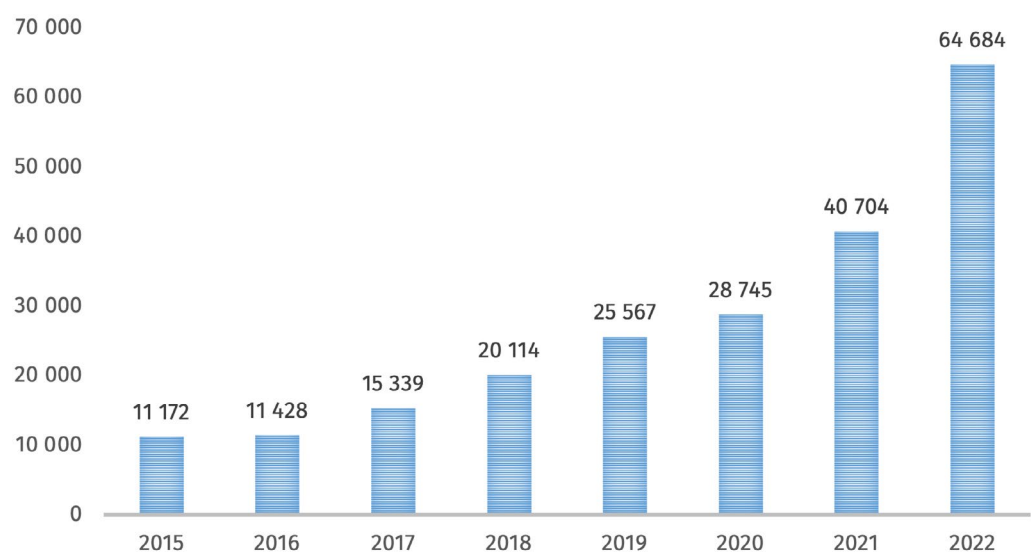
▶ **Figure 5.**
Balance of
migration
from Belarus
to Lithuania:
difference
between
foreigners
(non-Lithu-
anian citi-
zens) who
moved from
Lithuania to
Belarus and
from Belarus
to Lithuania



Source: <https://migracija.lrv.lt>.

Contrary to popular opinion among many experts, the increase in migration in Lithuania and Poland is not only related to the political crisis of 2020. An avalanche of labor migration began in Poland and Lithuania as early as in 2017, which was caused by economic difficulties in Belarus and easier access to the labor market for certain categories of workers in these countries (see Figure 4-6). At the same time, the events of 2020 and 2022 did not only give migration an additional boost, but also completely changed the composition and structure of the diaspora. Most of the political migrants, including entire sectors of civil society, political organizations, and mass media from Belarus, were forced to move to these two countries.

▶ **Figure 6.** Number of Belarusian citizens with residence permit or similar statuses in Poland, 2015-2022



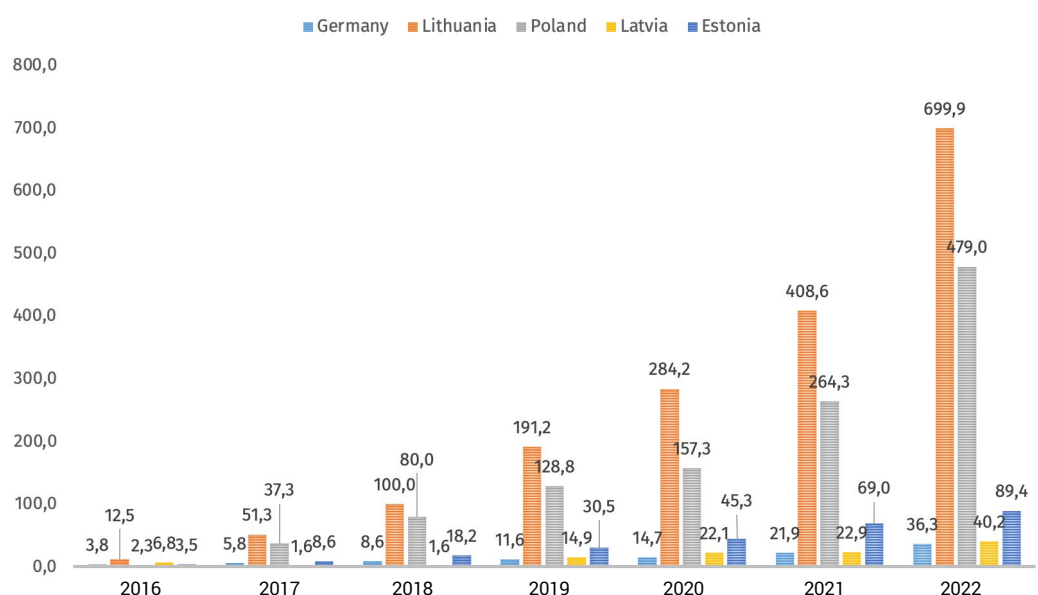
Source: <https://stat.gov.pl>.

Latvia and Estonia display a different migration model. Here the build-up of Belarusian citizens was not only due to migration for economic and family reasons, but also because of the adoption of Belarusian citizenship by ethnic Belarusians right after the demise of the USSR. Migration flows in absolute numbers have been and remain insignificant. The events of 2020 and 2022 gave this process a noticeable boost, but did not considerably change the composition of the diaspora. These countries, in contrast to Poland and Lithuania, did not attract a significant number of representatives of civil society and political organizations.

SIGNIFICANCE OF 2020 AND 2022 FOR MIGRATION

The political crisis in Belarus in 2020 and Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 gave the migration process a new impetus. Political migration has been added to labor migration. And the rate of it has also increased. In 2022 alone, the Belarusian diaspora living in Lithuania has grown by 57 percent. In Poland, in 2022, the increase in granted residence permits and similar statuses was 60 percent, and 110 percent increase in the number of new job invitations. The situation is similar in Latvia and Estonia: here the number of migrants from Belarus is at its peak throughout the entire period of independence of Belarus, although the increase in 2022 was not so critical—14 and 12 percent respectively. For Germany, migration from Belarus since 2020 also shows peak values. Compared to 2019, it has increased by 22 percent by the end of 2022, the increase in 2022 alone was 12 percent. Whereas between 2012-2020 the Belarusian diaspora in Germany grew on average by 570 persons per year, then in 2021 it increased by 1.5 thousand, and in 2022 by a record 3 thousand (see Figure 7).

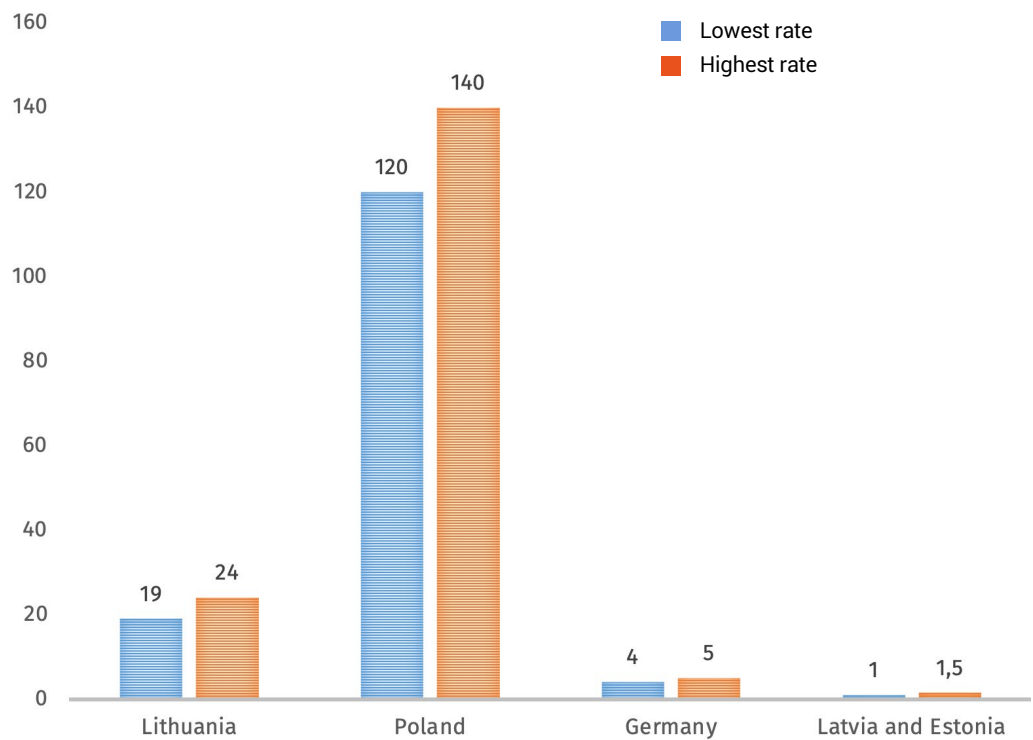
► **Figure 7.**
Growth rate of Belarusian citizens having the right to reside in the selected countries, compared to 2015, %



Sources: Authors' calculations based on migration data in Estonia: <https://www.stat.ee/en>; in Poland: <https://stat.gov.pl>; in Lithuania: <https://migracija.lrv.lt>; in Latvia: <https://www.pmlp.gov.lv>; in Germany: <https://www.destatis.de>.

For all the selected countries, as well as for many categories of economic and especially political migrants, the numbers remain at their peak values for the entire period of Belarus’s independence. In total, since the beginning of the crisis in 2020, 19-24 thousand persons have moved from Belarus to Lithuania, 4-5 thousand to Germany, 1-1.5 thousand to Latvia and Estonia, and 120-140 thousand to Poland (see Figure 8). **Thus, since 2020, a total of 145-170 thousand Belarusians have immigrated into the selected countries.**

► **Figure 8.** Emigration from Belarus after the 2020 crisis, thousand persons till the end of 2022



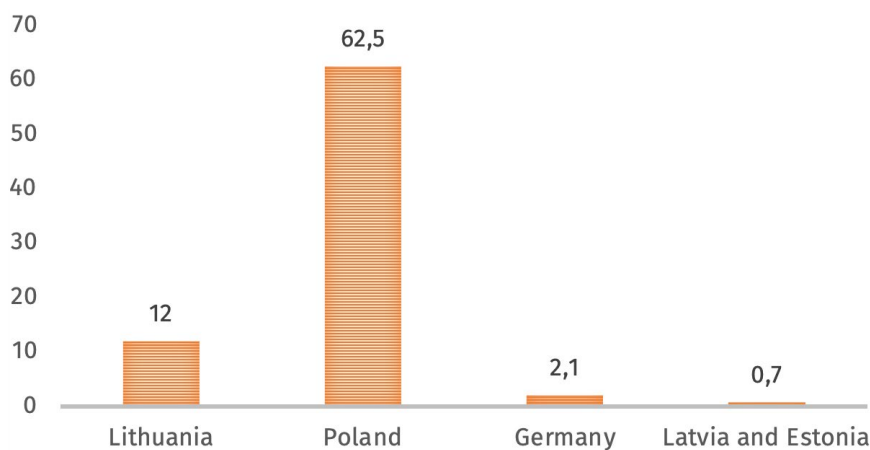
Sources: Authors' calculations based on migration data in Estonia: <https://www.stat.ee/en>; in Poland: <https://stat.gov.pl>; in Lithuania: <https://migracija.lrv.lt>; in Latvia: <https://www.pmlp.gov.lv>; in Germany: <https://www.destatis.de>.

CORRELATION OF ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL MIGRATION

After 2020, the public sentiment of Belarus subscribes to an opinion that the new emigration wave is made up largely of political and civil activists, creative talents, entrepreneurs, and IT specialists. And yet, an analysis of the labor market of **Lithuania** shows a persistent and absolute dominance of logistics and construction sectors, while both industrial and IT sectors are lagging behind. A similar situation is developing for **Poland**, where blue-collar jobs again dominate in labor migration. There is no doubt that a significant proportion of those who left Belarus after 2020 did so for political reasons, but it is also undeniable that a big part of them did so for economic reasons thus continuing the trend that had emerged since 2017.

Based on circumstantial evidence (types of issued visas, stated reasons for staying in the country, sector of employment in the labor market, etc.), it is possible to estimate **the extent of migration due to direct political persecution in Belarus starting from 2020 at the level of approximately 50 percent of the total number of all those who left (70-85 thousand) for Lithuania, Poland, Germany, Latvia and Estonia**, including journalists, NGO activists, politicians, scientists, artists and creative talents. Of these, about 12 thousand people reside in Lithuania, 55-70 thousand in Poland, 2-2.5 thousand in Germany, and 500-700 persons in Latvia and Estonia (see Figure 9).

▶ **Figure 9.** Extent of political migration from Belarus, by the end of 2022, thousand persons

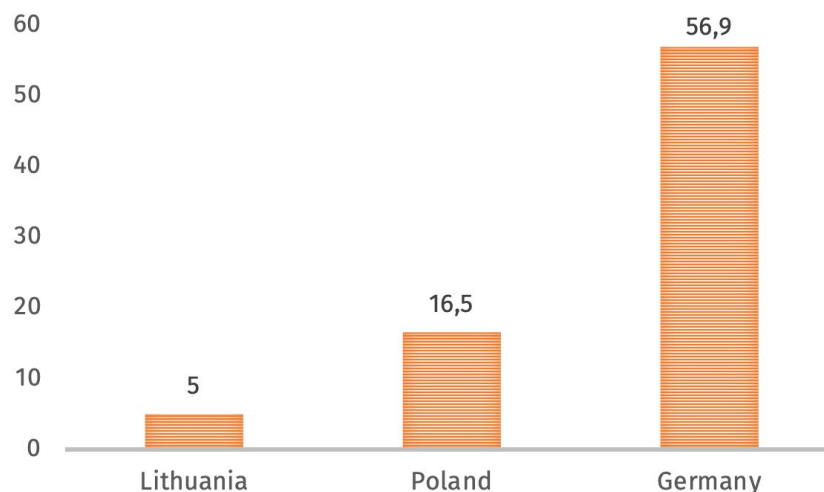


Source: As per the authors' approximation based on the methodology given in the text.

LENGTH OF STAY IN MIGRATION

Up to 95 percent of Belarusian citizens live in Lithuania on a short-term basis—they receive national D Type Visas and temporary residence permits for up to one year or much less often for a longer period. The number of issued permanent residence permits is extremely low. The prevalence of short-term employment arrangements harks back to the previous migration trends.

▶ **Figure 10.** Share of Belarusian citizens with the permanent residence status, out of the total number of Belarusian migrants, 2022, %



Sources: Authors' calculations based on migration data in Estonia: <https://www.stat.ee/en>; in Poland: <https://stat.gov.pl>; in Lithuania: <https://migracija.lrv.lt>; in Latvia: <https://www.pmlp.gov.lv>; in Germany: <https://www.destatis.de>.

The situation is similar in Poland, but the number of persons holding permanent residence permits is slightly higher. In Poland, about 30 thousand people have permanent residence permits, which is 14-17 percent of the total number of migrants.

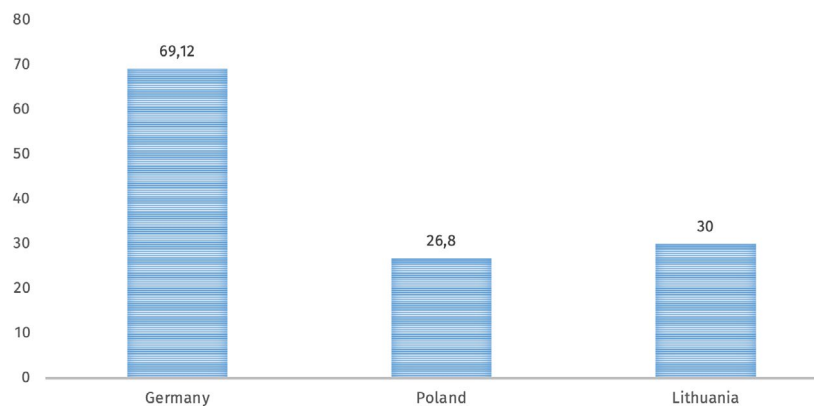
In Germany, the situation is radically different, where long-term residence status is absolutely prevalent, which reflects the previous trends of the mainstream migration. In 2011, 64 percent of the total number of migrants have lived in the country for 6-15 years. In 2022, this indicator shifted even more toward a longer stay. By that time, 48 percent of Belarusian immigrants have already lived in Germany for 10-25 years.

GENDER ASYMMETRY

Between the selected countries, there is a noticeable asymmetry in the gender composition of the Belarusian diaspora. **Lithuania** has precise data about the gender structure of its labor market and social insurance system, which include about half of Belarusian citizens living in Lithuania. Here we see an absolute prevalence of men—91-95 percent. Based on other circumstantial evidence, it can be concluded that the number of men in the total population of migrants from Belarus was at least 70 percent by the end of 2022.

Poland also demonstrates male predominance. Among those who received temporary residence permits in 2021, men accounted for 58 percent, permanent residence permits—52 percent, work permits—87 percent, and short-term job invitations—72 percent. Consequently, there is a significant gender asymmetry, especially in the field of short-term labor migration, while there is little gender difference in the case of long-term residence permits.

► **Figure 11.** Share of women* among Belarusian citizens residing in the selected countries, 2021, %



Sources: Germany: <https://www.destatis.de>; Poland: <https://stat.gov.pl>; Lithuania: authors' estimations.

In **Germany**, the Belarusian diaspora is dominated by women, which is a reflection of the country's employment structure as well as migration for family reasons. Whereas in general there is an overall gender parity among foreigners living in Germany with an insignificant predominance of men—53 percent (2021), the average share of women among Belarusian immigrants in Germany fluctuates only ever so slightly around 70.5 percent (average for 2011-2020). Only in 2021 their share decreased a little to 69.12 percent. Incidentally, the predominance of women is observable not only in migration for family reasons, but also in other categories, like for example, university students.

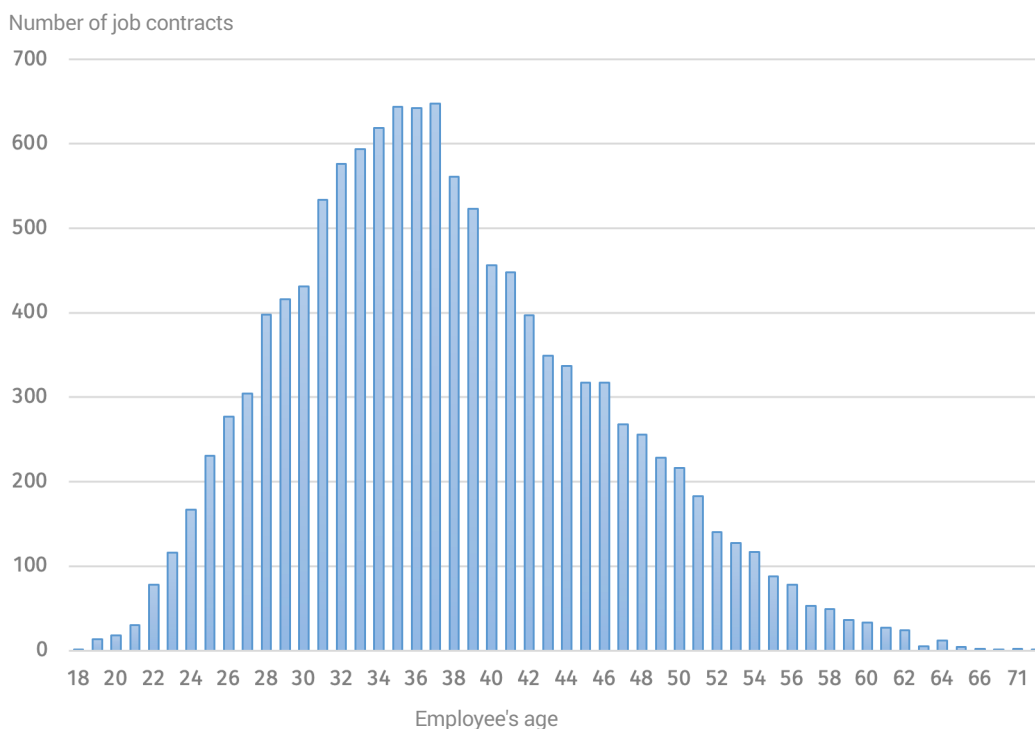
* For Germany—Belarusian citizens with residence permits; for Poland—estimation based on the available data about residence permit holders and labor migrants; for Lithuania—the authors' approximation based on the methodology given in the text.

AGE STRUCTURE

Lithuania has age structure data for its labor market and social insurance system, and there is no reason to assume that other data sets in their entirety will be significantly different. There is an absolute prevalence of people aged 30 to 49 years (up to 71.7 percent), while the age of 30 to 40 accounts for up to 50 percent, which points at the predominant immigration of skilled specialists with work experience, often people with a long professional track record (see Figure 12).

A similar situation is in **Poland**, although the immigrants there are somewhat younger. Here, the age structure information is available only for the labor market. In 2021, 60 percent of Belarusians who received a job invitation were aged 25 to 44, while the age group of 25-34 years accounted for 34 percent. Among those who received a work permit, 70 percent were aged 25 to 44, while the age group of 25-34 years again accounted for 34 percent.

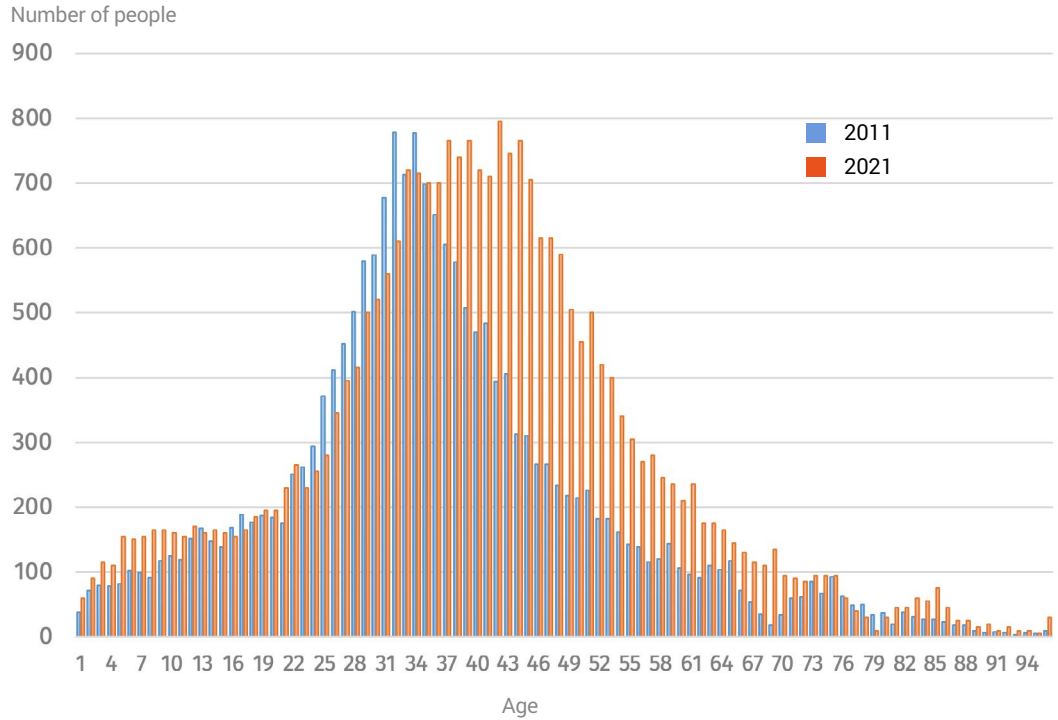
▶ **Figure 12.** Age structure of labor migrants of Belarusian citizenship under contracts in Lithuania, 2021



Source: Authors' calculations based on raw data provided by the Lithuanian Employment Service.

In **Germany**, the age of the diaspora is generally somewhat older. Belarusian citizens aged 26-35 in 2021 accounted for only 23 percent, from 25 to 45 years—just under 52 percent. At the same time, people over 45 made up almost a third—31 percent (see Figure 13).

▶ **Figure 13.** Shift in the age structure of the Belarusian diaspora in Germany, 2021



Source: <https://www.destatis.de>.

SHORT SUMMARY

Belarusian diasporas in Germany, Poland, and the Baltic countries share some similarities, but also have significant differences. The main trends are listed below.

Total Number of Belarusian Citizens Abroad

The most important migration destinations are Poland and Lithuania. Lithuania is the busiest destination in relative numbers, while Poland is in the lead in absolute numbers. 48.8 thousand Belarusians live in Lithuania, while the size of the Belarusian diaspora in Poland is estimated at 180-220 thousand. At the end of 2022, 28.8 thousand Belarusians permanently resided in Germany. The number of Belarusian citizens living in Latvia and Estonia is just 2.6 and 3 thousand respectively. **Thus, the estimated number of Belarusians who live in the five selected countries may be as high as 260-305 thousand people.** This estimate includes both long-term residents and those who immigrated in recent years.

Formation of the Diaspora

The emigration from Belarus has peaked in the last five-six years. Since 2015, the Belarusian diaspora living in Lithuania has grown by 700 percent, in Poland by 480 percent, in Estonia by 90 percent, in Latvia by 40 percent, and in Germany by 36 percent. A significant surge in migration to Poland and Lithuania occurs in 2017, when Belarusian citizens are granted facilitated access to the internal labor markets.

Significance of 2020 and 2022

In 2020-2022, the migration of Belarusians was at its historical peak in all the selected countries. The political crisis in Belarus in 2020 and Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 gave the migration process a new impetus. In 2022 alone, the Belarusian diaspora living in Lithuania has grown by 57 percent. In Poland, the increase in granted residence permits and similar statuses was 60 per-

cent, and 110 percent increase in the number of new job invitations. For Latvia and Estonia, the increase in 2022 was 14 and 12 percent respectively, for Germany—12 percent. In total, since the beginning of the crisis in 2020, 19-24 thousand persons have moved from Belarus to Lithuania, 4-5 thousand to Germany, 1-1.5 thousand to Latvia and Estonia, and 120-140 thousand to Poland. **Thus, since 2020, a total of 145-170 thousand Belarusians have immigrated into the selected countries.**

Political Migration

Based on circumstantial evidence, it is possible to estimate **the extent of migration to the selected countries due to direct political persecution in Belarus at the level of approximately 70-85 thousand**, including journalists, NGO activists, politicians, scientists, artists, and creative talents. Of these, about 12 thousand people reside in Lithuania, 55-70 thousand in Poland, 2-2.5 thousand in Germany, and 500-700 persons in Latvia and Estonia.

Length of Stay in Migration

Up to 95% of Belarusian citizens live in Lithuania on a short-term basis. The situation is similar in Poland, but the number of persons with permanent residence permits is slightly higher (14-17 percent). In Germany, long-term residence status is absolutely prevalent (57 percent).

Gender Asymmetry

In Lithuania and Poland, the number of men in the total population of migrants from Belarus was about 70 percent by the end of 2022. In Germany, the Belarusian diaspora is dominated by women, which is a reflection of the country's employment structure as well as migration for family reasons.

Age Structure

Lithuania and Poland demonstrate prevalence of people aged 25 to 49 (up to 70 percent of the total population). In Germany the age structure of the diaspora as a whole is somewhat older. In 2021, Belarusian citizens aged 26 to 35 accounted for only 23 percent, from 25 to 45 years—just under 52 percent. At the same time, people over 45 made up almost a third—31 percent.

SOURCES

The information about migration of Belarusian citizens to the selected countries comes from the official statistics provided by the migration authorities of Estonia, Germany, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland.

- Eesti Statistika (Statistics Estonia): <https://www.stat.ee/en>
- Statistisches Bundesamt (Federal Statistical Office of Germany): <https://www.destatis.de>
- Pilsonības un migrācijas lietu pārvalde (Office of Citizenship and Migration Affairs of the Republic of Latvia): <https://www.pmlp.gov.lv>
- Migracijos departamentas prie Lietuvos Respublikos vidaus reikalų ministerijos (Migration Department under the Ministry of the Interior of the Republic of Lithuania): <https://migracija.lrv.lt/lt/statistika/migracijometrasciai>
- Główny Urząd Statystyczny (Statistics Poland): <https://stat.gov.pl/en/contacts/>

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About the project

This Study was produced within the international project **"European Network for Belarus"**. The project is coordinated by Austausch e.V. (Germany) and is implemented in cooperation with partner organisations operating in Belarus, Poland, Lithuania and Germany. The network shall enhance the exchange of expert knowledge on Belarus and the visibility of Belarus in Germany, the project's partner countries, as well as at the EU level. The project is funded by the German Federal Foreign Office within the Programme "Expanding Cooperation with Civil Society in the EaP Countries and Russia" and the German Marshall Fund of the United States (GMF).

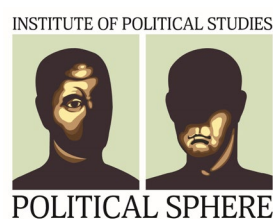
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