

Anastasiya Luzgina, BEROC  
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# Post-2020 Belarusian Permanent Migration to the EU and Beyond: An Empirical Assessment

Following the 2020 presidential election, Belarus experienced a sharp increase in outward migration, primarily to the European Union, with Poland and Lithuania becoming the main destination countries. However, the official migration statistics suffer from limitations and inconsistencies. The brief provides an empirical assessment of the scale of Belarusian migration after 2020. The results indicate that 400–418 thousand Belarusians live and/or work in the EU, Russia, and Georgia. The migration significantly affects host countries' labour markets and social systems, particularly in Poland. In turn, for Belarus, it represents substantial forgone economic potential, with estimated output losses exceeding 3.4% of GDP.

## Introduction

After the 2020 presidential election in Belarus, outward migration increased significantly. Belarusian citizens left the country for both political and economic reasons, with the European Union, particularly Poland and Lithuania, becoming one of the main destinations. Belarusian migrants have become a significant source of labour supply in Poland and Lithuania, helping alleviate labour shortages in economies experiencing demographic decline. At the same time, a sizable outward migration is likely to affect both Belarus' demographic dynamics and the economic outcomes. In this sense, estimating the number of Belarusians residing abroad is important for both host countries and Belarus itself. However, precise data on the number of Belarusians moving abroad after 2020 remains limited.

Existing international estimates provide only a partial picture. The World Migration Report includes both recent migrants and migrants who left Belarus decades ago and later acquired citizenship in other countries (WMR, 2024). It also relies on migration statistics that are not fully comparable across countries and are often available only with a time lag. As a result, these estimates do not capture the most recent migration wave that occurred after 2020.

Belarusian national statistics also underestimate migration flows, as they mainly record individuals who officially leave the country to work abroad under formal employment contracts (MIARB, 2025).

This policy brief aims to address this gap by providing estimates of migration from Belarus

between 2020 and 2024, based on data on residence permits issued in recipient countries, national migration statistics, information on citizenship acquisition, and open-source data. It accesses the number of Belarusian migrants in the main emigration destinations, namely the European Union, Russia, and Georgia, and discusses the implications for the host countries and Belarus.

## Assessing Belarusian migration to the EU

One of the most commonly used sources for analysing migration flows to the European Union is Eurostat data on the number of first permits. These permits indicate that a foreign national has received authorisation for a long-term stay in an EU country for the first time, typically for more than three months. They include various categories such as work permits, study permits, and other forms, including long-term visas. In many cases, the number of first permits corresponds broadly to the number of migrants entering and residing in a country. However, in some countries, there are significant differences between the number of first permits issued and the actual number of migrants. For example, this concerns Poland's issuance of Poland Business Harbor Visas to Belarusians. The visa allowed Belarusians to live and work in Poland. However, not all visa recipients moved to the country. Many used it for short-term tourism and did not subsequently obtain temporary residence permits.

According to European statistics, more than 90 percent of first permits issued to Belarusian citizens in recent years were granted by Poland and Lithuania. For this reason, estimating the



number of Belarusians residing in these two countries is central to assessing the scale of Belarusian migration to the EU.

## Lithuania

Assessing the number of Belarusians residing in Lithuania is relevant in light of the ongoing demographic decline and its implications for labour supply. Fertility in Lithuania remains well below replacement level—around 1.1 children per woman in 2024—while population ageing continues to reduce the size of the workforce (Statistics Lithuania; IMF, 2024). The current labour market situation is relatively tight, with unemployment around 7% in 2024. Migration helps mitigate some labour market pressures without constituting a major source of labour supply (European Commission, 2025).

In this context, Belarusians have become the second-largest migrant group in Lithuania. Their numbers increased markedly after 2020, rising from fewer than 18 thousand at the end of 2019 (Migracijos metraštis, 2020) to 57.5 thousand by the end of 2024 (Imigrantai Lietuvoje, 2026).

Estimating the number of Belarusian residents in Lithuania is relatively straightforward because the Migration Department of the Ministry of Interior Affairs publishes detailed statistics on foreigners residing in the country. These data show a close relationship between the number of first permits issued and the growth in the Belarusian population in Lithuania. Between 2020 and 2023, the number of Belarusians living in Lithuania increased slightly less than the number of first permits issued, partly because some individuals work in Lithuania on a rotational basis while continuing to reside in Belarus. An exception occurred in 2022, when the

Belarusian population in Lithuania increased more rapidly than the number of first permits issued to Belarusians following Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the expansion of humanitarian migration channels. Since 2024, the number of Belarusians residing in Lithuania has declined, partly due to the tightening of migration policy (EMT, 2025).

## Poland

Compared with Lithuania, Poland has stronger labour demand and even tighter labour market conditions, with significant dependence on migration. Despite a similarly low fertility rate (1.099 in 2024), unemployment remains low at 5.6% (November 2025), even with over one million foreign workers already present (Statistics Poland, 2025, 2026). Combined with population ageing and mounting pressures on social security and healthcare systems, this results in a structurally higher demand for migrant labour than in Lithuania. Against this backdrop, Belarusians—now the second-largest group of foreign workers after Ukrainians—play an important role. Only among social security contributors, their number has more than tripled in recent years - from 42.8 thousand in 2020 to 134.8 thousand in 2024 (ZUS).

However, accurately assessing the scale of Belarusian migration is challenging. Official statistics do not provide a direct measure of Belarusian residents. First residence permits significantly overestimate migration: between 2020 and 2024, Poland issued more than 874 thousand permits to Belarusian citizens, but many were used for short-term mobility rather than permanent relocation. Figure 1 illustrates the gap between the number of first permits issued and the number of residence permits held. At the same time, residence permit data underestimate the true



population. Approximately 125 thousand Belarusians held valid residence permits at the end of 2024, increasing to 141.2 thousand at the beginning of 2026; however, these figures exclude individuals awaiting decisions, whose applications may take months or years to process while they remain in the country (USC, 2026).

Importantly, statistics based on social security contributions also underestimate the total number of Belarusians permanently residing in Poland, as they exclude non-working spouses, children, students, pensioners, and other inactive groups. At the same time, combining different administrative datasets would lead to double-counting, as the same individuals may appear in multiple categories—for example, as residence permit holders, applicants awaiting decisions, and recipients of social benefits—meaning that simple

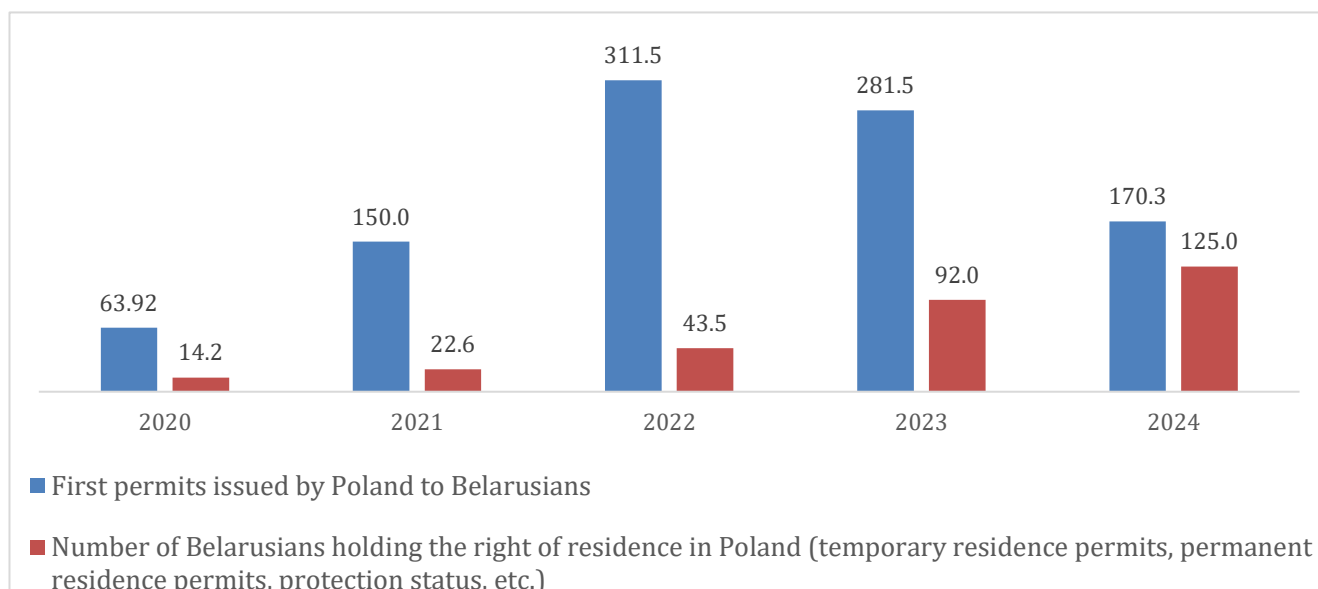
aggregation would inflate the total. As a result, neither the number of permits issued nor administrative records alone provide an accurate estimate of the Belarusian population in Poland.

### *Approaches to determining the number of Belarusians in Poland*

Luzgina (2025a) suggests two approaches to estimate the number of Belarusians residing in Poland.

The first approach—the gender-statistical approach—is based on estimating the number of Belarusians permanently residing in Poland by taking into account the gender structure of Belarusian citizens holding documents for permanent stay in Poland, as well as estimating the number of young Belarusians under 18, using statistical data on recipients of the 800+ child

*Figure 1. Dynamics of issuing first permits and residence permits by Poland to Belarusian citizens: thousands of people.*



Source: Urząd do spraw cudzoziemców; Eurostat. Note: First permits are permits issued for initial entry, including long-term visas. Resident permits include temporary residence permits, permanent residence permits, blue cards, and residence cards—that is, permits foreigners obtain for residence in the country after they've already entered. Due to the fact that many Belarusians received Poland Business Harbor visas (first permits), but did not use them to obtain a residence permit in Poland, the number of residence permits issued is lower than the number of first permits



benefit, which until 2026 was paid to all children under 18. The estimate based on this approach suggests that as of the end of 2024, between 172.8 and 181.1 thousand Belarusians permanently resided in Poland.

The second approach—the socio-demographic approach—is used to verify the accuracy of these estimates. This approach is based on the analysis of statistics on social security contributions, the age structure of Belarusians in Poland, and their employment status. Key components include data on the number of taxpayers, children under 18, and Belarusians aged 18 and older who are not employed in the Polish labour market. According to this second approach, the number of Belarusians residing in Poland at the end of 2024 ranged from 175.6 to 188.5 thousand individuals.

Thus, based on both approaches, between 172.8 and 188.5 thousand Belarusian citizens entitled to permanent stay were permanently residing in Poland at the end of 2024.

### **The total number of Belarusians in the EU**

Based on the above assessment of the total number of Belarusians residing in Poland, the known number residing in Lithuania, and the number who obtained first permits in other countries, it is possible to estimate the number of Belarusian citizens residing in the European Union. If EU statistics are considered, it can be noted that over the period 2016–2024, the share of first residence permits issued by EU countries excluding Lithuania and Poland averaged 7%. We can assume that the number of Belarusians residing in EU countries outside Poland and Lithuania approximately corresponds to this proportion.

In this regard, the total number of Belarusians residing in the EU at the end of 2024 was calculated assuming that approximately 93% of Belarusian citizens migrated to Lithuania and Poland. This results in an estimate of 247.6 thousand to 264.5 thousand individuals.

Based on available data on Polish citizenship obtained by Belarusians in 2020–2024, the total number of Belarusian citizens who do not yet hold citizenship or who obtained it relatively recently but permanently reside in the EU is between 265 thousand and 282 thousand individuals. Moreover, the majority of these individuals relocated to the EU in 2020–2024, a period marked by a significant increase in the number of first residence permits issued to Belarusians, primarily by Poland and Lithuania.

### **Migration outside of the EU**

Belarusians actively migrate not only to EU countries but also to other states such as Russia and Georgia. It is not possible to calculate how many Belarusian citizens currently live and work in Russia due to the absence of customs and border barriers and the lack of additional labour market legalisation requirements for citizens of the Union State. Nevertheless, there are general figures on the employment of Belarusians in the Russian labour market. As of 2023, approximately 124 thousand Belarusians were employed in Russia. An additional more than 12,000 resided in Georgia (Luzgina, 2025b). Taking these data into account, together with data for EU countries, between 400 and 418 thousand Belarusian citizens lived and worked outside Belarus. This amounts to approximately 4.5% of the country's total population.



## Implications of Belarusian Migration for Belarus

Together with data for EU countries, between 400 and 418 thousand Belarusian citizens lived and worked outside Belarus. This amounts to approximately 4.5% of the country's total population. Estimating the share of Belarusians of working age (16–60 years) living and working in the countries under study based on the gender-age structure of Belarusians in Poland yields approximately 355 thousand individuals. This corresponds to more than 6% of the country's total working-age population.

The forgone economic opportunities resulting from the emigration of working-age individuals can be assessed using the Solow growth accounting framework. The potential economic impact of the emigration of working-age Belarusians can be approximated as a static output loss, assuming that capital and total factor productivity remain unchanged. Based on the share of labour compensation in GDP at current national prices for Belarus in 2023 (0.57), and the estimated 6% reduction in the working-age population residing abroad, the immediate reduction in GDP may reach up to 3.42% (PWT 11.0).

## Conclusion

Belarusians constitute the second-largest group of foreign nationals in Poland and Lithuania after Ukrainians. Belarusians also make a positive contribution to the labour markets of other EU countries, as well as to those of Russia and Georgia. Consequently, their residence in the host countries has a tangible impact not only on the

labour market but also on social security systems, budget, and other sectors of the economy. Accurate data on the number of migrants, their age structure, and their participation in economic activity enable more effective forecasting of pressures on social systems and facilitate better planning of migrant integration into the host country's economy.

In Belarus itself, the long-term emigration of working-age citizens and their families remains insufficiently accounted for, which distorts assessments of the country's internal demographic situation and associated economic losses. Large-scale migration, including flows to Russia and Georgia, indicates that up to 6% of the working-age population currently resides outside the country, which, all else being equal, may reduce potential GDP growth by more than 3.42%.

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## Anastasiya Luzgina

BEROC

[luzgina@beroc.org](mailto:luzgina@beroc.org)

[https://beleconomy.org/en/info/researchers/anastasia\\_luzgina/](https://beleconomy.org/en/info/researchers/anastasia_luzgina/)

Anastasiya Luzgina works as a Research Associate at the Belarusian Economic Research and Outreach Center (BEROC). Before that, she served as an Associate Professor at the Belarusian State University. Anastasiya Luzgina also has worked at the National Bank of the Republic of Belarus (2003-2007) and the IMF Resident Representative office in Belarus (2007-2009).

In 2015, Anastasiya took part in the program for visiting researchers of the Central Bank of Finland. She also participated in the Fulbright Visiting Scholar Program (USA) (2018). She teaches monetary policy, monetary statistics, finance and FinTech.

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