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New permanent residents? Belarusians in Poland after 2020

For years, citizens of Belarus were not keen to migrate to Poland, despite wage differences between the two countries and the undemocratic regime in Belarus. This seems to have changed after the rigged presidential elections of 2020 and the Russian attack on Ukraine in February 2022. The number of Belarusian citizens in Poland is now estimated at 100,000 – 150,000 people. The April issue of CMR Spotlight was devoted to Belarus's persecution of its diaspora. In this issue, Kseniya Homel, Marta Jaroszewicz, and Magdalena Lesińska present the results of a survey of emigrants from Belarus who came to Poland after 2020: why did they choose Poland?; what is their situation?; what are their needs?



Belarusian Freedom Day, Warsaw, 25.03.2023

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New permanent residents? Belarusians in Poland after 2020

Kseniya Homel, Marta Jaroszewicz, Magdalena Lesińska

Due to the tense political situation in their country of origin, including the spiralling repressions against the democratically-oriented part of the population, Belarusians started to emigrate more often and for a longer time, bringing their businesses and families to neighbouring countries. Given the social, economic and language similarities and their readiness to stay in Poland on the one hand, and the demands of the Polish labour market and demographics on the other, Belarusian nationals are a group worth taking a special look at in the context of their possible permanent settlement in Poland. Belarusians require systemic support, especially in areas such as residence regulations, language courses, and education.

Introduction

The rigged presidential elections in Belarus in August 2020 were followed by an unprecedented wave of public protests against the rule of Alexander Lukashenko. The regime in Minsk responded with mass repressions, arrests and political trials, which led to a large outflow of Belarusian citizens primarily to neighbouring countries – Poland, Lithuania and Ukraine. From the latter, many Belarusians came to Poland after Russia's aggression against Ukraine in February 2022. The Polish authorities have not been indifferent to the needs of Belarusian

refugees and introduced simplified legal provisions for their entry, stay, work and study in Poland.

The data presented in the text are based on an online non-representative survey entitled “Migration from Belarus: integration into economic, social and political life in Poland”, addressed to emigrants from Belarus who came to Poland after 2020, conducted in August and September 2022 (N:777). The survey was supplemented by semi-structured interviews (15) with Belarusian diaspora representatives.

Belarusian nationals in Poland in numbers – overview of official data

Due to the dynamic character of migration from Belarus, alongside some statistical constraints, it is difficult to determine exactly how many Belarusian migrants currently reside in Poland. One could estimate the number of Belarusians at around 100,000–150,000 people but these are rather loose estimates. The main problem derives from a complicated legal basis regulating the status of foreigners in Poland, and in some cases a multiplication of statutes granted. Also, some groups of Belarusian migrants, particularly those working on short-term labour permits, circulate a lot. Finally, according to Polish legislation, Belarusian citizens enjoy certain legal exemptions, not equally accessible to

other groups of foreigners and not properly registered statistically. For instance, after the 2020 mass repressions, Poland quickly adopted [regulations on humanitarian visas](#) that suit the needs of Belarusians. Since December 2020, holders of humanitarian visas are not required to obtain labour permits, the same as holders of a visa issued within the so-called [Poland Business Harbour programme](#), dedicated to highly skilled migrants.

Given the recent hindrances created by the Belarusian regime to prevent its citizens from extending their documents in the Belarusian consulates abroad, Poland has recently widened the number of categories of foreigners who may apply for the [Polish travel document](#). Already since 2022, Belarusian nationals have also been able to apply for temporary residence permits on the basis of humanitarian visas.

Since 2019, Belarusians remain the second largest immigrant group in Poland, characterized by a quick increase of arrivals after August 2020 and after the Russian full-scale attack on Ukraine (data received from the Office of Foreigners). This stands in sharp contrast with earlier studies demonstrating a rather low propensity of Belarusian nationals to migrate to Poland ([Petrakova 2022](#); [Brunarska, Lesińska 2014](#)). According to the data of the Polish consular service, between 10.08.2020 and 31.12.2020, Poland issued as many as 47,000 humanitarian visas to Belarusians, and almost 70,000 visas within the Polish Business Harbour programme. It is, however, not clear how many holders of

those two types of visas remain in Poland and who obtained a short-term residence permit after arrival. Belarusians are also still using the legal opportunities provided by short-term employment schemes. In 2022, 153,000 Belarusian nationals obtained a so-called employer's declaration of entrusting work to a foreigner (data of the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy).

The most comprehensive data (that includes both flow and stock data) is available for those Belarusian citizens who obtained different types of residence permits. As of 31.12.2022 67,606 Belarusians with different forms of residence permits lived in Poland. A specific pattern characterizing Belarusian migrants in Poland is a relatively big ratio of persons with permanent residence permits (31,000 people). In the majority of cases, they obtain the permits due to Polish ethnic origin as Belarus hosts one of the biggest groups of ethnic Poles residing in Eastern Europe. The majority of short-term residence permits are issued in relation to work. Belarusians are also applying for refugee status or other forms of international protection. In the period August 2020-December 2022, 5775 Belarusians applied for international protection (data received from the Office of Foreigners).

Information about the survey

The study aimed to analyse the needs of Belarusian nationals in Poland who migrated after 2020, i.e., those who are still in the initial phase of adaptation and integration. The majority of survey participants were 30-45

(59%) years old; the second largest group were young people aged 18-29 (26%). Almost a similar proportion of women and men participated in the survey. The adaptation needs of Belarusians in Poland are also conditioned by the migration model chosen, as there were not only individual arrivals but often also the (re)settlement of whole families or family reunification. Importantly, only one-third of the respondents indicated that they stayed in Poland alone, while more than half of the respondents stayed in Poland with their spouse, 39% mentioned that they are in Poland with children, and 9% - with parents or other relatives. Most of the respondents (85%) lived in large cities (over 300,000 people), where there are better chances of finding a job and securing other adaptation needs. Some respondents experienced double migration or exile, as after 2020 they first moved to Ukraine.

What do we know about Belarusian emigrants after 2020? The survey results

Why Poland?

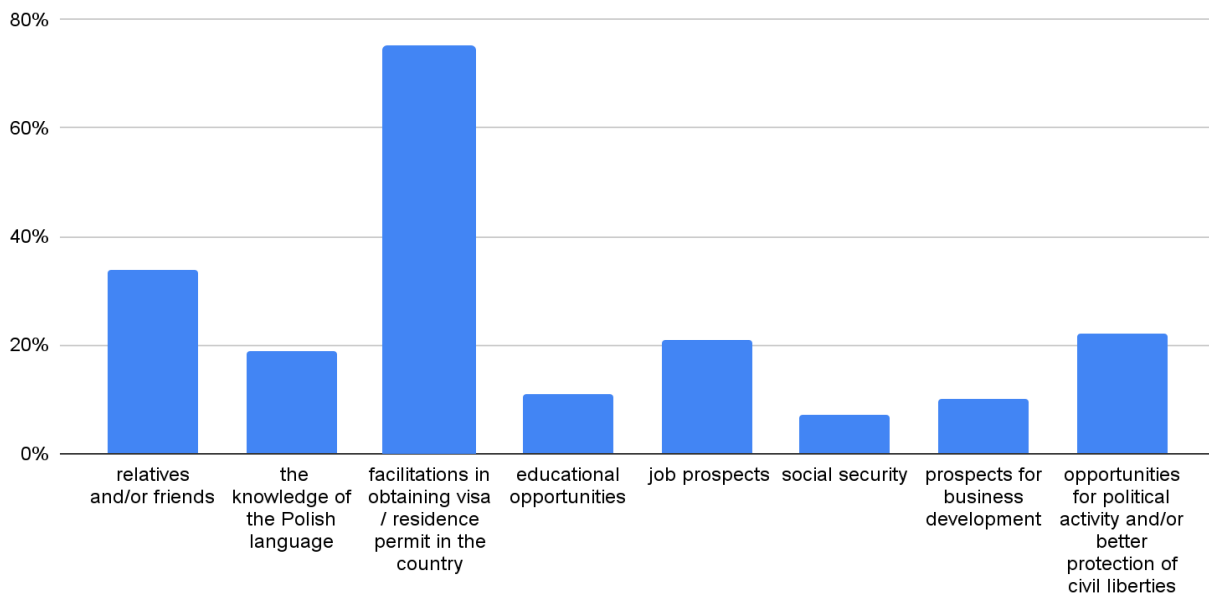
The choice of Poland as the country of migration was associated with a number of administrative and legalization, economic

and social conditions, which, compared to other migration directions (especially Lithuania and Georgia), ensure a smoother process of settlement and adaptation. Further tightening of criminal and administrative regulations by the Belarusian authorities caused migration to become the only solution to escape from repressions and persecutions and ensure the safety of family members. The vast majority of survey participants indicated a political reason (94%) as the main reason for leaving.

The majority of respondents (75%) pointed out that they chose Poland because of the relative accessibility of obtaining a visa and further legalization of stay. Also, social networks became an important determinant – 34% of the respondents indicated that they already had friends and relatives in Poland, which can be a significant support in the first period of adaptation.

Poland was also perceived as an attractive country both from the perspective of business and work opportunities (21%), as well as in terms of political freedom and civic participation (22%). A similarly numerous group indicated that they knew Polish before arriving (20%).

Reasons to choose Poland as a destination country (N=535)



Source: own elaboration based on the 2022 survey.

The study captured the diversity and complexity of legalization solutions available for Belarusian citizens in Poland. Given that the study was focused on participants who migrated to Poland within the last 2 years, most respondents mentioned national visas (23% humanitarian visas) as their legal basis for stay.

Economic integration

The process of economic integration of Belarusians in Poland is related to a number of factors, including access to the labour market and opportunities for business development. The collected data confirms the high level of economic autonomy and integration of Belarusian nationals in the Polish labour market. Most of the respondents indicated that they had a regular source of income in Poland (65%, N=628). More than half among them (74%)

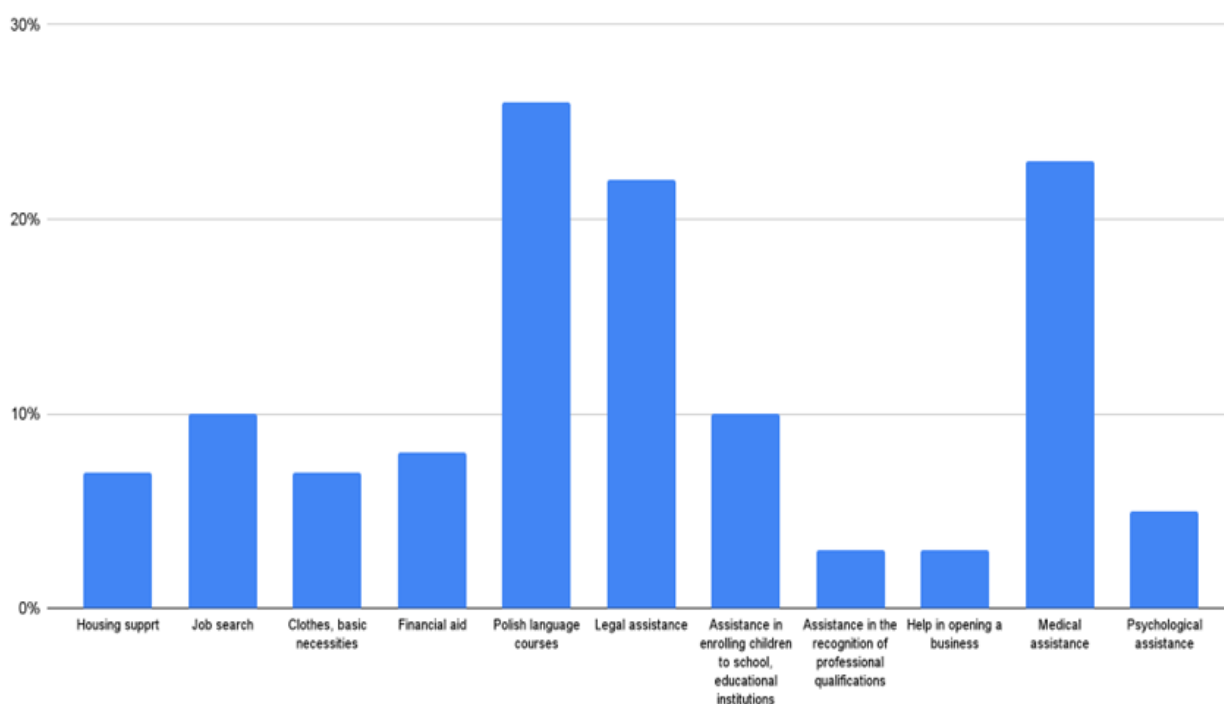
worked on the basis of an employment contract or a civil law contract, while 20% ran their own business (N=391). Despite Belarusians having the possibility to take advantage of a number of social assistance programs and targeted programs, these types of support were not perceived as the main source of income for this group of migrants in Poland. Only 29% (N=616) of respondents indicated that they used social assistance in Poland. The “500+” program appeared to be the most popular, as 48% of respondents used this type of benefit (N=172), which, again, also reflected that a significant group of Belarusians in Poland had children with them. Only 16% (N=604) indicated that they used government programs dedicated to Belarusian citizens. The programme for highly skilled professionals (the [Poland Business Harbor](#)),

and the [Kalinowski scholarship](#) for students turned out to be the most popular.

Among various forms of support offered by the central and local governments and social organizations (including diaspora organizations), the greatest demand was for

Polish language courses (26%), medical assistance (23%) and legal consultations (22%) (N=564). The majority of participants indicated that Belarusian organizations were the primary source of adaptation support for them.

Types of support Belarusians received in Poland (N=564)



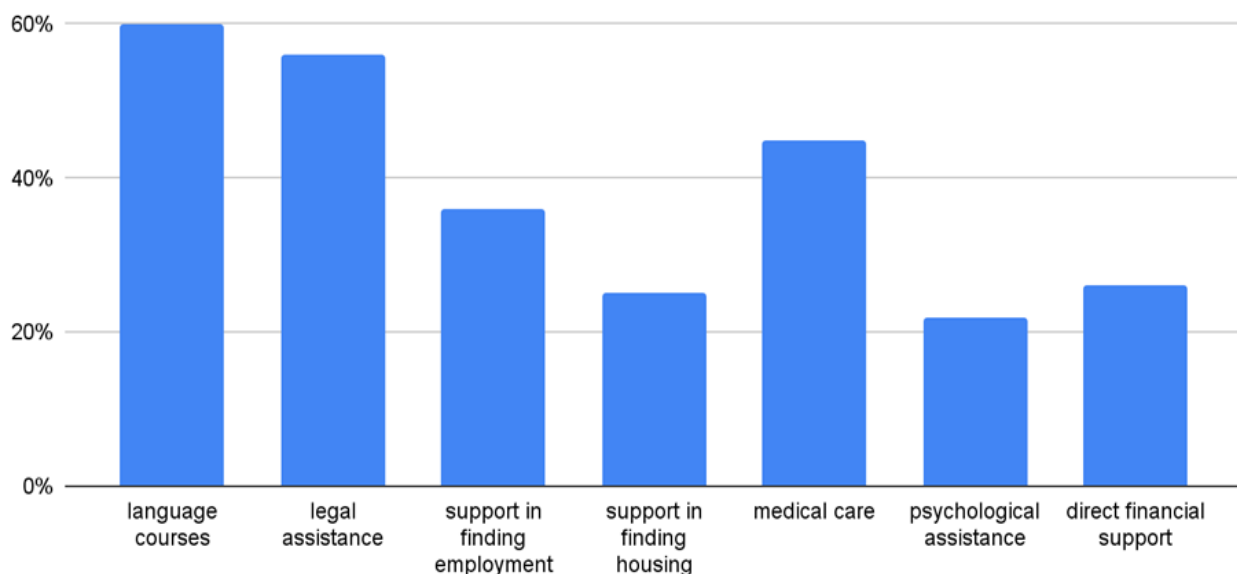
Source: own elaboration based on the 2022 survey.

The needs and challenges

The challenges that respondents faced on the Polish labour market were related to the possibility of finding employment, which was also linked to the lack or insufficient knowledge of the Polish language. The second area indicated were formalities related to business activity, in particular, getting familiar with the Polish tax system.

Answering the question about needs and assistance, most respondents indicated the accessibility of Polish language courses. The ability to enhance Polish proficiency level is an important condition for labour market activity, improvement of the material situation and effective social integration. In addition, participants specified the need for legal support (56%). A significant group of respondents also indicated the accessibility

Desired forms of support (N=558)



Source: own elaboration based on the 2022 survey.

of medical care (45%) and psychological support (22%). Support in job-searching (35%) and housing (25%) were also mentioned in the study. Mentioned types of support are important to enhance migrants' autonomy and improvement of their living conditions.

Belarusian organizations play an important role in providing support services and enhancing adaptation to life in Poland. They were broadly recognized among respondents and were mentioned as an important source of information sharing, social networking and political representation ([Jaroszewicz et al. 2023](#)).

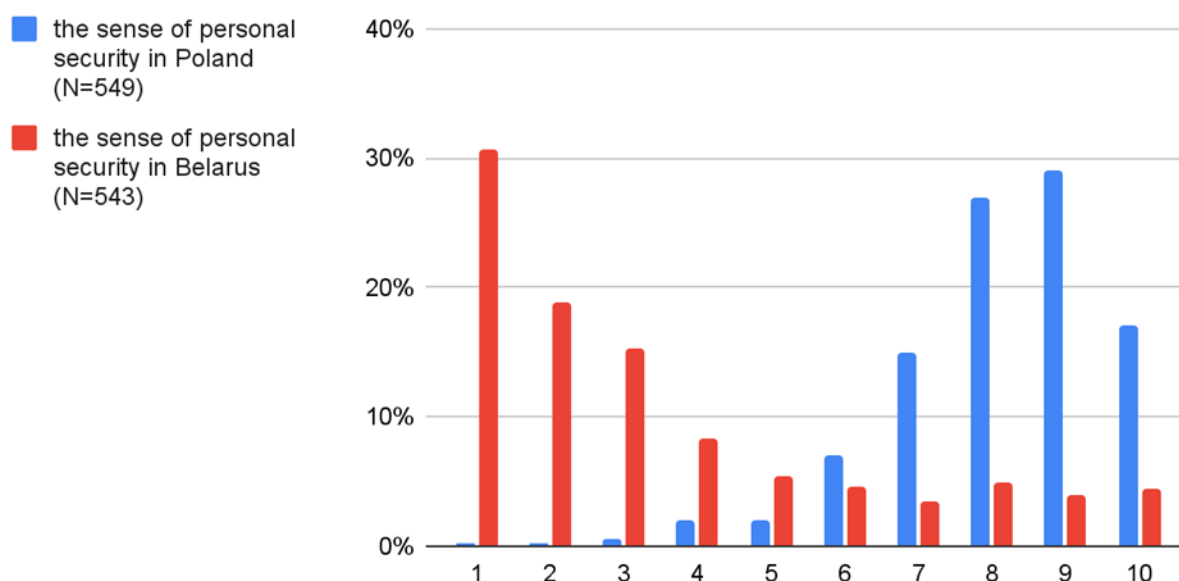
Assessment of quality of life and personal security

The quality of life and individual sense of security in Poland were assessed positively.

55% rated their quality of life as quite high, choosing 8 or more (N=556). Similarly, in the assessment of individual safety, 46% rated it at 9 or 10 points, the lowest ratings (1-3 points) were chosen by less than 1% of respondents (N=549). As positive conditions, the respondents mentioned the prospects in the labour market, the possibility of defending their rights, freedom of speech and opinion, and the lack of a direct threat from the regime's law enforcement services. Nevertheless, the sense of security in Poland was negatively affected by the lack of material stability and uncertainty about the future, separation from family, the fear of persecution in Belarus and the risk for family and friends who remained in the country, as well as difficulties related to administrative matters and medical care.

The personal security assessment on a scale from 1 to 10

1 illustrates the most negative score and 10 represents the most positive score



Source: own elaboration based on the 2022 survey.

Russia's military attack against Ukraine negatively influenced the lives of migrants. In the comment section, some respondents described the deterioration of their mental state as a result of the aggression, others declared that they experienced negative reactions or verbal aggression. Respondents expressed fears that the situation of Belarusians in Poland would deteriorate.

Possible returns

It was difficult for the respondents to answer the question about their return plans, which is understandable considering the continuation of repressions in Belarus; 53% indicated that they did not know or that it was still difficult for them to speculate on further plans. Some respondents (23%)

indicated that they intended to return to Belarus, and a group of similar numbers (24%) indicated that they were not considering such plans (N=550).

The main challenges and recommendations

1) More information on legal procedures and legal assistance is needed

There is a clear need to organise an information campaign on residence procedures, especially in social media popular among migrants, and increase the availability of legal assistance, which should be organized in cooperation with non-governmental organisations. While obtaining migration status for the purposes of work, study and performing actions related to family status might require certain

consular services of the Belarusian authorities, more flexibility and a nuanced attention to individual situations by the national migration services would be of great assistance to Belarusian migrants.

2) Support in learning the Polish language

Knowledge of the language (at least B1-B2 level) is an essential criterion to obtain a permanent stay. It goes without saying that knowledge of the official language of the country of residence is a basic condition for integration in any dimension - social, cultural or political; it also has a fundamental impact on self-reliance in everyday life and on not closing oneself within one's own ethnic group. Funding Polish language courses for migrants by governmental and local authorities is not only desirable but necessary and in the best interest of the Polish state and society.

3) Legal solutions for Belarusians deprived of citizenship by a decree of the authorities in Minsk

According to the new law adopted in Belarus, which will take effect from 10 June 2023, it will be possible to revoke the Belarusian citizenship of a person living abroad and convicted for 'terrorist' activities. This means political emigrants from Belarus will be in real danger of becoming stateless. The Polish travel document extended for foreigners with different legal statuses is a step forward, but a more thorough and long-term assistance strategy is needed for those who will be

victims of the new law for their activities in favour of a free and democratic Belarus.

4) Support for Belarusian pupils and staff in Polish schools

As a result of the repressive actions of the Belarusian regime, whole families have decided to emigrate to Poland. This poses a particular challenge for teachers and psychologists working in Polish schools, who are not prepared to work in classrooms with pupils not speaking Polish well, not familiar with the realities of a Polish education system, and often burdened with varied stress situations. Comprehensive support in the form of additional lessons, psychological support, and classes with intercultural assistants is needed. Support should extend not only to migrant pupils but also to the staff of the schools where they start their education.

5) Support for Belarusian students in the recruitment process and education in Poland

Belarusian students who had to leave the country due to mass political repressions face challenges in undertaking studies in Poland, as they cannot meet formal recruitment requirements. During the application process, students are obliged to submit documents with apostilles from the Belarusian authorities (diplomas confirming graduation from schools or universities, certificates of centralized testing (CT certificates), which may be impossible to obtain. Moreover, CT certificates are valid only for two years. Comprehensive solutions in terms of facilitation of recruitment processes for repressed students should

include legal instruments that provide an exemption from these obligations. Students of vocational and technical schools, who were expelled from schools in Belarus for political reasons also face challenges. There is a need to elaborate programmes to allow for the continuation and completion of secondary education in Poland.

6) Rehabilitation programs

Politically-motivated migration from Belarus is often related with prior repressions and detentions. The evaluation of rehabilitation needs is essential among Belarusian

migrants. Comprehensive (medical and psychological) programmes for the repressed and their families should be developed.

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