

Brunarska, Zuzanna; Lesińska, Magdalena

**Working Paper**

## Poland as a(n) (un)attractive destination for Belarusian labour migrants: CARIM-East research report

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# CMR Working Papers

70/128

**ZUZANNA BRUNARSKA  
MAGDALENA LESIŃSKA**

## **Poland as a(n) (un)attractive destination for Belarusian labour migrants CARIM-East Research Report**

April 2014

[www.migracje.uw.edu.pl](http://www.migracje.uw.edu.pl)

## CARIM-East

### Creating an Observatory of Migration East of Europe



The CARIM-East project is co-financed by the European Commission. The CARIM-East project at the Centre of Migration Research (CMR) at the University of Warsaw is also supported by the Polish Ministry of Science and Higher Education.



The CARIM-East project is led by the European University Institute (EUI) in Florence, Italy with Centre of Migration Research, University of Warsaw as the partner institution.

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#### **About the Authors:**

Zuzanna Brunarska – Centre of Migration Research, the University of Warsaw, Poland; e-mail: [zuzanna.brunarska@uw.edu.pl](mailto:zuzanna.brunarska@uw.edu.pl)

Magdalena Lesińska – Centre of Migration Research, the University of Warsaw, Poland; e-mail: [m.lesinska@uw.edu.pl](mailto:m.lesinska@uw.edu.pl)

## About the CARIM-East project:

This project is the first migration observatory focused on the Eastern Neighbourhood of the European Union and covers all countries of the Eastern Partnership initiative (Belarus, Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova, Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan) and Russian Federation.

The project's two main themes are:

- (1) migration from the region to the European Union (EU) focusing in particular on countries of emigration and transit on the EU's eastern border; and
- (2) intra-regional migration in the post-Soviet space.

The project started on 1 April 2011 as a joint initiative of the European University Institute (EUI), Florence, Italy (the lead institution), and the Centre of Migration Research (CMR) at the University of Warsaw, Poland (the partner institution).

CARIM researchers undertake comprehensive and policy-oriented analyses of very diverse aspects of human mobility and related labour market developments east of the EU and discuss their likely impacts on the fast evolving socio-economic fabric of the six Eastern Partners and Russia, as well as that of the European Union.

In particular, CARIM-East:

- builds a broad network of national experts from the region representing all principal disciplines focused on human migration, labour mobility and national development issues (e.g. demography, law, economics, sociology, political science);
- develops a comprehensive database to monitor migration stocks and flows in the region, relevant legislative developments and national policy initiatives;
- undertakes, jointly with researchers from the region, systematic and ad hoc studies of emerging migration issues at regional and national levels;
- provides opportunities for scholars from the region to participate in workshops organized by the EUI and CMR, including academic exchange opportunities for PhD candidates;
- provides forums for national and international experts to interact with policymakers and other stakeholders in the countries concerned.

Results of the above activities are made available for public consultation through the website of the project: <http://www.carim-east.eu/>.

For more information:

### CARIM-East

Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies  
(EUI)  
Convento,  
Via delle Fontanelle 19  
50014 San Domenico di Fiesole  
Italy  
Tel: +39 055 46 85 817  
Fax: + 39 055 46 85 770  
Email: [carim.east@eui.eu](mailto:carim.east@eui.eu)  
[www.eui.eu/RSCAS/](http://www.eui.eu/RSCAS/)

CARIM-East  
Centre of Migration Research, University of  
Warsaw (CMR)  
Banacha 2 B, St  
Warsaw 02-097  
Poland  
Tel/fax: (+48 22) 659 74 11  
Tel: (+48 22) 822 91 73  
E-mail: [migration.cmr@uw.edu.pl](mailto:migration.cmr@uw.edu.pl)  
[www.migracje.uw.edu.pl/](http://www.migracje.uw.edu.pl/)

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## **Abstract**

Poland, due to its geographical and cultural proximity as well as stable economic growth in recent years, may be a natural destination country for labour migrants from Belarus. The statistics related to their residence and employment show that the numbers of Belarusians working in Poland are smaller than it could be expected, in particular, relatively smaller comparing to Ukrainians. The text analyzes the causes of the limited attractiveness of Poland as a destination country for labour migrants from Belarus and points to the external and internal determinants of migration processes of Belarusian population. The paper is based on variety of secondary sources and qualitative research – in-depth interviews with local experts conducted in Minsk, Grodno and Warsaw. The text consists of four parts. The first one is an overview of statistical data on migration of Belarusians. The next two sections focus on the main determinants of migration outflows of Belarusian population: external (including political and international situation of Belarus), and internal ones (economic and social determinants, labour market and social networks), which heavily influence individuals' decision on whether and where to migrate. The last section is devoted to Poland and its (un)attractiveness for labour migrants from Belarus, including the discussion of its strengths and weaknesses as a destination country.

Key words: labour migration, Belarus, Poland, determinants of migration processes

## **Streszczenie**

Można by się spodziewać, że Polska ze względu na bliskość geograficzną i kulturową oraz stabilny wzrost gospodarczy powinna być naturalnym krajem docelowym dla migrantów zarobkowych z Białorusi. Statystyki pobytowe i dotyczące zatrudnienia wskazują jednak, że liczba Białorusinów podejmujących pracę w Polsce jest niższa, niż można by oczekiwać, w szczególności relatywnie mała w porównaniu z Ukraińcami. Autorki starają się odpowiedzieć na pytanie dotyczące przyczyn ograniczonej atrakcyjności Polski jako kraju docelowego dla migrantów zarobkowych z Białorusi, wskazując na zewnętrzne i wewnętrzne uwarunkowania procesów migracyjnych. Analiza bazuje na różnorodnych źródłach wtórnych oraz wnioskach z badania jakościowego w postaci pogłębionych wywiadów eksperckich przeprowadzonych w Mińsku, Grodnie i Warszawie. Tekst składa się z czterech części. Pierwsza zawiera przegląd danych statystycznych dotyczących migracji Białorusinów. Dwie kolejne dotyczą najważniejszych uwarunkowań procesów migracyjnych na Białorusi: zewnętrznych (w tym sytuacji międzynarodowej i politycznej Białorusi) oraz wewnętrznych (sytuacja gospodarcza i społeczna, rynek pracy oraz sieci społeczne), które mają zasadniczy wpływ na decyzje o emigracji i wyborze kierunku. Ostatnia część tekstu poświęcona jest Polsce i jej (nie)atrakcyjności dla migrantów zarobkowych z Białorusi, w tym ocenie jej silnych i słabych stron jako kraju docelowego.

Słowa kluczowe: migracja zarobkowa, Białoruś, Polska, uwarunkowania procesów migracyjnych

## Introduction

Belarus, similarly to Ukraine, is a country situated between two political and economic powers – Russia and the EU – which act as magnets for Belarusian citizens who wish to work or study abroad. While migrations of Ukrainian nationals have been widely discussed in the literature, Belarusian migrations have been mostly overlooked. Unlike Ukraine, Belarus has not actually embarked on the post-Soviet systemic transformation process, which has a significant impact on domestic drivers of migration from this country. It is also a country with intense pro-Russian orientation, robust institutional links with the Russian Federation and strong feeling of nostalgia for its Soviet past. Not surprisingly, Belarusians are more Russia-oriented when they migrate abroad.

Our interest in Belarus as a source country of migration to Poland was originally triggered by the analysis of data on inflows of migrants from Eastern Partnership countries who have arrived to Poland in recent years and noticeable differences between them. The official statistics clearly show that there are relatively few Belarusians coming to Poland to work. While there has been progressive liberalization of migrant entry requirements to the Polish labour market since 2007, the number of registered Belarusian workers in Poland has been relatively low – especially in comparison to Ukrainian workers. This observation made us question the reasons behind this apparently limited interest of Belarusians in seeking work in Poland. In addition, we were keen to explore: (a) what political, economic and administrative factors (external and domestic) have influenced the cross-border mobility of Belarusian citizens including their migrations to Poland and other EU countries; and (b) what is the relative attractiveness for Belarusians of migrant destinations other than Poland?

To address these questions, our paper has three main objectives. First, we wish to examine external determinants of Belarusian out-migration, and in particular to establish reasons for Russia's relative attractiveness as a destination for Belarusian migrants. Second, we wish to identify and examine the most important domestic determinants of the intensity of out-migration of Belarusians. Third, we wish to explore Poland's potential as a competitive destination for Belarusians and identify factors that determine Poland's attractiveness for Belarusians as a destination now and in the future.

As mentioned above, the number of available studies on and publications about migration processes in Belarus is rather limited, especially as regards those focusing on out-migration of Belarusians. There are serious difficulties in researching this subject. The main problem is the scarcity of reliable data. The official data disseminated by Belarusian state institutions are commonly recognized as grossly underestimating the scale of outflows and stocks of emigrants abroad.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, the results of the Belarusian Labour Force Survey (LFS), which was conducted for the first time in 2012, have not yet been published and there is no indication if and when they might become available. Another difficulty pertains to the free movement of workers between Belarus and Russia.

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<sup>1</sup> First of all, similarly to other countries, due to general low credibility of information on outward migration collected by population censuses and through residence registration system. Secondly, due to resistance of authorities against disclosure of the real scale of the outflows.

This means that the number of Belarusians living and working in Russia can only be estimated. In the EU, given the restrictive rules of admission, stay and work for third country nationals (e.g. visas, residence and work permits), the statistics are much more reliable. However, as various entry channels are used by Belarusians, similarly to other non-EU migrants entering the EU, the official data should also be treated with caution. For example, migrants may declare tourism as the purpose of entry while in reality they work illegally.

The aforementioned research questions can only partly be answered by examining the quantitative data and existing literature. Our additional sources of information were 13 in-depth interviews conducted during our visit to Minsk and Grodno in May 2013. These interviews involved experts drawn from various institutions (i.e. academia, employment agencies, labour unions, NGOs, members of the Polish minority, media, and employees of the Polish Embassy and General Consulate of Poland in Minsk) who expressed their opinions on factors influencing migration processes of Belarusians.

The present paper consists of four main parts. The first part presents the basic facts on migrations of Belarusians, in particular comparing their presence and employment in Poland with that of Ukrainians. The second part addresses the external determinants of out-migration, in particular as they affect migration to the most popular destination for Belarusians: Russia. This part is focused on special relations (political, economic and social) between both states, existing migration networks, labour market structure, and different pull factors which contribute to the attractiveness of Russia as a destination for Belarusian migrants. The third part examines domestic determinants of migration from Belarus, including economic and social conditions (e.g. labour market characteristics, certain attributes of Belarusian society), as well as the state policy relating to emigration processes. The final section discusses the competitiveness of Poland as a destination for labour migrants from Belarus and its advantages and disadvantages as a host country in comparison with other migrant receiving countries, in particular Russia.

In our analysis we focus on Poland as a destination country within the EU migration space. The EU perspective provides not only the wider context within which the migration of Belarusians to Poland should be considered, but also an insight into factors that influence the legal and political framework of migration processes taking place within the EU and on its edges. Over the recent years one of the main aims of the EU has been the creation of a single migration space. This was not only intended to promote circular mobility of workers within the EU but also mobility of workers coming from neighbouring countries (e.g. by promoting mobility partnerships and legal instruments such as Seasonal Migrant Workers' Directive being implemented currently). To meet national labour market demands, the promotion of circular mobility of migrants from (among others) Eastern Partnership countries, especially in sectors such as agriculture, has been one of the priorities of some EU member states (i.a. Poland). Thus, by observing migrant flows between Poland and Belarus we address two



overlapping dimensions of migration: the movement of migrant labour between the EU and a non-EU country, and its movement between two neighbouring countries.

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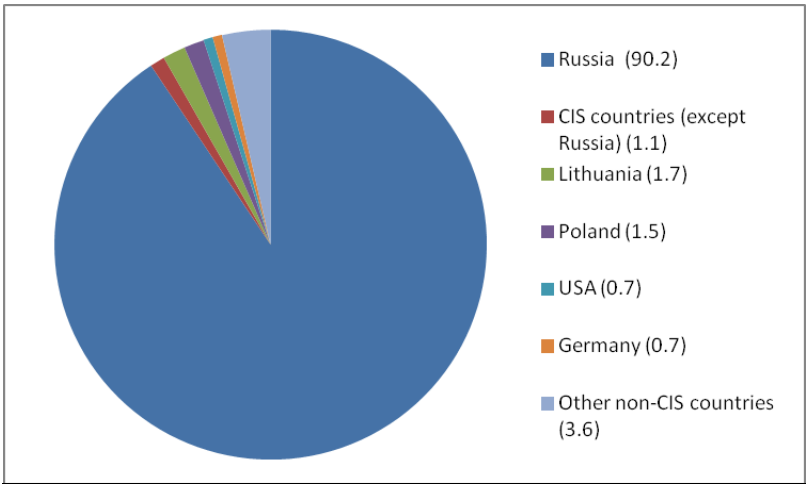
# 1. A glance at migration data: What do we know about labour migrations of Belarusians?

## General trends

The lack of systemic reforms, high dependency on external funding (including Russian energy subsidies) combined with the prospect of shrinking working age population<sup>2</sup> do not augur well for the smooth development of Belarusian economy. Not surprisingly, when an economy cannot provide its citizens with a satisfactory standard of living, people start looking for opportunities to migrate abroad. Belarusian migration flows these days are predominantly labour-related, i.e. their main aim is to improve the economic situation of migrants and their families. The politically-motivated emigration accounts for only a small part of all out-migration.

Labour migration from Belarus gained momentum as a result of severe economic crisis which reached its peak in 2011. Although Belarusian economy was earlier affected by the global financial crisis (GFC), the most acute problems occurred after the presidential elections, which were held in December 2010. Shortly before the elections, President Alyaksandr Lukashenka raised wages, including minimum wage, pensions and other social benefits, which led to increased demand for foreign currencies.<sup>3</sup> This combined with increased capital outflows resulted in the balance-of-payment crisis. Massive devaluation of the Belarusian rouble was followed by accelerated inflation, which resulted in the falling real wage. This has prompted many people to seek employment abroad. While labour out-migration as such was not new to Belarus as people had been migrating to seek work abroad before the GFC, the crisis brought the question of out-migration of Belarusians into the public arena: it became an important issue for the authorities to tackle and it galvanised the public opinion.

Figure 1. Destinations of labour migration of Belarusians, percentage of population aged 15+ working abroad by country of employment



Source: *Population Census 2009* (2011)

<sup>2</sup> According to Belstat’s projections, share of working age population will decrease from 60.7 in 2012 to 55.6% in 2020 and further to 52.8% in 2032 (*Demographic Yearbook of the Republic of Belarus 2012*).

<sup>3</sup> Moreover, with the increase of custom duty for used cars in July 2011 increased car imports ahead of the tariff hike had additionally raised the demand for foreign currencies (Alachnovič, Naŭrodski 2011).

Figure 1 illustrates main destination countries for Belarusian labour migrants according to the latest (2009) population census. The latter is considered the most reliable source of information on labour migration of Belarusians (Chubrik, Kazlou 2012: 34), especially due to the fact that the results of the Labour Force Survey have not been published. However, the census most likely considerably underestimates the number of labour migrants (*ibid*). The figure shows Russia as the most popular destination (90.2% of all Belarusians employed abroad), followed by Lithuania (1.7%), Poland (1.5%), Germany (0.7%) and USA (0.7%).

**Migration to Poland – Belarusians vs. Ukrainians**

Belarus and Ukraine are both the neighbouring states of Poland and important countries of origin of migrants coming to Poland. However, some striking differences regarding the character of migration from these countries to Poland are apparent. Figure 2 shows the numbers of Ukrainians and Belarusians living (upper charts) and working (lower charts) in Poland by the type of residence permit (permanent or fixed period) and work permit or employers declarations issued to such migrants in 2012.

Figure 2. Belarusian and Ukrainian immigration to Poland in 2012 (absolute numbers)

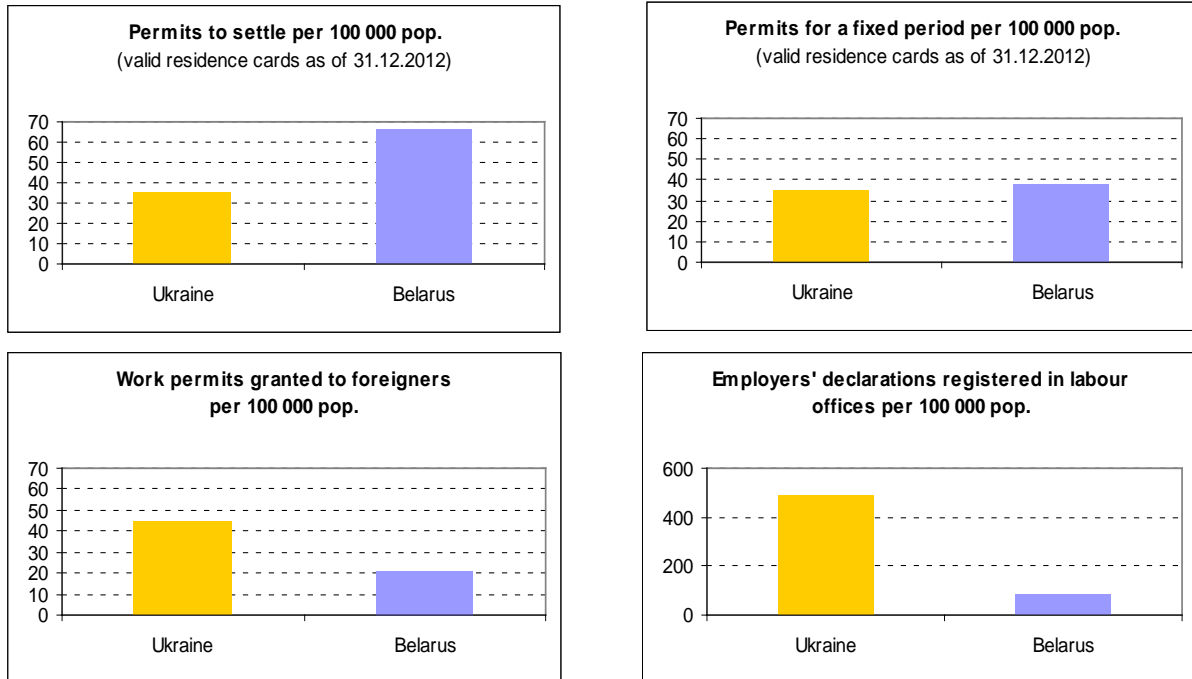


Source: Ministry of Labour and Social Policy and Office for Foreigners (Poland)

This picture is not surprising taking into account that the population of Ukraine is almost five times larger than that of Belarus.<sup>4</sup> What is, however, more interesting is the comparison between Ukrainian and Belarusian migration to Poland expressed in relative numbers – per 100 000 population of the sending country (see Figure 3).

<sup>4</sup> The population of Belarus amounts to 9 463.8 thousand (*Belarus' v cifrah* 2013) and of Ukraine to 45 443.05 thousand (*Chisel'nist' najavnogo naseleennia Ukraini* 2013) – both data as of 1.01.2013.

Figure 3. Belarusian and Ukrainian migrants to Poland in 2012 (per 100,000 of the home country population)



Source: Ministry of Labour and Social Policy and Office for Foreigners (Poland)

The figure shows that with regard to the size of the home country population, more Belarusians than Ukrainians come to Poland to live (it is more evident when permits to settle are concerned) but fewer Belarusian nationals come to Poland to work – compared to Ukrainians they apply less often for work permits and make less use of the system of employer’s declarations of intent to employ a foreigner (in relative terms).<sup>5</sup> The question we ask in this context is the following: how could these apparent differences be explained and what makes Poland relatively unattractive for Belarusian labour migrants? Also, why are the available legal instruments (work permits and employer’s declarations) enabling Belarusians to legalize work in Poland used relatively rarely (in comparison to Ukrainians, taking into account that there is no such disproportion as regards residence permits)? Do they choose other destinations than Poland or use other migration channels (both regular and irregular)? These questions will be addressed in the following sections of the paper.

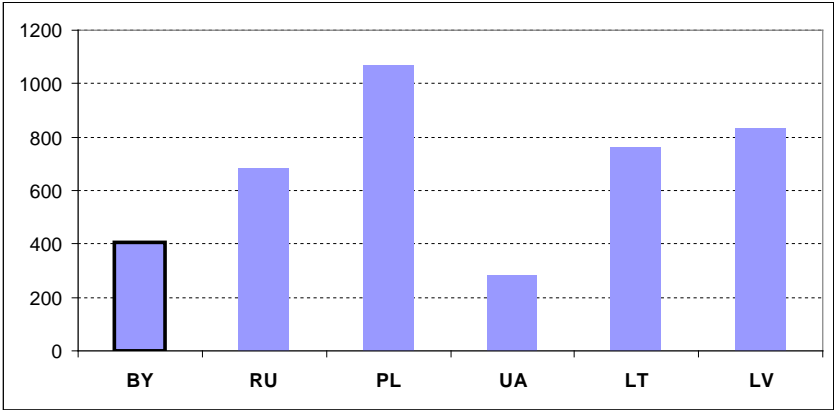
<sup>5</sup> The scheme of employer's declarations of intent to employ a foreigner was introduced as a supplementary tool to work permit system. Its main aim was to simplify the access to labour market for short-term (seasonal) workers and reinforce the circular migration from selected Eastern countries. Since it became implemented, the declaration scheme was addressed to citizens of Ukraine, Russia and Belarus, later it was extended also to Moldovans and Georgians (in 2009) and Armenians (in 2014). The scheme allows citizens of the 6 mentioned countries to perform work in Poland lasting up to 6 months within 12 consecutive months without a work permit.

**2. External determinants of Belarusian migrations: What makes Russia an attractive destination?**

This section explains the external determinants of migration of Belarusians beginning with income inequalities between Belarus and its neighbouring countries and then focusing on advantages of Russia relative to other migrant destinations. Russia’s advantages as a destination country are discussed both at the most general level (e.g. economic and political ties, physical accessibility, and cultural closeness) and more specifically with regard to migrants’ situation in the host country, demand for migrant labour and existing migration networks.

Belarus has not undergone the painful post-Soviet systemic transformation which was the cause of mass out-migration in Ukraine and Moldova. However, the 2011 economic crisis in Belarus (see section 1) triggered labour migration on an unprecedented scale. It has reached a massive scale largely due to significant wage differentials between Belarus and its neighbours. Figure 4 shows differences in nominal, gross average monthly wage between Belarus and the neighbouring states in 2010.

Figure 4. Nominal gross average monthly wages in 2010 (USD)



Source: based on *Labour and employment in the Republic of Belarus* (2012). Minsk: National Statistical Committee of the Republic of Belarus.

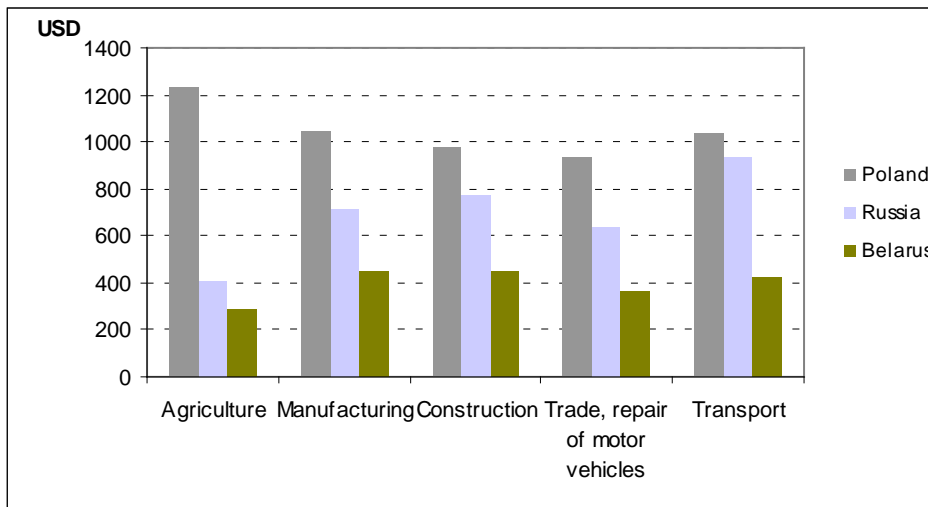
Looking at the disproportions between average wages in Belarus and neighbouring countries in 2010 (e.g. wages in Russia were 167% of those in Belarus, and in Poland they constituted 263% of those in Belarus), it is not surprising that Belarusian citizens go abroad to earn money.

Figure 5 shows sectoral wage disparities between Belarus, Russia and Poland in 2011.<sup>6</sup> It is apparent that wages in Belarus in sectors mostly popular among migrants are significantly lower than

<sup>6</sup> Comparisons are hindered by slight differences in sectors’ division. In Poland *agriculture* includes also fishing, while in Russia and Belarus term *agriculture* used here includes only agriculture, forestry and hunting. Moreover, in Poland the term *transport* refers to transportation and storage, while in Russia and Belarus to transportation and communications.

those in Russia and Poland,<sup>7</sup> which is the main incentive to look for (at least temporary) work in those countries.

Figure 5. Average wages in selected sectors in Belarus, Russia and Poland, in USD, 2011



Source: based on *Statistical Yearbook of the Republic of Poland* (2012); *Labour and employment in the Republic of Belarus* (2012); Federal State Statistics Service of Russian Federation website ([www.gks.ru/...](http://www.gks.ru/))<sup>8</sup>

While it is likely that Belarusians working in the EU earn less than the average wage in the sector of their employment in the host country (by and large migrant earnings are lower than those of the natives), in Russia where Belarusian citizens enjoy equal and unimpeded labour market access Belarusians tend to earn well above the Russian average wage (interviews 7 and 12). This may be, inter alia, because Belarusians mainly migrate to those Russian regions where wages are much higher than the Russian average, e.g. Moscow, Moscow region, and oil extracting regions. As far as migration to the EU is concerned, apart from higher wages pull factors include also higher standard of living, democratic norms and existing migration networks.

Foreign prices for certain goods may also be significantly lower in neighbouring countries. In those regions of Belarus that border the EU, cross-border mobility may substitute for circular migration. Price differentials for certain products make this kind of mobility particularly profitable. Belarusians visiting neighbouring EU states to shop or stock up goods for resale back home mainly buy food, household cleaning products, cosmetics and other products that are more expensive or difficult to access in Belarus (e.g. car tires). Petty traders may also sell in the EU such products as cigarettes, petrol and alcohol which are significantly more expensive there. Opportunities for cross-border shopping and price arbitrage result in the partial substitution of cross-border mobility for labour

<sup>7</sup> However, average wages in these sectors in Poland do not necessarily represent the earnings of Belarusian migrants, as migrants earnings tend to be lower than those of natives.

<sup>8</sup> Yearly average currency exchange rates according to: National Bank of Poland ([http://www.nbp.pl/home.aspx?f=/kursy/kursy\\_archiwum.html](http://www.nbp.pl/home.aspx?f=/kursy/kursy_archiwum.html), accessed: 20.06.2013), National Bank of the Republic of Belarus (<http://www.nbrb.by/statistics/Rates/AvgRate/?yr=2011>, accessed: 20.06.2013) and Internal Revenue Service of the United States (<http://www.irs.gov/Individuals/International-Taxpayers/Yearly-Average-Currency-Exchange-Rates>, accessed: 20.06.2013).

migration in Western regions of the country, i.e. there is less need to migrate abroad for longer periods.<sup>9</sup>

The political and economic dependence on Russia is one of the most important external determinants of out-migration of Belarusians. The economic dependence of Belarus is apparent from the official statistics. Most of the foreign direct investments in the real sector of the Belarusian economy come from Russia – 91% in 2010 and 54% in 2011<sup>10</sup> (*Belarusian statistical yearbook* 2012). Over half of the goods imported to Belarus originate from Russia (54% in 2011), while exports to Russia constitute over one third of total exports from Belarus – 35% in 2011 (*ibid*). Russia already controls several important branches of the Belarusian economy (e.g. the energy sector) and Russian firms seek control over new enterprises (e.g. the acquisition of Beltransgaz's shares by Gazprom). Credit support provided by Russia to Belarusian companies in exchange for further concessions also increases their dependency on Russian capital.

The political and economic ties between Belarus and Russia were strengthened by the formation of the Union State of Belarus and Russia in 1996 and the Customs Union (in 2010) involving those two states and Kazakhstan. The aim of the Union State was to create a uniform economic and customs area, introduce a single legal framework and act upon a common foreign, social and defence policy. The establishment of a Common Economic Space was a step further on the way to the political and economic integration of both countries as it implies free movement of workers, goods, services and capital.

Union membership also directly impacts Belarusian migration processes. Under the provisions of the Union State and the Customs Union, there are neither passport nor customs controls on the Belarusian-Russian border. Although the lack of visa and border control makes migration to Russia easier and less troublesome than to EU countries, these are not the key factors making Russia the more frequently chosen destination by Belarusian migrants. The critical feature in this respect is the fact that Belarusian citizens do not need work permits to work in Russia and they have equal rights to those enjoyed by Russians in the Russian labour market. According to a bilateral agreement<sup>11</sup> equal rights in the labour market pertain to wages, working hours, protection of employee's rights, working conditions, etc. Documents issued in Belarus, such as those describing the qualifications of migrants, are automatically recognized in Russia and one's tenure is mutually recognized by both countries. By law, the citizens of both countries enjoy equal rights as residents, in access to education, in social

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<sup>9</sup> Of course, these two forms of mobility may coexist, but having to choose either labour migration which means longer absence from home or petty trading allowing to earn the same or even larger money in the home region, some people will definitely opt for cross-border mobility.

<sup>10</sup> Decline of Russia's share in 2011 comparing to 2010 follows from a sudden increase of FDI from Great Britain.

<sup>11</sup> *Agreement between the Republic of Belarus and Russian Federation on equal rights of citizens*, adopted 25.12.1998, see: <http://www.carim-east.eu/media/legal%20module/biag/ru/2.2.7%20with%20Russia.pdf>.

protection and health care.<sup>12</sup> Russian and Belarusian educational systems are constructed in a similar way and authorities of both countries take further measures to harmonize educational law.

In sum, Belarusians in Russia “may not feel like guest-workers” (interview 8), whose rights can easily be violated and whose education is not recognized in the receiving country. There are no reliable data that allow us to compare the educational-occupational mismatch among Belarusian migrants working in Russia and in the EU. However, we expect it to be greater in the EU where Belarusian qualifications are not directly recognized. Moreover, Belarusians educated in a similar professional training and qualification system, familiar with similar workplace and socialization culture, are an attractive workforce for Russian employers.

The geographical closeness and good transportation channels makes Russia also easily accessible for migrants. This is an important factor increasing the attractiveness of Russia as a destination country as the physical proximity and low cost of transport make contacts with relatives easier and cheaper to sustain (e.g. by allowing migrants more frequent home visits and their family members – trips to Russia). In contrast to Russia, to travel to neighbouring EU countries, Belarusians need to apply for visas (which is both time-consuming and costly). They also have to pass the border and customs control which often involves queuing at the border or waiting for the train to change tracks. Also, as travel costs often increase with distance, travel to more remote destinations in Europe is even more time-consuming and expensive.

Close historical and cultural ties, i.e. the shared Soviet legacy and the common Tsarist imperial past, also make migration to Russia culturally less challenging than migration to the West. The knowledge of the Russian language is another important driver of migration to the east. According to the 2009 Belarusian national census, 41.5% of the Belarusian population described Russian as their mother tongue, while 70% speak Russian at home.<sup>13</sup> The ability to speak Russian combined with the knowledge of institutions and cultural similarities make it easier for Belarusian migrants to find themselves in the Russian reality. The language barrier is also relatively low in neighbouring EU countries – it is quite easy for Belarusians to learn Polish and in Lithuania and Latvia parts of the population still speak Russian. In more distant EU countries the communication barrier is normally higher. Apart from the language, there is also the psychological factor making Russia appear more familiar, especially to the older generations who often perceive Belarus and Russia as one state.

Although xenophobic attitudes become more and more common among the Russian society, for which the media and politicians trying to amass political capital are partially responsible, citizens of Belarus are in a relatively good positions in this respect. As one of the studies conducted by La Strada (2007) shows, 23% of Russian respondents expressed a positive attitude towards migrants from Belarus and 8% – negative, while the same indicators in case of citizens of Caucasus or Central Asian

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<sup>12</sup> However, some of those provisions remain mainly ‘on paper’ (Chubrik, Kazlou 2012).

<sup>13</sup> For census results see: <http://belstat.gov.by/homep/ru/perepic/2009/itogi1.php> (accessed: 10.07.2013).



states were 10% and 37%, respectively.<sup>14</sup> Now when Belarusian citizens are no longer treated as foreigners in the Russian labour market, the xenophobic factor is probably even less significant.

High demand for labour in Russia allows Belarusian citizens to find jobs relatively easily. Another factor encouraging Belarusians to migrate to Russia is high activity of Russian recruitment agencies and head-hunters seeking Belarusian employees. Russian recruitment agents look for Belarusian workers both in Belarus and in Russia. According to one of our interviewees, Russian regions bordering Belarus are full of job advertisements directed towards Belarusians (interview 8). In contrast, finding a job in the EU requires much more effort.

Our interviewees expressed contradictory views with regard to the operation of migrant networks in Russia and elsewhere. Some argued that Belarusians form strong migrant networks, others opined that networks play only a limited role. Considering that most Belarusian migrants organize their trips individually and do not make use of intermediaries, personal contacts definitely matter. L. Titarenko (2012) suggests that Belarusian migrants to Russia head mainly for regions where migration networks already exist – bordering regions, Moscow, Sankt Petersburg and Siberian oil extracting regions. Results of the INTAS project entitled *Patterns of Migration in the New European Borderlands: An assessment of Post-Enlargement Migration Trends in NIS Border Countries* suggest that migration networks of Belarusians are slightly stronger in Russia than in the EU. But the study also shows that Belarusian networks in the west are weaker than those formed by Moldovans or Ukrainians. In Russia, Belarusian networks are marginally weaker than those of Moldovans but they are stronger than those of Ukrainian migrants (Dietz, Danzer 2008). This suggests that the operation of migration networks may also be partially responsible for the Belarusian migrants' revealed preference for Russia as their destination.

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<sup>14</sup> The same indicators for Ukrainians totaled 21% and 10%, while for Moldovan citizens – 16% and 14%, respectively.

### **3. Domestic determinants of Belarusian migrations: What constrains the labour migration outflow?**

This section shortly explains the main internal determinants of Belarusians' out-migration: the specificity of the labour market, the state emigration policy, its perspective on out-migration, and general characteristics of the Belarusian society. We give examples of relevant labour market regulations and social policies aimed at reducing the international mobility of Belarusian residents. Naturally, all these are embedded in the political system of Belarus and its historical legacy which shaped both Belarus as a country and Belarusians as a society.<sup>15</sup>

#### **The specificity of the labour market**

State control over the labour market allows the authorities to influence migration decisions of citizens. The Belarusian labour market is subject to strong state regulation. The share of the population employed by state companies was 43% in 2011 (*Labour and employment in the Republic of Belarus* 2012). However, even the so called privately-owned companies include firms of mixed public-private ownership. The share of employment in such companies was almost 25% in 2011 (*ibid*) which means that about 68% of the labour market was under full or partial control of the state. Another piece of evidence which points to the domination of the state in the Belarusian economy is the public sector share of GDP which was as high as 70% in 2010 (EBRD). State enterprises are obliged to report vacancies to state employment agencies and are required to adhere to wage regulations imposed by the state. In 2008, the previously binding 'golden share' rule, which applied to privatized Belarusian companies and allowed the state to maintain control over them, was abolished. However, the authorities intend to re-introduce a similar mechanism. In June 2013 the Parliament adopted amendments to the law on privatization which give state representatives in the supervisory boards a veto power over major decisions made by company management (*Parlament prinjal...* 2013). All this disables employers from determining, inter alia, company employment rules or wages.

Moreover, authorities try to discourage an average Belarusian from running his/her own business. Impediments to running a private enterprise include: high taxes on entrepreneurs, time consuming regulations, and unavailability of cheap credits (which is easily achievable due to domination of state-owned banks in the banking sector – interview 8). As Kozarzhevskij and Rakova (2007) argue, the problem does not relate as much to the excessive tax rate, as to the complexity of the tax system per se, which consists of many different taxes coupled with the instability and inconsistency of the supporting tax legislation.

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<sup>15</sup> The authors are aware of the role of historical factors in shaping Belarus and its society (such as the burden of the agrarian society subjected to collectivization, without a tradition of private ownership etc.). Questions which arise in relation to their role are undoubtedly very interesting, also in the context of migration. Nevertheless, they remain beyond the scope of this text.

Loyalty towards the state is rewarded in the labour market, for example members of the Belarusian Republican Youth Union are guaranteed employment. In contrast, labour migration is treated by authorities as disloyalty towards the state and the society at large. Interestingly, this also applies to labour migration to Russia, which has recently been presented by the authorities as a subversive activity (although the Union State and Customs Union guarantee freedom of movement of workers).

Another specific feature of the Belarusian labour market is the mandatory placement of graduates. This applies to students offered so called 'budget places' at institutions of higher education whose tuition is paid by the state. It does not apply to students in 'commercial places', whose education is privately funded. A 'budget' student has to sign a contract with the state whereby the latter pays the tuition fees in return for a (work) service obligation, i.e. a promise that following graduation the student will work for a few years for an employer assigned by the state. The period of this obligatory employment depends on the faculty. Typically it lasts 2-3 years (interview 6). Those first jobs are usually unattractive for graduates who face the dilemma of either paying for their studies outright or being tied to an unsatisfactory job for a few years. Obligatory job placement after graduation prevents/reduces labour migration of graduates. In such circumstances it is not surprising that some young people opt to study abroad.<sup>16</sup>

The Belarusian government plays a tricky game with its citizens. On the one hand, it ensures relative, albeit illusive, stabilization by keeping the official unemployment rate low and the wages relatively equalized. The official unemployment rate has decreased recently from 2.1% in 2000 to 0.5% in September 2013 (*Sostojanie rynka truda* 2013). This has been achieved as a result of overemployment in state enterprises (which are not profit-oriented) and by keeping the unemployment benefits low (to deter people from registering).<sup>17</sup> The obligation to perform public works while registered as unemployed and the limited time (6 months) during which a person is entitled to obtain unemployment benefits are further discouraging factors (Chubrik, Kazlou 2012). Free health insurance for all citizens, regardless of their employment status, additionally eliminates the necessity to register as unemployed. However, as the World Bank (2012) recently observed, the 2009 census data indicate that unemployment rate in Belarus was probably close to 6.1%. Other expert calculations estimate the Belarusian unemployment rate at an even higher level – according to M. Zaleski (*Kakaja real'naja bezrobotica...* 2012) it reached 12-13% in 2012. Income distribution is relatively equal in Belarus. The Gini coefficient for Belarus remains remarkably low by international standards. Its value amounted to

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<sup>16</sup> If they decide to study abroad, Belarusians can make use of available scholarship programs. If they choose Poland, they can apply for the Polish Government's Scholarship Programme for Young Scholars, the Kalinouski scholarship, the Lane Kirkland Scholarships Programme, the GFPS, or the newly introduced Stefan Banach Scholarship Scheme.

<sup>17</sup> For instance in February 2013 the average unemployment benefit has not exceeded 17 USD (*Posobie po bezrobotice...* 2013).

26.5 in 2011, compared to e.g. 32.7 for Poland<sup>18</sup> (World Bank 2013). Low income differentials reduce relative deprivation, which limits people's aspirations and makes them less eager to look for additional sources of income (which is also a demotivating factor for migrating abroad). However, it has to be mentioned here that paying part of a salary under the table is not a rare phenomenon among Belarusian employers (which problem has been subject to investigation of the Belarusian Ministry of Taxes and Duties for a few years).

On the other hand, the state has reduced job security by introducing a system of fixed term contracts ('contractualisation'). The presidential decree 29/1999 (*O dopolnitel'nyh merah...* 1999) allowed employers to enter into fix-term contracts with all categories of workers and change the previously open-ended contracts to fix-term contracts. Since 2004, fix-term contracts of employment have been compulsory for all state enterprises. According to Belarusian law such contracts should last between one and five years. No official data regarding the share of fixed-term contracts in overall employment is published, but various estimates put it at about 90% (see e.g. Freedom House 2013). The short-term contract system makes an employee insecure about his/her job and, thus, dependent on the state and the employer, who is not obliged to justify the termination of the previous contract.

As far as the structure of the labour market in concerned,<sup>19</sup> Belarus, on the one hand, suffers from labour shortages in certain sectors, e.g. in IT, marketing, sales, construction, real estate, tourism, health care, transportation and logistics. On the other hand, there are labour surpluses in other sectors. The Belarusian education system produces too many lawyers, accountants, economists and administration staff (*Osnovnye harakteristiki rynka...* 2012). Labour shortages are more severe in provincial regions, but even in Minsk employers actively seek certain categories of employees (which is clearly visible in the urban space, e.g. in the Minsk metro trains which are full of job advertisements). According to a study of job vacancies performed by the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection of Belarus (quoted by the Belarusian Telegraph Agency, *Na rynke truda...* 2013), the most sought after in the labour market are physicians<sup>20</sup> (in cities 1105 vacancies and only 15 jobless physicians were registered in December 2012); nurses (1356 vacancies to 51 job seekers) and engineers. In towns, there are also vacancies for drivers and construction workers (as one of our informants stated, the construction sector is indicative of the health of the whole economy – interview 8). In general, there is excess demand for blue-collar workers (Shymanovich, Chubrik 2013). Also in the countryside there are vacancies for certain specialists (although in general there are not many job vacancies in the provinces).

These labour market imbalances result from the lack of labour flexibility. First, the state impedes mobility in the labour market by not allowing the workers to easily change jobs. Second,

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<sup>18</sup> A Gini index is constructed in such a way that an index of 0 represents perfect equality, while an index of 100 implies perfect inequality.

<sup>19</sup> In 2012 10% of workers were employed in agriculture and 26% in industry (*Respublika Belarus'. Statisticheskij ezhegodnik* 2013).

<sup>20</sup> In the countryside this concerns also veterinarians.

there is no incentive to make any changes as the state regulation of the level of wages means that a job change may not necessarily lead to any improvement in the job seekers' living standards. Emigration of some categories of workers (e.g. in construction, IT and medical care), who may expect better earnings abroad, deepens the problems even further. Particularly severe problems with labour deficits occur in the border areas, inhabitants of which opt for migration (or its substitute – cross-border mobility) more frequently than residents of the inland regions. Lack of border control between Russia and Belarus makes it practically impossible to measure or control the outflow of workers to Russia. In this situation it is not surprising that the authorities try to limit the scale of out-migration. But instead of positive signals and incentives, they use a range of demotivating measures – a particular feature of the Belarusian political system.

### **State policy towards emigration**

In principle, the state does not impose any restrictions on its citizens as far as migration is concerned. There are no legal mechanisms that directly prevent Belarusians from going abroad.<sup>21</sup> Belarusian legislation provides a possibility for a person to be temporarily prevented from leaving the territory of Belarus.<sup>22</sup> The Ministry of Interior runs a data bank containing the names of all those, whose right to leave the country has been temporarily restricted. Such measures, however, apply mainly to politically-motivated emigration and do not concern labour migrants (at least not overtly as the boundary between political and economic migration is sometimes blurred).

In practice, the state tries to influence the mobility of its citizens in a more subtle way. First, under the law, Belarusians can look for work abroad on their own, but if they need assistance they have to use the services of agencies licensed by the state. The only way for an agent to mediate between a foreign employer and the Belarusian labour migrant is to get an official state license. Overtly, this system has been introduced to protect Belarusians from being exploited by foreign employers (interview 8). Under the Belarusian law, a potential labour migrant has to sign a work agreement with his future employer prior to departure from Belarus. The procedures are complicated, lengthy, and generate additional costs.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, the agencies involved cover only a limited number of countries<sup>24</sup> and professions (mainly in construction).<sup>25</sup> These cumbersome procedures effectively discourage both potential migrants and their future employers (interview 3). Therefore most migrants

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<sup>21</sup> In general, to date the Belarusian legal framework concerns mainly immigration, while the need for developing it as far as emigration is concerned has appeared only recently.

<sup>22</sup> See *Zapret na vyezd...* (2011). Full text of the presidential decree concerning this issue can be found in the CARIM East database at <http://www.carim-east.eu/2739/2739/>.

<sup>23</sup> Costs by private international recruitment agencies amount to up to 1 million BYR – about 90 Euro – per working place (*Adaptacija k tendencijam...* 2013).

<sup>24</sup> As regards destinations, most of the agencies possessing state licenses deal with migration to Russia (65 out of 82 agencies present on the currently valid list), while there are only 4 agencies sending workers to Poland, 4 to USA, 3 to Germany and 3 to Lithuania (only the most frequently enlisted destinations have been mentioned here).

<sup>25</sup> See the list of licensed agencies presented on the website of the Belarusian Ministry of Interior – [mvd.gov.by](http://mvd.gov.by) (*Spisok juridicheskikh lic...* 2013).

elect to self-organize their foreign employment. However, even in such cases the authorities act in a more veiled way to deter potential migrants.

The state has no coherent emigration policy. However, over the past years it appears to have resorted to different methods, some of them very indirect, to discourage emigration. For example the Presidential decree no 9 (some commentators labelled it ‘the serfdom decree’) signed in December 2012 (*Dekret Prezidenta Republiki... 2012*) banned the wood industry workers from quitting their job at their own request. As one of our interviewees observed, the decree appears to be the only legal measure that may be perceived as an example of an instrument directly deterring emigration (interview 6). Officially, the measure was introduced to enable effective modernization and reconstruction of the wood industry, but many experts and the media have also pointed out its migration restraining aspect. A similar although less formal administrative measure involved a ban on doctors wishing to quit their employment in the Grodno Region (Zajac 2013). There is also a covert requirement for state-owned companies not to let employees quit their poorly paid jobs. Otherwise, those wishing to leave risk being dismissed on worst possible terms (*Belarus' riskuet ostat'sja... 2012*). Similarly, according to one of our interviewees (interview 9), those in managerial positions are usually made aware that their attempt to leave Belarus to work abroad could make the authorities cease their normal practice of turning a blind eye to various work-related irregularities. Effectively, people are blackmailed to stay in jobs as the day-to-day work of senior management is practically impossible without some administrative infringements. In July 2013, the Prime Minister Mikhail Myasnikovich foreshadowed the introduction of a tax on the unemployed (*Nalog s nerabotajushhih... 2013*). According to Belarusian media the draft Presidential decree is ready and the jobless tax could be introduced as of January 2015 (*Nalog na bezrabotnyh... 2013*). This measure appears to be primarily directed against Belarusians earning their living as petty traders and labour migrants (who have income but do not pay their taxes in Belarus).

Another example of an indirect measure which may serve as a disincentive for those considering working abroad may be full commitment given by the Belarusian authorities to anti-trafficking campaigns (run i.a. in frames of La Strada Belarus programme). This is because turning attention to risks associated with migration may possibly deter people, especially women, from seeking work abroad (interview 13). It may be claimed that there is a hidden agenda behind the state support given to anti-trafficking campaigns.

Yet another step taken by the state since the mid-2000s to deter emigration involved the introduction of restrictions on students taking part in international exchange programs (Yeliseyeu 2012). Thus, activities of agencies dealing with the student “Work and travel” programme were curtailed. It has also been more difficult for students to take their exams at an earlier or later date, which used to be a common practice so that students could extend their stay abroad to make it more profitable (interview 10 and 11). Currently, the Belarusian law limits the duration of a work agreement associated with student exchange programmes to three months (Bahur 2012).

The red tape has also been used to discourage people in regions bordering Latvia from taking advantage of the local border traffic agreement which was signed in August 2010, and came into effect in the first half of 2012.<sup>26</sup> A. Poczobut (2012) cites a resident of the border region who claims that all the required formalities make the local border traffic permit the worst, although cheap, kind of visa (as it is as hard to obtain and restricted to the border area).

The Belarusian authorities may also resort to threats to dissuade their citizens from migrating abroad. Ideas to deprive migrants and their families of free medical care or to introduce full payment for communal services<sup>27</sup> have been floated by the state's representatives over the recent years. Declaring such plans, President Alyaksandr Lukashenka stated openly that a potential migrant would think twice before deciding to work abroad if he/she had to pay the full cost of communal services and medical treatment. Such declarations are in the mainstream of the state policy towards its own citizens which is based on threats and coercion. From time to time Belarusian authorities also come up with odd and controversial ideas aimed at constraining the mobility of citizens. In September 2013, Alyaksandr Lukashenka proposed a new levy aimed at people who go abroad to shop (the 100 dollar 'exit fee'). In the end, the President backed off from the idea, but the initiative to collect signatures under a petition against the new tax (change.org 2013) is evidence that it has been discussed seriously.

What is worth noting while discussing the institutional barriers, is the fact that they mainly constrain labour migration flows and to a smaller extent influence settlement migration as people who plan to leave their home country for good are not concerned with potential problems faced by returnees. Moreover, the lack of effectiveness of the state's attempts to limit the outflow of workers proves that without systemic reforms there is no chance to make Belarusians resign from earning additional money abroad.

### **Characteristics of the society**

Some of our interviewees suggested that the difference between Ukrainian and Belarusian migrants coming to Poland could be attributed to differences in the mentality of the two nations. They argue that Belarusians are less mobile and less willing to take risks than Ukrainians (interviews 8 and 9) – this may result from both the characteristics of the state system and socio-cultural characteristics of Belarusians. They prefer to get in contact with employers directly and would not depart until they have a job waiting for them at the other end (interviews 3, 8, 9 and 13). These assertions were partially confirmed by a qualitative study of employers conducted by the CMR in 2006-2008 as a part of the MPLM project.<sup>28</sup> Polish employers of Belarusians reported that the latter tended to act very cautiously (Grabowska-Lusińska, Żylicz 2008).

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<sup>26</sup> It came into force in December 2011 and the first LBT permits were issued in March 2012 (Yeliseyeu 2013).

<sup>27</sup> See e.g.: *Trudovye migranty dolzhny...* (2011); *Lukashenko: Vse shabashniki...* (2011).

<sup>28</sup> *Migration Policy and Labour Market Change* (MPLM Project); <http://www.migracje.uw.edu.pl/projekt/118/>.

As regards the nature of the Belarusian welfare state it is based on the principle of full employment, all citizens are entitled to free medical care and there are expanded welfare programs in form of various allowances and exemptions. Citizens of Belarus become accustomed to numerous benefits as the social security system is constructed in such a way that about 65% of the population is entitled to some benefits (Chubrik *et al.* 2009). All this, together with attempts to keep the unemployment level low and to minimise income differences is aimed at making an impression of stability and reducing people's relative deprivation. Moreover, one of our interviewees stated that Belarusians are less motivated than Ukrainians and less willing to accept disagreeable living and work conditions abroad (interview 3). This should not be surprising, given the fact that Belarusians start from a more comfortable position as the average wage in Ukraine is considerably lower than in Belarus (see Figure 4 in the previous section) and the unemployment level is higher.

The prevailing opinion among the interviewed experts is that, unlike Ukrainians, Belarusians are less mobile as a society and their migration networks are less developed due to shorter migration history. However, such opinions are difficult to verify and there are opposing views on the role of migrant networks in facilitating Belarusian migration (see sections 2 and 4).



#### **4. Poland as a destination for Belarusians: What influences the attractiveness of the Western neighbour?**

The main purpose of this section is to analyze advantages and disadvantages of Poland as a competitive destination country for labour migrants from Belarus and the impact of Polish migration policy on Belarusian arrivals. The issue of attractiveness of Poland to foreigners is of growing importance not only due to short-term labour market needs. It is also a part of a much wider debate related to long-term strategy of development in the light of negative demographic forecasts – population aging due to low birth rate and mass emigration. Migration policy, including diaspora policy, is treated as one of the tools to compensate for the negative effects of the unfavourable population changes.

##### **Advantages of Poland as a destination country**

One of the most important advantages of Poland as a destination country for Belarusians is its geographical closeness and cultural proximity. Belarusians who are willing to commence any kind of social and economic activity in Poland could easily communicate with Poles, thanks to similarities between Polish and Belarusian/Russian languages. Besides, many people who grew up in the communist Poland acquired school level grasp of Russian, which is widely used in Belarus. Belarusians are also relatively well thought of in Poland. According to the latest public opinion poll on attitudes of Poles towards other nationalities, the positive attitude of Poles towards Belarusians has increased from 19% in 1993 to 33% in 2012 while the feeling of antipathy has declined from 47% in 1993 to 26% in 2012 (CBOS 2012).

In the early 1990s, given the political and economic destabilization which followed the collapse of the Soviet Union, the human flows between the sovereign states in the region were very intensive and spontaneous. The trans-border mobility between Poland and Belarus during this period was often associated with petty trading, shopping and smuggling. Over time, these mostly uncontrolled trans-border flows have diminished. Due to stricter border control and the closure of temporary street markets by local authorities, these trans-border, often informal activities became less profitable. While they have not completely disappeared, their forms have changed. There is shopping tourism of Belarusians on massive scale pursued both by individuals and organized groups. According to our interviewees, some Belarusians regularly shop in Poland as agents for other people who use them to order and deliver back home specific products (e.g. household appliances).

Additional factor influencing the trans-border contacts is related to the numerous Polish minority in Belarus, which is concentrated in the Western part of the country. Its members have traditionally maintained strong relations with Poland.<sup>29</sup> According to Belarusian national census

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<sup>29</sup> The presence of Polish minority in Belarus is a result of the border changes which took place after the Second World War. The Western part of present Belarus where most of its representatives live nowadays was a territory of Poland before 1939.

(2009) there are 295 thousand ethnic Poles living in Belarus (3.1% of population). It is the second largest (after Russians) national minority. Most of them – some 230 thousand – reside in the Grodno region. Poles in Belarus have developed a range of institutions including cultural centres, schools, churches and support organisations. These institutions help to sustain Polish culture and language among ethnic Poles living in Belarus. Their activities are supported by the Polish state, as the maintenance of vibrant and strong relations with Poles living in the neighbouring countries is one of the priorities of the Polish diaspora policy. It is therefore not surprising that it is mainly migrants from Western Belarus who choose Poland as their destination.

In the recent years, Poland has changed its migration policy to attract labour migrants from neighbouring countries (*Polityka migracyjna Polski...* 2012). The target groups are nationals of Eastern Partnership countries – particularly Ukrainians and Belarusians – and Russia. These recent legal and political measures include the liberalization of labour market admission rules for foreigners, the proposed liberalization of visa regime, the system of scholarships to attract students from Eastern Partnership countries, and more proactive diaspora policy including the introduction of the Card of the Pole.

The Card of the Pole (*Karta Polaka*) is the most powerful political instrument addressed to Polish diaspora in the East. Established in 2007, it is intended for ethnic Poles who are citizens of the former Soviet Union republics.<sup>30</sup> It provides its holders with a range of entitlements, such as work permit exemption, a right to set up a business enterprise in Poland on the same basis as Polish nationals, a right to study in Poland (e.g. to apply for scholarships, preschool, primary and secondary education) as well as a right to receive a health care support in emergencies. Although holders of the Card of the Pole are not entitled to visa free border crossing, they could apply for a free long term residence visa which also allows multiple visits to Poland. In practice, the Card partly removes the most difficult legal impediments to travel to Poland such as the need to obtain a work permit, by those who wish to work in Poland, and the need to obtain frequent/multiple visas by those who wish to stay in Poland. In all, the Card is a pull instrument encouraging people to come, study and work in Poland.

The Belarusians of Polish origin are the second largest group of the Card holders. According to Ministry of Foreign Affairs, between 2008 and the end of 2012 more than 42 thousand Cards were issued to Belarusian citizens. As the possession of the Card exempts Belarusians from the obligation to obtain a work permit or employer's declaration, the number of Card holders directly influences the number of work permits and employer's declarations issued to Belarusian citizens. When comparing relative numbers of workers from Belarus and Ukraine employed in Poland we should take into account the relatively larger proportion of Belarusian Card holders (per 100 000 population). The number of Cards of the Pole issued for Ukrainians until the end of 2012 amounted to 46 thousand,

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<sup>30</sup> The main condition to obtain the Pole's Card is to confirm Polish origin and the living relationship with Polishness by at least basic knowledge of the Polish language, by proving that at least one of parents or grandparents or two great grandparents were of Polish nationality or had Polish citizenship and by confirming the active involvement in cultural activities within Polish community for a period of at least the past three years.

while in case of Belarusians it was 42 thousand. This reduces the number of registered Belarusian workers in Poland.

Not surprisingly, the reaction of the Belarusian authorities towards the Card of the Pole was very negative. They heavily protested against the introduction of the Card on the grounds that its use is contrary to the Belarusian national interest. There was also a very negative campaign in the Belarusian state media. Certain restrictions were also introduced to diminish the Card's potential appeal. Under the Belarusian law (introduced at the beginning of 2013) the possession of the Card is prohibited for civil servants and those working in state institutions such as the armed forces, police and national security agencies (*Białoruś: milicjanci i wojskowi...* 2013).

The official reaction notwithstanding, the Card has been well received by all those needing an instrument facilitating visits to Poland (Chubrik, Kazlou 2012: 67). As one of our interviewees stated, the Card is usually treated in terms of a practical tool, without any ideological or sentimental context, especially by younger people (interview 1). It is particularly useful for those who wish to study in Poland. Polish universities are also interested in attracting students from Belarus who, given the cultural and linguistic proximity of the two countries, adapt easily to the academic regime in Poland. To encourage young Belarusians to come and study in Poland, the (Polish) Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Science and Higher Education established special scholarship programs.<sup>31</sup> Moreover, the Card is often used to visit Poland for shopping (interview 5).

In recent years Poland liberalized the rules of admission of foreigners to the domestic labour market. The simplified scheme was launched in the middle of 2007 to support and foster short-term circular labour migration. Under the simplified rules, to employ a foreigner an employer's declaration of intent is needed. The system of lodging such declarations is simple, fast and cheap. This has fundamentally changed the basis of temporary and seasonal employment of foreigners in the Polish labour market. This is also reflected in data on employer's declarations issued to citizens of Belarus: their number doubled between 2010 and 2012: from 3.6 thousand to 7.6 thousand.

Belarusians are the third largest group (after Ukrainians and Moldovans) which uses the employer's declaration scheme. Nevertheless, their number is not as high as it could be expected. One could interpret the growing number of employer declarations issued to Belarusians year after year as a confirmation that more Belarusians are arriving to work in Poland. Another explanation, however, is that these who used to come to Poland earlier as tourists and engage in irregular employment have benefited from the scheme to arrive and work legally. Thus, the scheme has succeeded in channelling some irregular migrants into legal forms of employment (Duszczyk *et al.* 2013: 34). That said, despite the simplified employment procedure, some foreigners continue to arrive using tourist visas to pursue

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<sup>31</sup> The data of Central Statistical Office shows that Belarusians are the second nationality registered at Polish higher education institutions. Their number is not very high and reaches 3 thousand (there is, however, an upward trend: the number increased three times since 2005). The first place is taken by Ukrainians – 10 thousand out of 29 thousand foreign students registered in Poland in academic year 2012/2013 (which is five times more than in 2005) (Fundacja Edukacyjna Perspektywy 2013).

illegal employment. Thus, the real number of Belarusian workers in Poland is higher than shown in the official statistics. While there is paucity of reliable information on the number and legal status of Belarusian workers in Poland, it could be assumed that some of them are ‘partially-legal’ – having permits to stay without a right to work. This could, at least to some extent, explain the relatively small numbers of work permits and employer’s declarations issued to Belarusians by relatively high number of residence permits.<sup>32</sup>

To conclude, recent developments of Poland’s migration policy, geographical and cultural closeness between the two nations, as well as a broadly positive attitude of Poles towards Belarusians have all helped to attract larger inflows of Belarusian citizens to Poland. Nevertheless, the number of Belarusians working in Poland is still lower than it could be expected. We therefore ask next what are the main disadvantages of Poland as a destination for Belarusian labour migrants?

### **Disadvantages and other impediments to labour migration of Belarusians to Poland**

One of the crucial factors reducing the attractiveness of Poland as a destination for Belarusian labour migrants pertains to competition from Russia – the main destination for Belarusian workers (see section 2). One of our interviewees presented an interesting opinion stating that “Belarusians tend to choose Russia when they want to earn money quickly, while they choose Poland (or other EU states) when they want to change their living conditions and life style” (interview 13).

Relative to unimpeded access to the Russian labour market, Belarusians coming to Poland (and other EU states) face cumbersome admission rules. Poland introduced visa requirement for Belarusian citizens in 2003 as an obligatory measure prior to its entry to the EU and the Schengen zone. However, our interviewees indicated that it is not the visa obligation per se that is a problem. It is the practicalities of visa application that pose difficulties for applicants. First, there appear to be serious problems with the online registration which is obligatory in order to send the visa application to the Polish consulate. The simpler way is to use one of the agencies, but it means to pay a relatively high fee for its services – up to Euro 100-200 (interview 6). Second, visa transaction costs are also high (Euro 60 for the visa in addition to the cost of agency assistance). Third, there are long queues in front of Polish consulates every day which imposes a cost in kind on visa applicants.<sup>33</sup> There are also queues at the border crossings, and thus the average time spent at the both check points (Belarusian and Polish) often adds up to several hours. As one of our interviewees commented: “it is not worth it to stand for few hours together with petrol smugglers” (interview 6).

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<sup>32</sup> Interestingly, there are more women than men among citizens of Belarus applying for a stay permit while there are more men among recipients of work permits and employer’s declarations. One of the hypotheses to explain this could take into account the fact that many women are employed in the sectors related to shadow economy and they do not apply for work permits (this concerns e.g. employment in households).

<sup>33</sup> However, this problem also occurs in other countries, especially in Ukraine and has been frequently investigated by the media and reported by NGOs.

Other important disadvantages are the characteristics of the Polish labour market. As the main motivation behind the decision to migrate pertains to wage differentials, Poland is not as a competitive destination as one could expect (see section 2), especially taking into account the costs mentioned above related to migration process. That is, Poland competes for foreign workers not only with Russia but also with other EU countries. In many of them, e.g. in Germany, the labour market is much more attractive and the level of wages is much higher than in Poland. For many migrants who search for better job opportunities abroad the level of earnings and working conditions are far more important than the geographical or cultural proximity of the destination country.

What may also be a serious disadvantage of Poland as potential destination for labour migrants from Belarus are limitations related to the structure of the Polish labour market (this also applies to other EU states). The market is fragmented into two sectors: the primary sector for highly skilled workers and professionals, and secondary sector for unskilled workers. The sector open to foreign workers in Poland is the secondary one where there are mainly low-paid jobs with limited opportunities for upward mobility (mainly in agriculture, construction, transportation, and domestic services). Moreover, as one of interviewees representing a Belarusian employment agency pointed out, Polish employers prefer Ukrainian to Belarusian workers as the former are more likely to accept lower wages and worse working conditions (interview 8). This opinion is, however, difficult to verify.

Another factor influencing the low level of labour migration of Belarusians to Poland is the absence of established migration networks and personal contacts (with the exception of Grodno district where the Polish diaspora is concentrated) (interviews 1, 2, 3 and 5). The importance of migration networks as a factor pulling in migrants is well recognized by scholars (see e.g. Górny *et al.* 2010). The settled Belarusian minority in Poland is not very numerous and not well organized. Therefore it is not able to play an active role as a pulling force encouraging their co-ethnics to chose Poland as a destination.<sup>34</sup>

Last but not least, the lack of (or limited) knowledge of Poland as a destination country was often mentioned by our interviewees as an important factor influencing the destination choice made by Belarusian migrants. An average Belarusian seem to have a rather limited knowledge of the Polish labour market, jobs availability and formal (and informal) rules applying to foreign workers. Our interviewees stressed the fact that information about the system of employer's declarations is not sufficiently spread among Belarusians (interviews 3, 8 and 9). This lack of information is deepened by the public media campaign in Belarus which spreads misinformation and projects a negative image of Poland. According to our interviewees, a common media message related to Poland is focused on negative information such as high unemployment, economic crisis, social protests and employee abuse by dishonest employers (interviews 1 and 6). Unpleasant incidents involving Belarusian citizens

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<sup>34</sup> According to the last national population census (2011), there are 47 thousand people of Belarusian origin (meaning those who declare Belarusian nationality) living in Poland, most of them concentrated in Podlaskie region (border region with Belarus).

abroad are usually amplified in the official media (interview 2). This may be interpreted as an indirect attempt to dissuade Belarusians from migrating to Poland. However, it could also be a response to the criticism towards Belarusian authorities by the EU, Belarusian political exiles living in the EU, including Poland, and Polish political elites and media.

## Conclusions

Relatively low wages, an unstable economy, limited opportunities to generate additional income in the home country, combined with little chances for changes unless systemic reforms will be introduced, make Belarusians try their luck at working abroad. Available data on the migration of the citizens of Belarus shows that Russia is an indisputable leader among receiving countries for Belarusian migrants. Nevertheless, Poland, due to stable economic growth on the one hand, and the recent liberalisation of migration policy (including the rules of admission to the labour market for foreigners) on the other hand, could also be considered an attractive destination for Belarusian labour migrants. Among the EU states Poland is indeed one of the main receiving states for Belarusians. Existing data suggests that Belarusians relatively often (e.g. in comparison to Ukrainians) come to Poland for residence but relatively rarely use official channels which enable foreigners to perform work (work permits and employer's declarations).

As the analysis has shown, migration patterns of Belarusians are influenced by three groups of factors. The first is related to close political and economic relations with Russia, the second originates in the EU (i.a. strict and costly admission rules), and, last but not least, the third group is related to the Belarusian domestic political and economic system.

The choice of destination made by Belarusian migrants is largely influenced by relations with the country's biggest neighbour. Political and economic dependence on Russia, provisions of the Union State and Customs Union, together with close cultural (including linguistic) ties – all this makes Russia a quite natural choice for Belarusian citizens. The key factor as regards labour migration seems to be the rights the citizens of Belarus enjoy in the Russian labour market, not different from the rights of Russian citizens. Moreover, the activity of recruitment agencies and head-hunters additionally encourages Belarusians to choose Russia as a destination country.

In comparison to Russia, Poland (and the EU as such) has one main disadvantage – strict admission procedures, both into its labour market and into its territory in general. However, time- and cost-consuming visa procedures and time which has to be spent at the EU border do not seem to be the key factors responsible for low numbers of labour migrants. A more important disadvantage is related to limited chances of getting a decent job in the receiving country. Russia, which offers Belarusian citizens equal labour market rights, is more competitive than the EU, including Poland, which mainly offer low-paid jobs in the secondary labour market. Moreover, as far as Poland is concerned, it does not offer attractive wages that could be perceived as a sufficient incentive for labour migration. Limited knowledge on the simplified procedure of employment available in Poland combined with a negative image of the country presented by the state media additionally reduce the probability of choosing it as a destination, especially in regions of Belarus which are not bordering Poland. On top of this, differences in prices for specific products between Poland and Belarus make petty trade

profitable. As people are able to earn a living without the need to emigrate, the number of potential labour migrants falls.

Belarusian authorities do their best to discourage their citizens to go to work abroad and thus are also partly responsible for limited outflows, including to the EU and, specifically, Poland. By holding control over a significant part of the labour market and by using a whole set of official and unofficial instruments, the state tries to influence peoples' decisions i.a. concerning labour migration. By adhering to the principle of full employment, keeping the official unemployment rate low, attempting to minimise income differences, and expanding the social welfare system, the authorities create the impression of stability and reduce relative deprivation. However, the lack of effectiveness of the state's attempts to limit the outflow of workers proves that without systemic reforms there is no chance to make Belarusians resign from earning additional money abroad.

Although Poland occurs to be a very demanding destination in terms of time, costs, and opportunities for potential labour migrants, especially in comparison with Russia, thanks to its geographical location and cultural proximity it has potential as a receiving country for Belarusian migrants. This conclusion seems to be of a key importance for Polish decision makers, not only because of short-term interests related to the needs of the economy and the labour market, but first and foremost in the context of a long-term developmental strategy which is needed in response to negative demographic trends and the ageing of the society. The inflow of Belarusian, as well as Ukrainian and other EaP nationals, is perceived as positive phenomenon due to their integration capabilities. The new instruments introduced in the recent years by the Polish government (i.a. simplified procedure of employment and the Card of the Pole) seem to be a step in the right direction in order to attract workers from Eastern Partnership countries, including Belarus. As this analysis shows, however, these tools occur to be insufficient to noticeably increase the attractiveness of Poland as a destination country.



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## **Appendix**

### **Expert interviews conducted in Minsk, Grodno and Warsaw in May 2013:**

Interview 1. Polish journalist

Interview 2. Polish journalist

Interview 3. Polonia organization activist

Interview 4. Polish consulate employee

Interview 5. Polish consulate employee

Interview 6. Belarusian scholar

Interview 7. Belarusian scholar

Interview 8. Representative of Belarusian employment agency

Interview 9. Belarusian trade unions activist

Interview 10. Belarusian research institute employee

Interview 11. Belarusian research institute employees

Interview 12. Belarusian journalist

Interview 13. Belarusian engaged in Polish NGO