



Migration Profile

BELARUS

A. Executive Summary

Belarus is an Eastern European nation that used to be part of the Soviet Union. Minsk is the capital and largest city, and it is also the administrative headquarters of the Commonwealth of the Independent States (CIS) that includes twelve countries: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Russia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Ukraine, and Uzbekistan.

Belarus is industrially developed and its valuable production is mostly based on heavy industry.ⁱ Agriculture accounts for about 8% of its GDP, despite the detrimental effects of the 1986 Chernobyl nuclear disaster, when 70% of the radioactive dust reached Belarusⁱⁱ.

Concerning energy production and consumption, Belarus' main trading partner is Russia, especially for natural gas. This is due to its geographic position, being one of the most important transit territories for Russian hydrocarbons to reach the markets of Central and Western Europe.ⁱⁱⁱ The construction of Nord stream 2, a pipeline to transport gas from Russia to Germany under the Baltic Sea, completed in Autumn 2021, is a factor that has a direct impact on Belarusian economy.

Belarus joined the military alliance Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) in the '90s^{iv}. Although it has participated in several operations with the Atlantic Alliance, it has never applied for its membership. Nevertheless, Belarusian Armed Forces have, for example, joined the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) military mission.^v Belarus is part of the European Union Eastern Partnership.

In 2020 the migrant population in Belarus represented 11.3% of the total population^{vi}. In addition, there were 2,915 refugees under UNHCR's mandate, 143 asylum-seekers, and 6,297 stateless persons.^{vii} Most refugees were originally from Ukraine, Afghanistan and Syria.^{viii}

Concerning human trafficking, Belarus is on the Tier 2 Watch list, meaning that the government could further implement measures to fully comply with the US Trafficking Victims Protection Act's minimum standard. Nevertheless, it is making efforts to do so, as it was on the Tier 3 Watch List in 2020. Belarusian government confirmed 109 trafficking victims in 2020, 19 less people than 2019.^{ix}

B. Country Profile

I. Basic Information

Belarus is a rather flat country with an average elevation of 162 metres above sea level. It contains a chain of low hills crossing the middle part of the country and shares borders with Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Russia and Ukraine. The country does not have direct access to the sea, however it is well equipped with water resources having over twenty thousand rivers, ten thousand lakes and several large swamps, the latter mostly in the southern region.

As of February 2022, Belarus counted 9,444,330 million inhabitants^x. The majority of the population is Belarusian (83.7%), and the largest ethnic minority is Russian (8.3%), followed by Polish (3.1%) and Ukrainian (1.7%)^{xi}. 83.3% is Orthodox, while 6.7% is Roman Catholic, and 1% belongs to other Christian denominations (0.5%). Other minor groups are Muslim (0.2%) and Jewish (0.1%). 7.8% claim to have no religion^{xii}.

Belarus is a Presidential Republic, with the President as the head of the Republic.^{xiii}

II. International and Internal Migrants

In 2020, according to the UN International migrant stock, migrants were 11.3% of the total population^{xiv}, accounting for 1,067,090 people in Belarus^{xv}, and 578,377 of them were female (54.2%)^{xvi}. By mid-year 2020, most of the immigrants were aged between 55 and 59 (116,691 people), while 102,508 were between 30 and 34 years old, and the smallest group were children aged between 0 and 4 (7,892 persons)^{xvii}.

Even though there were more female migrants, however, among children the male component was more attested (3,995 male versus 3,897 female). Also, there were more men aged between 20 and 24 (18,574 women versus 20,183 men), as well as between 25 and 29 (41,402 male versus 40,141 female)^{xviii}. Nevertheless, the highest concentration of women (64,217 versus 52,474 men) could be found in the immigrant group aged between 55 and 59.

According to the National Statistical Committee of the Republic of Belarus, the majority of the people coming to Belarus are from a CIS country, while a smaller percentage comes from a non-CIS country (in 2019 22,533 persons came from the CIS, while 12,313 from a non-CIS country, not including Georgia in either of them).^{xix} From the CIS countries, many migrants arrive from the Russian Federation and from Turkmenistan. In 2018, the third largest group came from Ukraine. Instead, immigrants outside the CIS are mostly from China and from Iran^{xx}.

The foreign population tends to concentrate in the capital, Minsk, where most of the working activity takes place. Some other large cities, like Vitebsk or Grodno, are also attracting migrants because of better transit connections and more developed market places^{xxi}. According to the Centre for the study of Belarusian culture, language and literature, Chinese immigrants prefer to live in Minsk (82%), while others reside in Grodno in order to avoid speaking their native language and to study more effectively the Russian language, which can

be an obstacle for the working field. The Japanese community is also living in the capital, but some of them can be found in cities like Orsha, Zhodino and Novopolotsk.^{xxii}

Internal migration is a widespread phenomenon in Belarus. People tend to move from rural to urban areas because of their lower wages and poor living conditions.^{xxiii} In rural areas, public support including social services for assisting seniors, such as nursing or specific physical activities, are limited. Compared to urban areas, infrastructures, education services and healthcare are lacking in rural areas. Moreover, in such areas, private-sector opportunities are restricted. A considerable number of rural young people of working age, particularly women, relocate to cities as a result of this confluence of causes. In addition, Minsk represents a key destination for young Belarusian students since it has the country's main universities such as the Belarusian State University or the Belarusian State Agrarian Technical University.

Internal migration tends to imbalance the rural population structure, and outlying areas suffer from a scarcity of young people, especially females. Rural regions lack agricultural specialists, engineers, professors and healthcare personnel who could otherwise alleviate regional infrastructural or economic deficits due to the tendency of skilled persons to seek greater income in cities.^{xxiv} Furthermore, housing in rural locations is simpler to come by than in metropolitan areas. This generates incentives for low-human-capital households to remain in rural regions, expanding the gap between urban and rural communities.^{xxv}

III. Emigration and Skilled Migration

In 2020, around 16% of the Belarusian population emigrated, exceeding the number of immigrants present in the country.^{xxvi} According to the National Statistical Committee of the Republic of Belarus, 261,307 left Belarus in 2019,^{xxvii} 12,941 of them went to a CIS country, while 8,035 relocated outside the CIS.

Russia was, until recently, the most popular destination for Belarusian migrants. Because they are far from Minsk and have Russian borders, the Viciebsk and Homiel areas are the primary sources of labour migration to Russia.^{xxviii} However, since the 2014-2016 Russian economic recession, a substantial number of Belarusian labour migrants have moved westwards, specifically in the Visegrád 4 States (V4S: Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia)^{xxix}.

From 2016, the number of Belarusian nationals working in Poland for short or longer-term, job-related and non-work-related purposes began to rise, increasing in 2018-2019 and climbing even more during the COVID-19 pandemic. Since 2019, the popularity of short-stay visas for employment has also grown in Czech Republic, even though the number of Belarusians working there is relatively small compared to the one in Poland. The same movement happened in Slovakia, but in minor terms.^{xxx} Higher income and better living standards are the primary factors luring Belarusians to the V4 nations. There, they have more options to advance in their careers, gain a solid education and have access to high-quality medical care.^{xxxi} The presence of friends, family, or of an established Belarusian diaspora in the country of destination is another reason for migrating, even though to a smaller extent.

IV. Forced Migrants (Internally Displaced Persons, Asylum Seekers, Refugees, and Climate Displaced People)

In 2020, there were 2,915 refugees under the UNHCR's mandate, 143 asylum-seekers and 6,297 stateless persons.^{xxxii} By the end of 2020, according to UNHCR, most refugees came from Ukraine (2,540), followed by Afghanistan (179) and Syria (52)^{xxxiii}. In regards to asylum-seekers, in the first semester of 2021, 219 people asked for protection in Belarus,^{xxxiv} and their countries of origin were Ukraine, Iraq, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Turkey, and Afghanistan.^{xxxv}

As a result of the EU border crisis, thousands of migrants were placed in refugee camps at the Belarus border with Poland. Later on, they were relocated in warehouses, like the one at the Bruzgi logistics centre where over 600 migrants are living. Some other people, instead, have found accommodation in a hotel close to Minsk airport or in other warehouses.^{xxxvi}

These stranded migrants include men, women and children lacking the most basic services. They must cope with cold weather conditions and with lack of food, shelter, water and medical attention. These harsh conditions endangered the life of several migrants and some of them died in the last months of 2021. A small number of migrants also chose to return home voluntarily.^{xxxvii}

V. Victims of Human Trafficking

The Belarusian government made very few efforts to prevent human trafficking. In 2020, it only recognized 109 victims of human trafficking, compared to 128 in 2019.^{xxxviii} 107 of them were victims of sex trafficking and 2 of forced labour. 34 of these victims were **children**. 95 victims were employed in sex trafficking or forced labor in Belarus, while 14 were exploited overseas.

Belarusian victims are largely exploited in Belarus and Russia, as well as in Poland, Turkey, and other European, Eurasia, and Middle Eastern countries. Sex trafficking affects even Belarusian women looking for work abroad in the adult entertainment and hotel industries. In addition to Belarusian, there are also Russian, Ukrainian, Vietnamese and Moldovan victims who have been recognized by the Belarusian government. Most of the traffickers are Belarusian nationals and are increasingly using internet platforms and connections to lure victims into forced labor and sex trafficking as a result of the COVID 19 pandemic.^{xxxix}

Victims of human trafficking are located all around Belarus, both in Eastern Belarus in the Gomel region, and in Western Belarus in the Grodno Region. In the Grodno region, production and distribution of sex material depicting minors -among others- have been recently analysed by the Department of the Investigative Committee of the Republic of Belarus for the Grodno Region.^{xl}

Victims of human trafficking have access to a hotline set up by the International Organization for Migration (IOM)^{xli}, aiming at educating potential labour migrants, but also cooperating with professional and specialised NGOs, such as Business women club Brest^{xlii}, for example,

that is more focused on women. IOM supports victims of human trafficking by providing healthcare services, psychological counselling, employment agencies, overnight accommodation and other services.^{xliii} Victims of human trafficking, particularly children, have access to social shelters in the Brest region, in Vitebsk, in Gomel, in Grodno, in Minsk city and Minsk region and in Mogilev.^{xliv} The Belarusian Investigative Committee holds seminars in the Brest, Vitebsk, Gomel, Grodno and Mogilev region on the topic “Combating child pornography on the global Internet”.

VI. National Legal Framework

Belarus is on the Tier 2 Watch list, as the government does not fully comply^{xlv} with the US Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA)’s minimum standard. Nevertheless, it is making efforts to do so, since in 2020 it was on the Tier 3 Watch list. Because of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the government's anti-trafficking effort plan, Belarus was thus elevated to the Tier 2 level.

In 1998, the government adopted the Immigration Law, establishing a legal framework for immigration within the country and providing, among others, rules for the departure of illegal migrants from the Republic of Belarus. The government also adopted in 2008 the Law on Granting Refugee Status, Complementary and Temporary Protection to Foreign Citizens and Stateless Persons in the Republic of Belarus, amended in 2014.

In 1999, the Belarusian criminal code was promulgated. Article 181 condemns sex and labour trafficking; it prescribes penalties going from three to seven years in jail for offenses involving adult victims and seven to fifteen years’ imprisonment for those exploiting minors.^{xlvi} According to the government, three trafficking investigations were ongoing in 2019 under art. 181, compared to four investigations in 2019.^{xlvii}

Concerning the international framework, since 2001 Belarus has been both a party to the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and to its 1967 Protocol. Belarus, however, has not accepted the UN Statelessness Conventions^{xlviii}. Belarus has ratified the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organised Crime and the related Protocol, meaning the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children in 2003. In 2019, the UN resolution 74/176 called “Improving the coordination of efforts against trafficking in persons” was also signed by the Belarus government^{xlix}. It was adopted by the UN General Assembly in order to assess how far the UN Global Plan of Action to Combat Trafficking in Persons had progressed in its implementation.¹

VII. Main Actors

The State

The Ministry of Internal Affairs of Belarus (MVD) gathers and analyses data related to human trafficking crimes.^{li} All information regarding such crimes is recorded into the Ministry of Internal Affairs’ electronic database^{lii}. Moreover, the government runs public awareness campaigns on television and radio. It provides NGOs with support in the form of advertising

hotlines, funding and the placement of awareness-raising materials on state-owned television and billboards. Previously, the Ministry of Internal Affairs had conducted an advertising campaign on human trafficking and developed a website to educate the public about sexual abuse and exploitation of children, including child sex trafficking.^{liii} It also cooperates actively with the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) to combat trafficking in persons.^{liv}

International Organisations

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) is extremely active in Belarus, supporting some projects. For example, for 2021-2022 it has helped include persons of concern in the National Vaccination Plan against COVID-19. As a result, refugees are covered under the vulnerable groups clause.^{lv} UNHCR was the only international agency in August-September 2021 that was granted access to the Polish-Belarusian border to offer humanitarian aid and asylum information to a group of thirty-two Afghans, stuck at the border for almost two months.

The International Federation of the Red Cross (IFRC), in November 2021, donated over one million Swiss Francs to the Belarus, Polish and Lithuanian Red Cross to allow their volunteers and workers to provide food, water, blankets, and critical medical assistance to thousands of vulnerable people.^{lvi} The Belarus Red Cross (BRC) has been thus a very active agency in the migrant border crisis.^{lvii} In 2019 BRC provided heated tents to refugees when temperatures were falling at -20C.^{lviii} In 2021, BRC launched an operation to respond to the COVID-19 outbreak^{lix}. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) assists its Red Cross partners by offering support and technical knowledge, particularly in regards to keeping migrants in contact with their family and other protection-related problems.^{lx}

The International Organisation for Migration (IOM) is another international agency that has been very active in Belarus during the current border crisis period. It distributes humanitarian aid based on the analysis of demand for food and for non-food items already given. On January 21, 2021 it provided over two-hundred kilos of bread, over one-hundred kilos of fruit and almost one-hundred litres of milk to children.^{lxi}

Other Organisations

In Belarus there is also a government agency, the State Border Committee of Belarus (SBC).^{lxii} It is responsible for implementing state border policy and maintaining border security and control. It collaborates with IOM.

The non-governmental organisation, Business Women Club, works to help women and children. It has affiliated associations in Pinsk, Brest, Kobrin and Baranovichi. This NGO protects women's rights and interests trying to improve a woman's status in society. Not only it fights to prevent human trafficking, but it also aims at expanding economic opportunities for Belarus' women. Business Women Club also works to prevent HIV/AIDS among sex-business women and children. Another NGO called "Ponimanie" prevents child abuse. It promotes the protection of paternity, maternity and childhood^{lxiii} and offers psychological

support. Both Ponimanie and Business Women Club work together with IOM.

Within the “Дарамора” (Aiuto) program, the organisation provides socio-medical attention to trafficked victims. Red Cross promotes national campaigns of information, especially in crowded places like railway stations, where brochures are distributed indicating train schedules; it offers classes in schools and formation institutes; it promotes different activities of sensitisation, like theatrical performances and flashmob, to get public attention and interest regarding human trafficking.

The Catholic Church

In 1999, the Belarusian Catholic Bishops' Conference (CCBB) was established. It is the Republic of Belarus' official religious national organisation for the Roman Catholic hierarchy. A Permanent Council, the Bishops' Commissions and other bodies make up the Conference. CCBB's goal is to promote an atmosphere conducive to faith building and propagation of the Social Doctrine of the Church based on the Evangelical truth. Some of the Conference's goals are to contribute to people's moral rebirth, to organise social charity work, to support catholic religious organisations, to provide religious education and to develop church-state relations.^{lxiv} Concerning migration, the issue has been for some years on the European Churches' agenda (CCEE). The Caritas in Veritate Commission set up an office handling migration, holding monthly meetings with delegates from throughout the continent. The CCEE has a specific link with the International Catholic Migration Commission (ICMC) and other Catholic European networks working on behalf of migrant pastoral care. The Roma people have also been a focus of particular interest. The CCEE has organised gatherings advocating for an improvement in the plight of Roma people in Europe, in collaboration with several commissions, such as the Commission of the Bishops' Conferences of the European Union.^{lxv}

Caritas Belarus works proactively with several groups of people, migrants included.^{lxvi} It runs canteens to give food and shelter to the poor, as well as social support services such as home nursing care for the elderly and jail visits. Caritas Belarus has four diocesan offices and a national office in Minsk as part of its organisational framework. To carry out its services, the agency has a workforce of almost thirty workers and volunteers across the country^{lxvii}. Together with Malteser International, Caritas Belarus distributes aid to migrants who are currently stranded at the borders with the European Union.^{lxviii}

Caritas Belarus and Malteser International have a long-standing collaboration to serve the underprivileged and disabled in the country. Thanks to this collaboration, the Order of Malta has been able to speed up its support activities for the on-going migrant crisis.^{lxix} The Order of Malta has established a programme to deliver food and basic necessities to the stranded migrants. In november 2021, more than a thousand bags containing food, baby food and milk were distributed. Caritas has several volunteers and employees in the diocese of Grodno in Belarus. These people are helping to organise and distribute aids.^{lxx} At the same time, Malteser Hilfsdienst and Caritas Belarus continue to support the poor population living at the border area. The elderly and homeless, who are particularly at risk because of the rising prices of basic necessities, are also under the care of Malteser Hilfsdienst and Caritas Belarus.^{lxxi} The

diplomatic mission of the Sovereign Order of Malta in Belarus is located in Minsk.^{lxxii}

Through the International Catholic Migration Commission (ICMC), the Vatican has given financial assistance to provide humanitarian aid to migrants stranded at the Belarus-Poland border in January 2022. In the middle of the migratory crisis, the papal contribution of EUR 100,000 is helping in assisting migrants stuck in the cold.^{lxxiii}

The Salesians of Don Bosco are particularly active in Belarus. There are three Salesians communities in Belarus, based in three different cities: the Borovlyany Community, the Minsk Community and the Smorgon Community (“Супольнасць Смаргонь”).^{lxxiv} They manage for the most part oratory activities such as the Salesian Youth Days^{lxxv} providing workshops concerning family relationships topics, financial education, conflict resolution social media issues among other topics and activities.^{lxxvi}

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