



POLICY BRIEF

From Belarus to the EU: Migration Trends and Strategic Responses

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In recent years, Belarus has experienced profound migratory shifts, driven by political repression, geopolitical tensions and regional conflicts. Following the disputed 2020 presidential elections, up to 500,000 Belarusians fled to neighbouring countries, with many seeking stability and opportunities in the European Union (EU). At the same time, Belarus became a transit hub for migrants from the Middle East, as part of state-orchestrated migration flows aimed at pressuring the EU, and a refuge for over 20,000 Ukrainians displaced by war. These dynamics have challenged regional migration policies, highlighting tensions between national security, economic interests and humanitarian obligations. The evolving landscape underscores the need for EU Member States to develop balanced and adaptive migration strategies that effectively respond to state-orchestrated migration pressures from Belarus. This Policy Brief discusses Belarus' migration trends and their implications for the EU.

This is not due to the absolute number of migrants it produces or hosts, but rather because of the strategic and political context in which these movements take place.



SETTING THE SCENE

Belarus, while not traditionally a major player in global migration flows, has emerged as a highly consequential actor in Europe's migration governance landscape. This is not due to the absolute number of migrants it produces or hosts, but rather because of the strategic and political context in which these movements take place.

Under Alexander Lukashenko's centralised rule since 1994, Belarus has maintained limited political pluralism and a state-controlled economy. The 2020 presidential election, widely deemed fraudulent, saw Alexander Lukashenko re-elected for a seventh consecutive term¹ and sparked mass protests, exposing a deep divide between the regime and its citizens, particularly in urban centres. The regime responded with a harsh crackdown and widespread repression^{II}, and has grown increasingly authoritarian^{III}. The government has prioritised internal security, loyalty of its security forces, and suppression of both domestic opposition and perceived external adversaries^{IV}. The 2020 crisis also deepened Belarus' long-standing but cautious relationship with Russia. While Minsk had historically benefited from Russian energy subsidies and financial aid, it resisted full political integration into the Union State with Russia^V. It equally resisted deeper economic integration: Belarus joined the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) in 2015, alongside Russia, Kazakhstan, Armenia and Kyrgyzstan, gaining access to a larger market, but was reluctant to cede control over key industries^{VI}. This dynamic shifted after 2020, as Lukashenko has since almost exclusively relied on Moscow for economic support, political backing, and security guarantees. The alignment intensified further following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, with Belarus facing enhanced Western sanctions for siding with Moscow – resulting in greater political isolation and diminished strategic autonomy.

Belarus' economy continues to operate under a Soviet-style model dominated by state enterprises, with only limited and sporadic market-driven reforms. While this model has provided a measure of stability, with Belarus maintaining slow but steady GDP growth before 2020, it has stifled innovation, deterred foreign investment, and left the country reliant on exports – particularly to Russia, which accounted for more than 40% of its total trade^{VII}. However, structural challenges such as an ageing workforce, a stagnant private sector, and recurrent financial crises persisted and were compounded by the post-2020 political turmoil and international sanctions.

In January 2024, Belarus adopted a new Migration Policy Concept for 2024-2028^{VIII}. The policy underscores the country's alignment with Russia and seeks to strengthen national security, promote sustainable economic growth, improve the quality of life of citizens and address demographic challenges. It envisions a unified migration space with Russia under the Union State framework, deeper cooperation on migration within regional organisations such as the EAEU and the Collective Security Treaty Organisation, and measures to combat irregular migration. It also promotes voluntary resettlement of persons, including among Belarusian expatriates, aligned with state-defined values.

Relations between Belarus and the European Union have followed a cyclical pattern, alternating between engagement and isolation, depending on the political situation in Minsk. The EU's dual-track approach involved cooperation during periods of relative openness,

¹ In early 2025, Lukashenko was re-elected to serve another term as President.

and the imposition of sanctions during times of repression^x. Prior to 2020, Belarus cooperated with the EU and international organisations on migration management, border security, irregular migration prevention, and anti-trafficking. This cooperation halted following the 2020 elections and the EU imposition of sanctions. Belarus subsequently suspended the Readmission Agreement with the EU and left the Eastern Partnership (EaP) multilateral cooperation framework^x.

Post-2020 developments have reshaped Belarusian migration dynamics, compounding issues such as demographic decline and brain drain. Since then, Belarus has become both a growing source of migrants and a facilitator of irregular migration to the EU. In addition to that, the country has seen arrival of Ukrainian refugees fleeing the war. For the EU, the Belarusian case embodies multiple migration challenges: the need to offer protection to individuals fleeing political persecution, the risks posed by state-facilitated irregular migration, and the opportunity to integrate skilled professionals.

BELARUSIAN EMIGRATION

Shifting Destinations and Growing Challenges post-2020

Before 2020, migration patterns in Belarus were shaped by the steady outflow of Belarusians seeking better opportunities abroad and the inflow of labour migrants from Russia and other post-Soviet states^{xi}. Young Belarusian professionals, especially IT specialists, were drawn to countries like Poland, Lithuania, and Germany by higher salaries and greater political freedom. Facilitating this trend were policies such as Poland's Karta Polaka (Pole's Card)^{xii} and Lithuania's relaxed visa rules, making it easier for Belarusians to emigrate. At the same time, Belarus remained attractive for workers from Russia, Ukraine and Central Asia due to visa-free travel and employment agreements under the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS)^{xiii}, the Belarus-Russia Union State, and the EAEU frameworks, which ensured smooth labour mobility and kept Belarus' workforce diverse, even as skilled Belarusians looked abroad².

The 2020 post-election crackdown, however, marked a turning point. Repressions extended beyond activists to ordinary citizens, prompting a wave of migration driven by fear and uncertainty. Political dissidents, skilled workers and professionals and many others left the country, seeking safety and stability abroad. While the data is fragmented, among others due to the issuance of multiple documents in the EU, such as short-term visas and long-term residence permits, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe estimates that 200,000 to 500,000 people left Belarus post 2020 election^{xiv}.

Among the most affected sectors was IT, once a pillar of Belarus' economy. Since 2020, an estimated 20,000 IT professionals have fled the country, driven by political repression, economic uncertainty and a deteriorating business environment^{xv}. Their departure halved the IT sector's contributions to GDP, from nearly 6% in 2021 to approximately 3% in 2023^{xvi}. Several leading IT companies have either relocated their headquarters or downsized their Belarusian operations, seeking more stable environments. In response to the growing

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² In addition to that, Russia and Belarus on 19 June 2020 signed the Agreement on Mutual Recognition of Visas and Other Issues Related to the Entry of Foreign Citizens and Stateless Persons into the Territory of the State Parties. The Agreement came into force in early 2023.

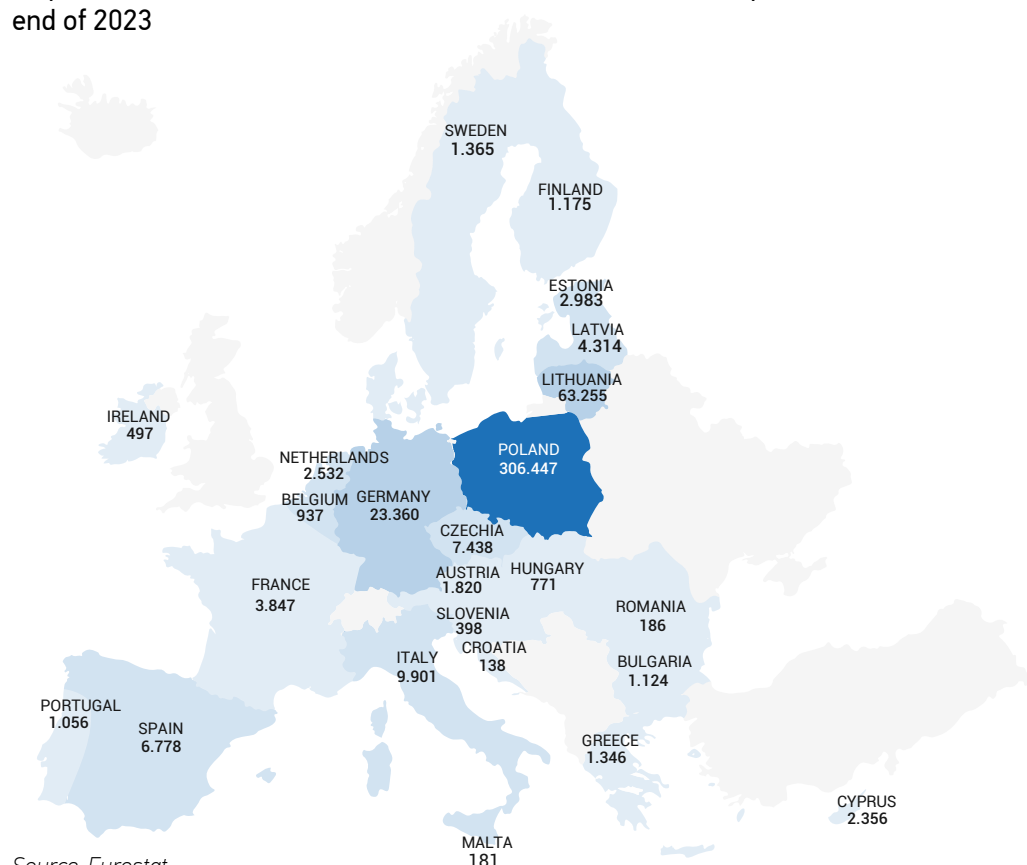


Between 2020 and 2022, EU countries issued more than 500,000 first residence permits to Belarusian citizens, with Poland accounting for around 95% of them.

outflow, Belarusian authorities attempted to curb the brain drain through retention measures, including extending mandatory work requirements for graduates of state-funded universities and even limiting English language instruction – an apparent attempt at discouraging westward migration. Nonetheless, these efforts have done little to reverse the trend^{xvii}.

Most emigrants chose EU destinations such as Poland and Lithuania. Between 2020 and 2022, EU countries issued more than 500,000 first residence permits to Belarusian citizens, with Poland accounting for around 95% of them^{xviii}. It is estimated that Poland hosted 100,000 to 150,000 Belarusians during this period^{xix}. Still, not all Belarusian migrants moved west. Many, particularly those with family or cultural ties, migrated to Russia. Shared language, visa-free travel through the Union State agreement, and a large labour market make Russia a viable destination among Belarusian migrants seeking opportunity and stability, despite Moscow facing international sanctions.

Map 1. The number of Belarusian holders of valid residence permits in the EU at the end of 2023



Poland and Lithuania actively supported Belarusian migrants through targeted programmes for professionals like *'Poland.Business Harbour' initiative* (PBH), launched in 2020. This programme facilitated the relocation of Belarusian start-ups and IT companies by offering streamlined visa procedures and incentives for setting up businesses, considering Poland's needs for highly skilled IT workers. By 2023, nearly 90,000 PBH visas had been issued. However, only about 13,500 Belarusians moved to Poland under the scheme.



Some PHB visa recipients stayed in Belarus and worked remotely, while others used the programme to pursue non-IT jobs in the EU, leading to concerns about visa misuse. Belarusian entrepreneurs also faced hurdles in Poland despite the offered PBH's support. Legal complexities, administrative delays, bureaucratic and structural obstacles to securing business partnerships, limited access to financing, and banking restrictions for non-residents made it difficult for Belarusian businesses to gain a foothold in Poland. These various challenges prompted the initiative's suspension in early 2024.

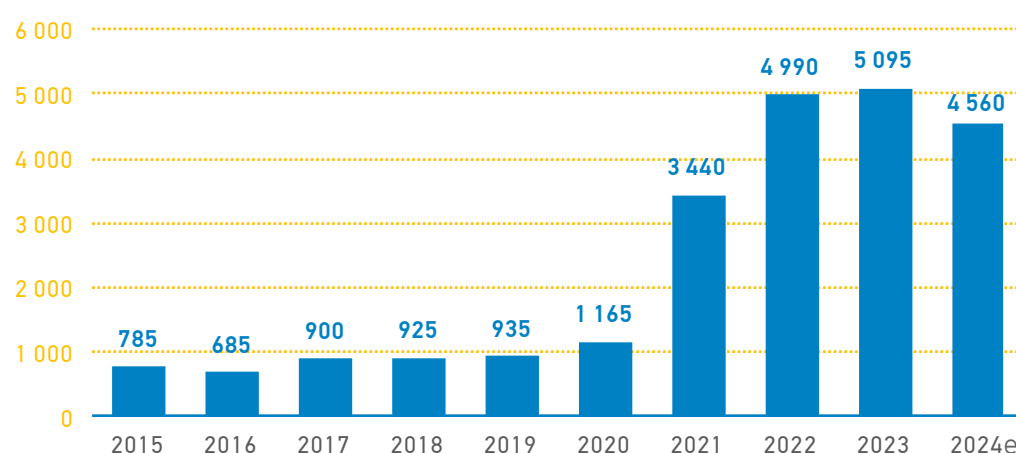
Lithuania also welcomed Belarusian migrants and businesses, particularly in the IT sector, and provided strong support through programmes such as Invest Lithuania and International House Vilnius. By 2023, more than 850 Belarusian companies were registered in Lithuania, including major ones such as EPAM and Wargaming, which relocated from Belarus. Latvia also tried to attract Belarusian professionals and companies, offering support through the Investment and Development Agency of Latvia, though it introduced no specific measures despite a growing IT talent need.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine sustaining emigration impetus

The outbreak of full-scale war in Ukraine in 2022 has reinforced existing migration dynamics in Belarus. As political repression deepened and economic conditions deteriorated due to Belarus' alignment with Russia, the outflow of Belarusian citizens persisted and even intensified. According to Eurostat, the number of first-time asylum applications by Belarusian nationals has steadily increased over the past four years – from 3,440 applications in 2021 to 4,990 in 2022 and 5,095 in 2023. Preliminary estimates for 2024 suggest a slight decrease to around 4,560 applications^{xxi}.

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Chart 1. First-time asylum applicants from Belarus in the EU-27, 2015-2024

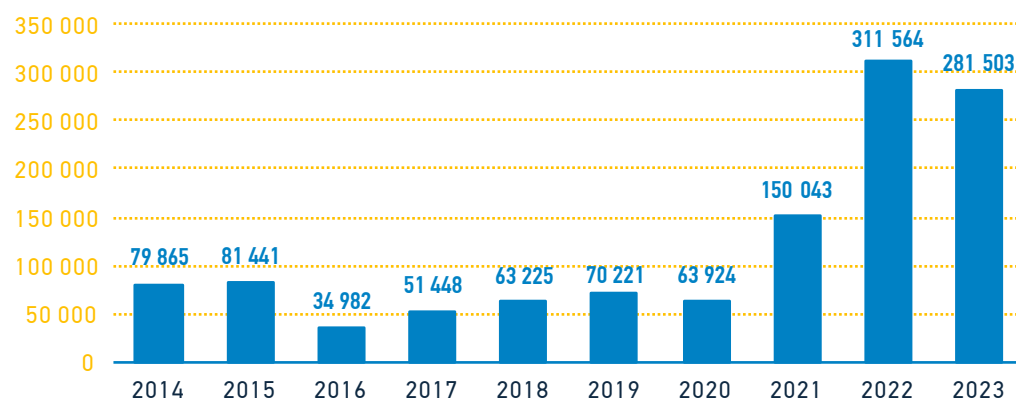


Source: Eurostat

Data on first residence permits issued to Belarusian nationals in the EU-27 also reflect a sustained migration flow. In 2021, 150,056 Belarusians received first residence permits. This figure more than doubled in 2022, reaching 311,567 – likely due to both the domestic situation in Belarus and regional destabilisation due to the war in Ukraine. In 2023, the number slightly declined but remained high at 281,279^{xxii}, suggesting that many Belarusians continue to seek more stable living conditions abroad.



Chart 2. First-time residence permits issued to Belarusian nationals in the EU-27, 2014-2023



Source: Eurostat

Western sanctions, imposed in response to Belarus' complicity in the war, have restricted access to international markets and weakened the national economy^{xxiii}. Job losses and inflation have compounded the challenges faced by ordinary Belarusians. Fear of being drafted into a conflict has become another driver of migration. While Belarus has not officially committed troops to the war, its close alliance with Moscow has fuelled anxiety – particularly among young men – about potential mobilisation^{xxiv}. Many have tried to leave the country pre-emptively^{xxv}, contributing to the population outflow and straining Belarus' already dwindling labour force. Albeit not solely due to emigration, the country's total population also decreased from 9,200,617 on 1 January 2023 to 9,155,978 on 1 January 2024^{xxvi}.

Despite mounting pressures, reaching EU countries has become more difficult. Initially welcoming, countries like Latvia and Lithuania have tightened migration policies. Lithuania suspended national visa issuance for Belarusians, refused or revoked residence permits, and scrutinised applicants' ties to the Belarusian military or nuclear industry. Latvia adopted similarly restrictive policies on visa and residence permits for Belarusian nationals. However, specific categories, such as residence permits for employment purposes, continued to grow, reflecting a selective openness towards skilled labour migration amid broader restrictions.

While many Belarusians continued to try to head westwards, others were seeking alternative destinations with more lenient entry conditions. Countries such as Georgia, Armenia or Kazakhstan have emerged as viable options due to visa-free travel agreements and fewer migration barriers. According to available estimates, over 45,000 Belarusians and Russians had moved to Georgia by May 2022^{xxvii}, while between February and July 2022, some 12,050 Belarusian citizens arrived in Armenia^{xxviii}. This wave of migration has had a significant impact on the economies and societies of the host countries. In Georgia, migrants notably boosted GDP growth and strengthened sectors such as technology, finance and hospitality^{xxix}. Favourable conditions such as low living costs also contributed to Tbilisi becoming a hub for Eastern European talent^{xxx}. Migration from Belarus thus reflected both a search for safety and a strategic pursuit of economic opportunity.

At the same time, Belarus itself has served as a destination for those fleeing conflict. The country has become a temporary refuge for people displaced by the ongoing war

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in Ukraine. According to the Belarusian State Border Committee, in 2022 around 70,000 Ukrainian individuals have entered Belarus^{xxxii}. As of February 2023, the Belarusian government reported hosting 20,536 Ukrainian refugees, with women making up 66% of this population^{xxxiii}. According to UNHCR, there were 44,260 refugees from Ukraine recorded in Belarus as of 31 March 2025^{xxxiii}. Refugees face several challenges, including securing adequate housing, accessing employment opportunities and obtaining necessary legal protection. A report by the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) highlights that many Ukrainian refugees in Belarus face financial instability and need assistance with accommodation and integration into the local labour market^{xxxiv}.

STATE-ORCHESTRATED MIGRATION: INSTRUMENTALISING BORDERS

In retaliation for EU sanctions introduced in 2020, Belarusian leader Lukashenko openly threatened to relax border controls. By 2021, his regime began facilitating travel for migrants from the Middle East (Iraq, Syria, Iran, Afghanistan, etc.) toward the EU. Evidence^{xxxv} suggests that the Belarusian government cooperated with travel agencies and possibly criminal networks, encouraging migrants to cross into EU territory via Belarus, while providing visa and coordinating travel. The result was a manufactured border crisis, particularly affecting Poland, Lithuania and Latvia. Thousands of migrants were pushed toward the EU borders, and many were left stranded. EU officials described Belarus' actions as 'hybrid warfare' or 'lawfare'^{xxxvi}, accusing Lukashenko of weaponizing migration^{xxxvii}. European Commission (EC) President Ursula von der Leyen underscored that this was not a migration crisis but "an attempt of an authoritarian regime to destabilise its democratic neighbours"^{xxxviii}.

In response, the affected Member States tightened their migration and asylum policies and secured their borders to maintain national security^{xxxix}. Lithuania declared a state of emergency in the regions bordering Belarus, erected a physical barrier along the border, increased border personnel, and sought support from the EU and Frontex to coordinate efforts and address humanitarian needs^{xl}. Latvia took similar steps, reinforcing its border and cooperating with neighbouring countries and EU institutions^{xli}. Poland, recording around 9,400 irregular border crossing attempts in a month in the second half of 2021, responded with a heavily securitised approach. It deployed 4,000 border guards and 25,000 soldiers, declared a state of emergency and built a fortified barrier along the Belarusian border^{xlii}. These measures, coupled with restrictive legislation aimed at preventing irregular entry, drew criticism for contradicting EU migration policy.

The situation also exposed the dehumanisation of migrants. One of the examples occurred in Usnarz Górny, where Afghan migrants were stranded in harsh conditions between the Polish and Belarusian borders. Polish authorities reportedly refused to process asylum applications, failed to provide necessities, and ignored European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) orders for humanitarian assistance^{xliii}. While Poland insisted the migrants were on Belarusian territory, continued border enforcement and surveillance raised serious legal and ethical concerns.

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Policy and operational responses to instrumentalization must not erode the foundations of European law and values.

In October 2024, Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk announced plans to temporarily suspend the right to asylum, arguing that it was being exploited in ways that undermined its original purpose. A new migration strategy introduced the same month included a controversial provision allowing authorities to halt the acceptance of asylum applications in certain areas if migrant inflows are deemed a threat to national stability – a response, according to Tusk, to Belarus’ instrumentalisation of migration. In February 2025, the Sejm (Poland’s lower house of Parliament) passed the law enabling this suspension, reinforcing Poland’s stance that Belarus continues to use migration as a tool of hybrid warfare. The law was passed by the Senate (Poland’s upper house of Parliament) on 13 March and signed by the President on 26 March 2025. A decree was immediately issued, suspending the possibility of applying for international protection at the Polish-Belarusian border until 25 May 2025.

CONCLUSIONS AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The migration dynamics surrounding Belarus call for a coherent and forward-looking EU response that balances security with legal and humanitarian obligations and reinforces its global leadership on human rights. While the use of migration as a geopolitical tool has tested the resilience of EU border and asylum systems, policy and operational responses to instrumentalization must not erode the foundations of European law and values. Member States facing direct pressure from Belarus require flexible tools and strong solidarity mechanisms, without compromising the rights of those genuinely in need of protection. A two-pronged approach is essential: one that reinforces border security and strategic preparedness, and another that preserves access to asylum and supports structured, legal migration channels.

The following recommendations are proposed:

Strengthen border security without undermining asylum rights

By streamlining security screening while ensuring due process for genuine asylum seekers, the EU can safeguard both its borders and its ethical and legal commitments. **Increased financial and operations support** for frontline states such as Poland, Lithuania and Latvia **should enable integrated solutions** – such as temporary humanitarian facilities, independent monitoring and rapid response teams – to ensure that security measures do not undermine fundamental European values. This recommendation aligns closely with the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum, which seeks to balance border security with humanitarian responsibilities through a comprehensive and coordinated approach to migration management. The Pact emphasises solidarity among Member States and proposes mechanisms for fair burden-sharing, streamlined asylum procedures, and improved border controls. Conversely, Poland’s move to suspend the right to asylum represents a significant challenge to these principles. The Polish proposal, driven by security concerns and the perceived threat of hybrid warfare tactics used by Belarus, risks undermining EU law and the non-refoulement principles of the Geneva Convention. Instead of generalised suspension of asylum, the EU and Member States should focus on **improved screening mechanisms, accelerated but fair processing of asylum claims, and secure border infrastructure with built-in humanitarian safeguards**. By **strengthening regional cooperation and intelligence sharing**, frontline states can reduce security risks without



undermining asylum rights, ensuring that security policies remain legally sound and in line with EU values. A coordinated response among EU Member States should prevent Belarus from exploiting migrants' vulnerabilities.

Establish legal and safe pathways for at-risk Belarusians

To maintain legal pathways for Belarusians the EU and Member States should provide structured and regulated mobility options, reducing the risks associated with irregular migration while reinforcing the EU's humanitarian commitments. Specialised **humanitarian visa or sponsorship programmes** for politically persecuted Belarusians would create safe and legal channels for those in need, ensuring that those genuinely at risk can access protection without resorting to dangerous migration routes or exploitation.

To prevent individuals collaborating with the Belarusian regime from abusing such pathways, these programmes must include **robust and transparent security and vetting mechanisms**. A **multi-layered screening process** should be implemented, including comprehensive background checks in cooperation with EU intelligence services, national security services and civil society organisations. Applicants should be subject to rigorous vetting, including a review of their political history, employment background and potential links to Belarusian state institutions involved in repression. **Databases tracking known regime associates**, including individuals linked to security services, state media and sanctioned organisations, should be consulted before visas or asylum are granted. To increase reliability, humanitarian visa and sponsorship applications should include **supporting documentation from independent sources**, such as human rights organisations, opposition groups or international NGOs monitoring political persecution in Belarus.

Retain and integrate skilled Belarusian migrants

An often-overlooked dimension of Belarus-related migration is the retention of skilled migrants. Countries like Poland and Lithuania have already benefited from Belarusian professionals, but more targeted efforts and proactive policies are needed to ensure that this potential is fully harnessed, and that these highly skilled workers stay and contribute to their new communities. **Streamlining residency and work permit procedures, reducing red tape and improving business support systems** can encourage skilled Belarusians to build long-term careers in host countries. This is particularly important in sectors such as technology and innovation, where the EU can benefit from Belarusian expertise while countering the brain drain to other regions.

Beyond retention, supporting integration and economic contributions is key to fully unlocking the potential of Belarusian migrants. Host countries should prioritise **policies that facilitate access to housing, education, language training, and employment opportunities** to enable new arrivals to settle and integrate effectively. Tailored **programmes to promote entrepreneurship and business development** can further maximise the economic contributions of Belarusian migrants, particularly in high-demand sectors such as digital services, fintech and artificial intelligence. By providing mentoring networks, start-up grants and simplified business registration procedures, EU states can turn emigration from Belarus into an engine of economic dynamism rather than a challenge to be managed.



Improve public communication and counter disinformation

A **proactive and transparent communication strategy** is crucial to counter disinformation and ensure public trust in migration policies in general, and in the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum in particular. Belarus and other actors have deliberately distorted migration narratives to sow division, making it essential for the EU to take control of the conversation. The public needs to be well informed about the rationale behind EU migration policy, including the Pact's focus on fair burden-sharing, efficient asylum processing and strengthened border management. A coordinated EU-wide communication campaign – involving civil society, independent media and digital platforms – should explain how the Pact addresses both security and humanitarian concerns. Ensuring public awareness of legal migration opportunities, asylum procedures and border policies should prevent disinformation from shaping political discourse and undermining social cohesion. By improving communication and fostering an informed public debate, the EU can build trust in its migration governance while countering external attempts to manipulate the issue for geopolitical gain.

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POLICY BRIEF

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