Migration and Belarusian EU Accession

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Introduction

This chapter addresses a practical question with clear policy stakes for the European Union: what would Belarusian accession mean for migration, demography, and labour markets in the EU—and for Belarus itself? The analysis takes a comparative, evidence-led approach because choices on free movement, sequencing, and safeguards are most credible when grounded in what has actually happened elsewhere.

The chapter is organised around three objectives. First, it synthesises what is known about Belarusian migration—both to the EU and more broadly—covering the post-Soviet realignment of the 1990s, labour-mobility patterns through the 2000s, and the politically driven outflows of 2020–2025. Second, it draws lessons from the 2004 enlargement by examining countries most comparable to Belarus today—Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, and Hungary—tracking short-, medium-, and long-term impacts on population, labour markets, and society, and highlighting where policy design mattered. Third, it translates these insights into forward-looking implications for both Belarus and the EU: how flows are likely to evolve, what risks to anticipate, and which policy instruments can shift outcomes from brain drain to brain circulation.

The evidence base combines desk research (official statistics, comparative studies, and recent policy evaluations) with more than ten semi-structured interviews with senior experts and policymakers involved in the 2004 accession process in Lithuania, Latvia, Poland, and Hungary. These interviews clarify how enlargement worked in practice—what was planned, what was not, and which effects surprised decision-makers—and help separate policy-driven dynamics from background demographic trends.

The aim is not to predict exact headcounts but to equip EU institutions and Member States with an actionable framework for sequencing, de-risking, and harnessing Belarus–EU mobility, should the accession track open.

1. Belarusian Migration since the 1990s

1.1 Phase One: Post-Soviet Realignment (1990s)

The dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 marked a significant turning point for Belarus, leading to its independence. In 1994, Alexander Lukashenko came to power, winning Belarus's first and only free presidential election. During the 1990s, Lukashenko began to consolidate power through referendums that expanded presidential authority and aligned Belarus more closely with Russia (Hartwell et al., 2022).

The economic context of the decade was marked by significant challenges. The transition from a Soviet to a post-Soviet economy led to widespread poverty and unemployment, serving as a major push factor for emigration (Hanson, 2014). Political instability and limited economic opportunities further encouraged migration, setting the stage for ongoing demographic and economic challenges in subsequent years.

Migration Trends

Migration to and from Belarus in the 1990s was significantly shaped by the economic and political changes following the Soviet collapse. Many Belarusians migrated to Russia, Poland, Germany, the United States, and Canada. Labour migration to Russia increased over time, while temporary migration to the EU remained limited. The main push factors were economic instability, political uncertainty, limited economic opportunities, and ethnic tensions (Macrotrends, 2023).

Demographic Impacts

Out-migration of young and skilled workers during the 1990s contributed to an ageing population and a reduced workforce, exacerbating economic challenges. Despite some immigration, Belarus's population began to decline due to low birth rates and ageing trends. The emigration of skilled professionals reduced the country's economic potential, and return migration remained limited (Macrotrends, 2023).

1.2 Phase Two: Labour Migration (2000–2020)

Between 2000 and 2020, Belarus witnessed continued consolidation of power under Lukashenko. Referendums, particularly in 2004, removed presidential term limits, effectively allowing him to remain in office indefinitely. Despite occasional overtures to the EU and the West, the country largely maintained close ties with Russia. This period saw increasing authoritarianism, with elections frequently criticised for lacking fairness and transparency (Hartwell et al., 2022).

Over these two decades, Belarus generally experienced a positive net migration rate, suggesting that more individuals immigrated to the country than emigrated. However, this positive balance masked underlying complexities. The majority of migration flows remained within the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), particularly with Russia, reflecting historical ties and economic partnerships. A gradual shift emerged, with increasing numbers of Belarusians seeking opportunities in non-CIS countries—especially Poland and Lithuania—driven by evolving economic landscapes and political considerations within the region (Petrakova, 2022).

Labour migration played a critical role in Belarusian migration dynamics during this period. Immigration to Belarus, primarily from Ukraine, was consistently significant, with immigration figures surpassing emigration numbers between 2009 and 2019, reaching its peak growth between 2014 and 2016 as a result of Ukrainian emigration flows (Integral Human Development, 2022).

Migration patterns from Belarus were notably skewed towards men, who comprised a substantial portion of labour migrants. Political instability and economic challenges served as prominent push factors, particularly among younger and more educated individuals. These push factors intensified following the contentious 2020 presidential elections, prompting an acceleration of emigration to EU countries, particularly Poland (Chmiel et al., 2021).

Demographic and Economic Consequences

While a positive net migration rate was observed, Belarus's population continued to decline due to persistently low birth rates and an ageing demographic structure. The emigration of younger, more educated individuals further contributed to the ageing trend, posing challenges to the sustainability of pension and healthcare systems (Macrotrends, 2023). The emigration of skilled workers—predominantly male—resulted in a reduction of the workforce, impacting economic productivity and creating labour shortages across various sectors.

Migration patterns between rural and urban areas in Belarus widened existing disparities. Rural areas experienced substantial out-migration driven by limited economic opportunities and restricted access to services. Urban centres, particularly Minsk, attracted migrants seeking better prospects, contributing to population growth in urban areas.

Growth of the Belarusian Diaspora

Between 2000 and 2020, the Belarusian diaspora expanded significantly and became increasingly politically active. While Belarusian communities already existed in countries such as Poland, Lithuania, and the United States, migration driven by economic and political reasons expanded these networks. Following the 2020 elections, the diaspora was characterised by enhanced civic and political engagement, with Belarusians abroad actively supporting democratic movements and advocating for change (Chmiel et al., 2021).

1.3 Phase Three: Political Exodus and Geopolitical Instrumentalisation (2020–2025)

The period between 2020 and 2025 was marked by significant political upheaval. The 2020 presidential election, widely regarded as rigged, sparked unprecedented protests. The Lukashenko regime responded with a severe crackdown, resulting in mass arrests, police brutality, and the forced exile of opposition leaders. The Ryanair incident in 2021, in which a flight was forced to land in Minsk to arrest a journalist, drew international condemnation. Belarus's support for Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 led to increased international isolation and sanctions, further destabilising the political landscape.

Political repression following the 2020 elections triggered a wave of emigration. Driven by fears for their safety and a lack of opportunities for political expression, many Belarusians sought refuge in neighbouring countries, particularly Poland, Lithuania, and Ukraine (until the escalation of the war). This exodus marked a significant brain drain, as many of those who left were skilled professionals, activists, and intellectuals. While economic factors existed, the overriding driver was political persecution (Luzgina & Koreyvo, 2023).

Weaponisation of Migration

Belarus was also implicated in the weaponisation of migration, particularly during the 2021 border crisis with Lithuania, Latvia, and Poland. The Belarusian government, allegedly in retaliation for EU sanctions, strategically facilitated the irregular entry of migrants—primarily from the Middle East and Africa—into the EU. This tactic involved providing migrants with visas, transportation to the Belarusian border, and instructions on how to cross illegally. The crisis resulted in significant humanitarian challenges, strained bilateral relations, and prompted accusations of Minsk using vulnerable individuals to exert political pressure on the EU (European Parliament, 2023).

Transformation of the Diaspora

The political crisis significantly reshaped the Belarusian diaspora. Existing communities in Poland, Lithuania, Germany, and the United States experienced a surge in new arrivals, revitalising these communities while presenting integration challenges. The diaspora became a crucial hub for organising political opposition, providing support for those persecuted in Belarus, and advocating for international pressure on the Lukashenko regime (Petrakova, 2022).

A defining characteristic of the post-2020 diaspora is its high degree of politicisation and civic engagement. Belarusians abroad became actively involved in supporting democratic movements, organising protests, and advocating for human rights. Online activism and social media campaigns played a crucial role in raising awareness (Chmiel et al., 2021). The presence of this large and politically active diaspora has significantly influenced EU–Belarus relations: the EU became more vocal in its criticism of the Lukashenko regime and imposed sanctions in response to human rights abuses (European Parliament, 2023).

Demographic and Social Consequences

The accelerated emigration had a profound impact on Belarus's demography. The exodus of young, educated individuals further exacerbated the country's existing demographic challenges, particularly its ageing population and shrinking workforce. This brain drain resulted in a loss of human capital, potentially hindering future economic growth and innovation (Petrakova, 2022; Macrotrends, 2023). Independent estimates suggest at least 100,000–200,000 departures since 2020, while official data understate the scale (Kłysiński, 2023).

Civil society organisations within Belarus faced increased pressure during this period, and independent media outlets were forced to shut down or operate from abroad. This erosion of civil society and the suppression of dissenting voices led to increased polarisation within Belarusian society (Chmiel et al., 2021). The war in Ukraine also influenced migration patterns, with Belarus becoming both a transit country and a potential destination for refugees.

2. Lessons from Enlargement: The 2004 Case Studies

This section examines what happened when countries with demographic and economic profiles similar to Belarus joined the European Union in 2004. By tracing migration flows, population changes, and labour-market adjustments in Poland, Hungary, Latvia, and Lithuania, it identifies the immediate, medium-term, and long-term impacts of EU accession on sending states. The analysis moves beyond numbers to consider economic outcomes, social transformations, and the role of public policies—or their absence—in shaping these trajectories.

2.1 Country Profiles at the Time of Accession

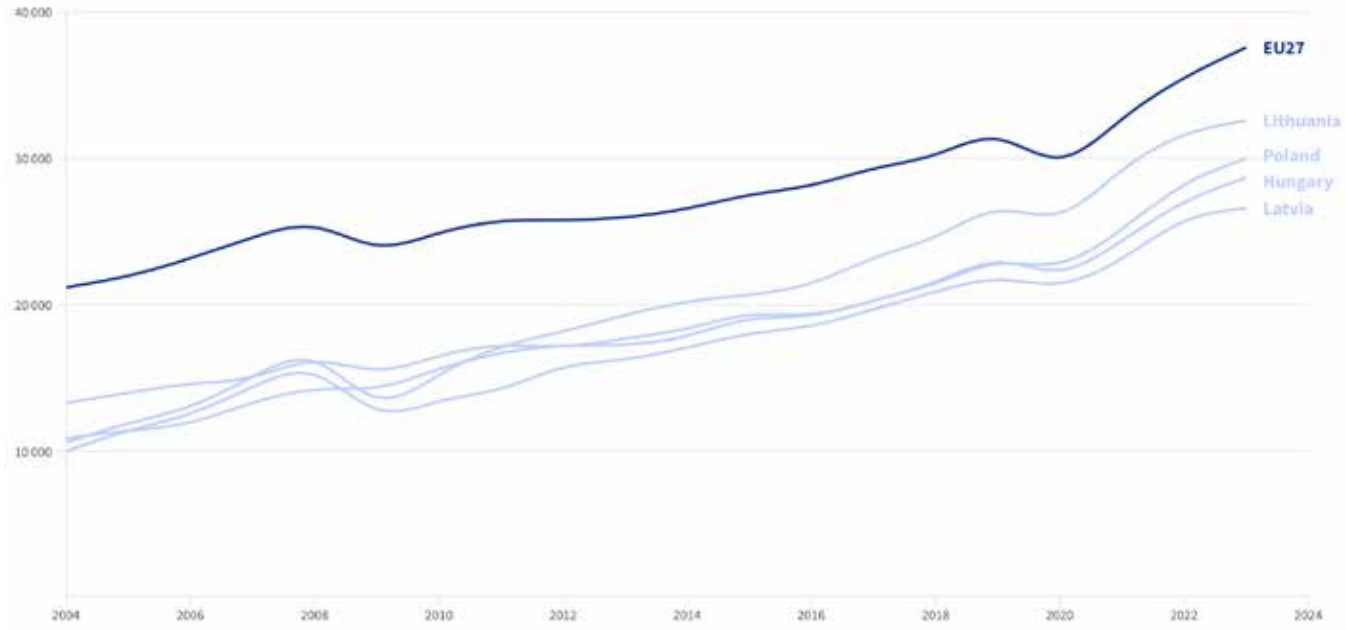
Economic Context

The 2004 EU enlargement marked the largest single expansion of the Union, adding ten new member states and more than 74 million people to a Union that grew from 15 to 25 members. The EU's share of global GDP (measured in purchasing power parities) increased from 19.3 per cent to more than 21 per cent (Council of the EU, 2024).

As an economic indicator, GDP per capita in Poland, Latvia, Lithuania, and Hungary ranged between 9,000 and 13,000 USD at the time of accession, markedly below the EU average. Hungary had pursued rapid market-oriented reforms from the early 1990s, while Latvia and Lithuania opted for more gradual transitions, and Poland underwent significant structural changes strongly shaped by EU integration dynamics (Black, Engbersen, Okólski, & Pantîru, 2010; Budnik, 2009; Bujor, 2024). By comparison, Belarus today remains slightly below the levels observed in these new member states at the time of their accession; Hungary in 2004 and Belarus today also present comparable population sizes, despite notable differences in land area (World Bank, 2025).

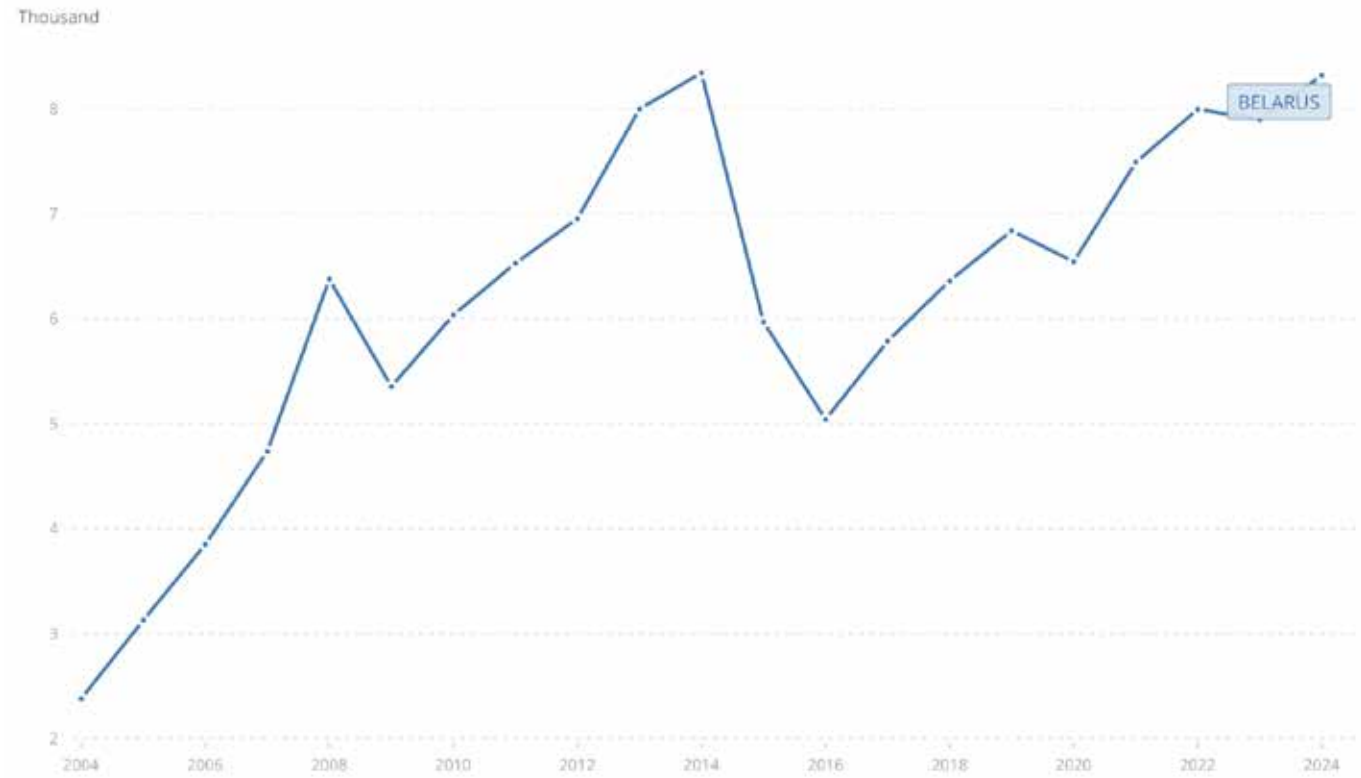
For the new member states, accession provided a framework for economic growth, stability, and integration into global markets. In 2004, the EU10's average GDP per capita in purchasing power standards (PPS) equalled 59 per cent of the EU27 average; by 2022 this had risen to 81 per cent (Council of the EU, 2024). Pasimeni (2024), reviewing the enlargement two decades later, concludes that most ex-ante expectations were realised: trade costs fell sharply, trade integration deepened, and EU10 firms became more firmly embedded in cross-border value chains, especially in manufacturing.

GDP per capita (purchasing power adjusted)



Source: Eurostat (dataset sdg_10_10), (dataset sdg_08_10)
https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/infographics/2004-enlargement-facts-and-figures/#0

GDP per capita (current US$) - Belarus



Source: https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.CD?end=2024&locations=BY&start=2004

Demographic Context

By the time of EU accession in 2004, all four countries already displayed demographic fragilities: low fertility, rising mortality, and significant emigration. In Poland, the population remained broadly stable in the early 1990s before the significant demographic shifts triggered by accession. Hungary experienced a steady decline throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, with natural decrease firmly entrenched as a structural challenge. In Latvia, the early 1990s brought a sharp population fall caused by both negative natural increase and sustained net emigration. Lithuania followed a similar trajectory, with fertility rates collapsing after independence and emigration increasing sharply, reducing the population from around 3.7 million in the early 1990s.

Hazans (2019) identifies four distinct waves of post-independence emigration from Latvia, which resonate with broader regional dynamics: a Pre-Accession Wave (2000–2003) shaped mainly by individual migrant characteristics; a Post-Accession Wave (2004–2008) strongly conditioned by institutional and market factors; Crisis-Driven Emigration (2009–2010) following the global financial crisis; and a Post-Crisis Wave (2011–2016) in which migration normalised as a life strategy. In the post-Covid period, Hazans notes the rise of remote work and transnational living among highly skilled workers as a further reshaping of mobility patterns (Hazans, 2019, pp. 64–65).

These demographic trajectories closely resemble those of contemporary Belarus, which since the early 1990s has combined low fertility with rising emigration, shrinking by about one million people to roughly 9.2 million by 1 January 2023, with the post-2020 crackdown accelerating outflows and tightening labour shortages in healthcare, construction, and IT (Kłysiński, 2023).

2.2 Migration Flows Post-Accession

Scale and Selectivity

The 2004 enlargement set off migration flows on a scale that many policymakers had not anticipated. Between 2004 and 2007 alone, approximately two million Poles migrated to other EU countries, primarily to the United Kingdom and Ireland (Drinkwater, Eade, & Garapich, 2006; Kaczmarczyk & Janicka, 2009; Kaczmarczyk, Aldaz-Carroll, & Hołda, 2020). Population decline followed across all four countries: Latvia fell from 2.263 million in 2004 to 1.862 million in 2024 (–17.7%); Poland from 38.18 million to 36.55 million (–4.3%); Lithuania from 3.377 million to 2.88 million (–14.7%); and Hungary from 10.11 million to 9.562 million (–5.4%) (World Bank, 2025).

Importantly, the character of migration also changed. Before accession, those leaving to the EU were mainly highly educated migrants who were competitive on European labour markets. After accession, both low-skilled

and high-skilled workers left, in far higher numbers. The early opening of labour markets in the United Kingdom, Ireland, and Sweden made them the most accessible destinations for A8 workers in practical terms, demonstrating how policy openness channels flows (Okólski & Salt, 2014; Kahanec, Zaiceva & Zimmermann, 2009).

Destination Countries

The United Kingdom, Ireland, and Germany were the principal beneficiaries of post-accession migration. While most older member states applied transitional restrictions, the UK, Ireland, and Sweden opened their labour markets immediately in 2004, resulting in a surge of east–west migration (Dustmann et al., 2010; Zaiceva & Zimmermann, 2008). Ireland saw Poles become the largest non-Irish nationality within just a few years (Central Statistics Office, 2017). The UK experienced the largest immigration wave in its modern history, with over half a million workers arriving in the first years after enlargement (Dustmann et al., 2010). Germany, despite maintaining restrictions until 2011 (EU-8) and 2014 (EU-2), quickly became a central destination once its labour market opened fully, hosting more than 900,000 Romanian citizens alone by 2024 (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2024).

Network effects consolidated these flows, as established diaspora communities acted as magnets for newcomers, reinforcing the concentration of migrants in specific destinations (Beine, Docquier, & Özden, 2011).

2.3 Labour-Market Impacts in Sending Countries

EU accession initially had a positive impact on unemployment rates in sending countries. Latvia's unemployment rate dropped significantly from double digits prior to accession to single digits by 2007, largely due to mass emigration (Hazans, 2007). In Poland, unemployment rates decreased notably from approximately 20 per cent in 2003 to around 9 per cent by 2007 (Balcerowicz, 2007; Kaczmarczyk & Tyrowicz, 2015). Hungary saw a relatively smaller immediate emigration wave, though significant outward migration increased following the 2008 economic crisis (Fazekas & Blaskó, 2016).

This drop can be explained by two factors. First, those who were relatively marginalised in the labour market gained new opportunities as others left. Second, inward investment created new employment. Post-accession countries experienced improvements in labour-market conditions, gradually aligning with EU averages, with declining unemployment and steadily increasing employment rates over the subsequent decade (Bieszk-Stolorz & Dmytrów, 2020; Fazekas & Blaskó, 2016).

The emigration of younger, often highly skilled workers created immediate labour shortages, particularly in healthcare, construction, and information technology (OECD, 2013; Hazans, 2007). Poland experienced significant labour shortages in construction and healthcare (Kaczmarczyk & Janicka, 2009; Eldring, Fitzgerald, & Arn-

holtz, 2012), while Latvia encountered acute skill mismatches and labour-market disruptions (Braukša & Fadejeva, 2013). In response, substantial wage growth occurred: Latvia saw notable wage increases between 2005 and 2008, driven by competitive pressures to retain domestic workers (Hazans, 2007), and Poland experienced similar wage growth trends in sectors heavily affected by shortages (Balcerowicz, 2007; Budnik, 2009).

The selectivity of migration amplified its effects. Workers in medicine, ICT, engineering, and construction were disproportionately likely to leave, creating bottlenecks at home, while employers reported weakened innovation capacity and persistent vacancies. At the same time, emigrants often faced skills mismatches abroad, with up to 40 per cent of university graduates employed below their qualifications (Hazans, 2018). Across CEE the balance sheet was mixed: EU-wide output gains masked losses in sending states at least in the short run, while remittances mostly boosted consumption rather than investment (Holland et al., 2011; Barbone, Pietka-Kosińska & Topińska, 2012; OECD, 2006).

2.4 Labour-Market Impacts in Receiving Countries

Across the EU-15, EU-10 migrants registered high employment rates and strong labour-force participation, yet frequently entered segments of the market below their formal qualifications—especially in construction, hospitality, agriculture, and selected services (European Commission, 2011; Galgóczi & Leschke, 2012; Fihel, Kaczmarczyk, & Okólski, 2006). Evidence from the UK and Ireland documents high employment alongside occupational downgrading and lower average wages relative to natives (Currie, 2007; Voitchovsky, 2014). Model-based and descriptive analyses converge on modest, often temporary wage effects and limited displacement risks, with positive contributions to output and employment in receiving states (D'Auria, Mc Morrow, & Pichelmann, 2008; Kahanec, Zaiceva, & Zimmermann, 2009).

Benefits and adjustments were uneven within receiving countries: metropolitan regions and expanding tradable sectors absorbed EU-10 workers more readily, while peripheral areas and low-productivity sectors adjusted more slowly (European Commission, 2011; Galgóczi & Leschke, 2012).

2.5 Demographic Consequences and Long-Term Challenges

Latvia illustrates the demographic and human capital costs most starkly. Since 2000, the country has recorded among the fastest depopulation rates in the world, its population shrinking by around 18 per cent to 1.9 million. Between 2000 and 2013, approximately 259,000 Latvians emigrated without returning, with losses concen-

trated among the young and highly educated. By 2014, two in five Latvians with higher education under the age of 25—and more than one-third of those aged 25–34—were living abroad (Hazans, 2018). Net migration in Latvia remains deeply negative: net outflow of –4,600 was recorded in 2024 (Statistics Latvia, 2025), and it is estimated that the country's population may shrink by a further 35 per cent in the next 25 years. Lithuania experienced similar losses, though net migration turned positive in recent years (+23,140 in 2024), driven largely by arrivals from Belarus and Ukraine and by returning Lithuanian citizens (Statistics Lithuania, 2025).

Hungary followed a slightly different trajectory. Emigration accelerated after 2004 but peaked later, with particularly strong flows following the 2008 financial crisis and again after 2010, when political disillusionment became a growing driver. Highly skilled Hungarians—especially young graduates—moved in significant numbers to Germany, Austria, and the UK, often citing weak institutional trust alongside economic motives. Many accepted jobs below their qualifications, a form of "brain waste" (Szilasi et al., 2025). Net migration in Hungary is positive but modest (+4,900 in 2024), with 41,300 Hungarian citizens moving abroad and 28,900 returning (ÓIF, 2025; Hungarian Statistical Office, 2025).

In Poland, skilled mobility clustered around metropolitan centres, creating a dual pattern: large cities enjoyed net human capital gains while peripheral regions faced persistent drain (Herbst & Rok, 2016). Poland in 2024 registered positive net migration, partly due to fewer Poles leaving the country (Statistics Poland, 2025), but it recorded the EU's largest absolute population decline for the second year running, losing approximately 123,475 inhabitants in a single year (Notes from Poland, 2025).

Mass emigration intensified ageing processes, particularly in Latvia and Lithuania, with younger working-age populations disproportionately migrating abroad, resulting in higher dependency ratios and increased pressures on pension systems and public finances (Hazans, 2018).

2.6 Return Migration and Brain Circulation

Return migration has been promoted as a way to transform brain drain into brain gain. Evidence from Latvia, Lithuania, and Hungary shows that returnees bring valuable assets: international contacts, language skills, entrepreneurial ambition, and new managerial practices. Return migrants are more likely to engage in entrepreneurship than those who never left, with higher self-assessed capabilities and lower fear of failure (Fredheim, Varpina & Krumina, 2021; Varpina & Fredheim, 2022). Yet the scale of return remains too small to compensate for the magnitude of losses. In Latvia, for example, only about a quarter of emigrants return, and their profile does not mirror the groups most likely to have left.

Countries affected by these shifts implemented various measures to attract return migrants. Poland initiated targeted programmes to improve employment conditions and facilitate recognition of qualifications obtained

abroad (Kaczmarczyk & Janicka, 2009; Kálmán, 2016), though effectiveness varied significantly across regions and sectors (Kaczmarczyk et al., 2020). Two levers matter most for sending countries: first, recognising soft skills and experience gained abroad reduces early unemployment spells for returnees and raises the odds of self-employment (Martin & Radu, 2012; Grabowska, 2018a); second, linking funding to local ecosystems that can absorb returnees' skills improves the odds that remittances become capital rather than consumption (OECD, 2006; Barbone et al., 2012).

Policymakers from the 2004 enlargement states recalled in interviews that return migration was simply not considered at the time. Social remittances—the skills, norms, and networks that circulate back even when diplomas are under-utilised abroad—only entered the policy conversation after the 2008–2009 financial crisis, when returns became more common (Levitt, 1998; Grabowska, 2018a; White et al., 2018).

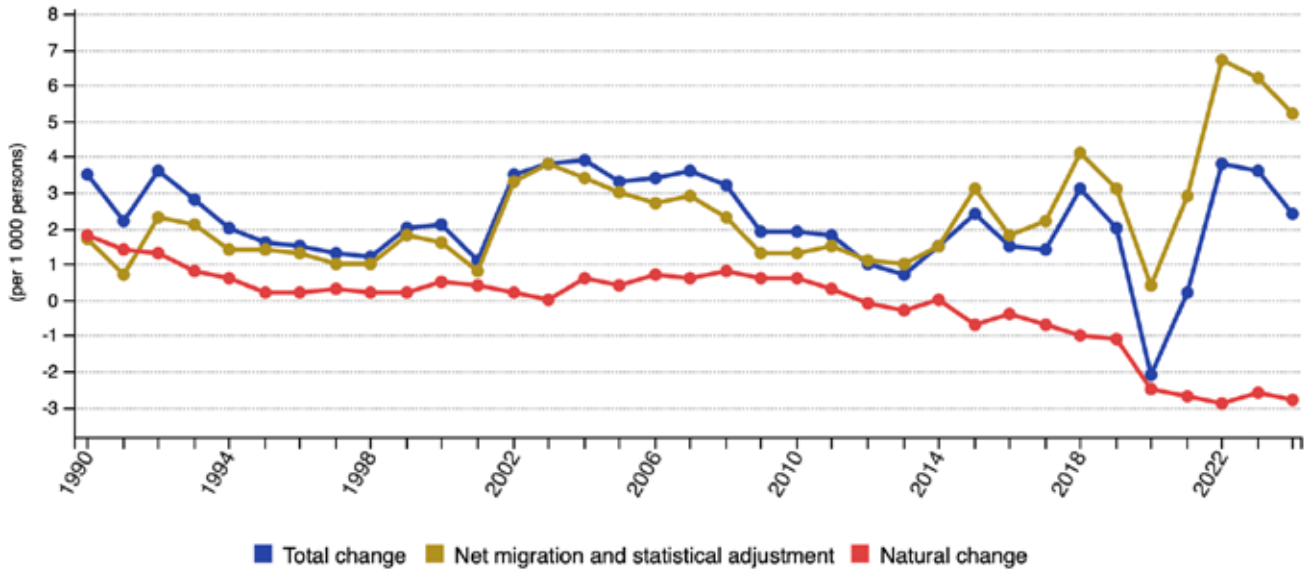
2.7 Political Knock-On Effects in Receiving Countries

While post-2004 mobility primarily generated labour-market complementarities, the political effects in receiving EU-15 countries proved more disruptive. Freedom of movement became politicised as part of wider debates over immigration, welfare, and sovereignty. Public opinion data show that migration from Central and Eastern Europe was often perceived more negatively than the macroeconomic evidence would justify (Brücker, Jahn, & Upward, 2013; Dustmann, Frattini, & Preston, 2010).

In the United Kingdom, the inflow of A8 migrants after 2004 coincided with the rise of UKIP, which linked free movement to welfare pressure and wage competition (Ford & Goodwin, 2014). In Austria, Denmark, and the Netherlands, mainstream parties adjusted their rhetoric to counter far-right challengers, contributing to a broader politicisation of intra-EU migration (Dennison & Geddes, 2019). The link between free movement and Euroscepticism is most clearly illustrated by Brexit: scholars identify the visibility of post-2004 migration, combined with narratives of "uncontrolled" borders, as a central driver of the Leave vote (Hobolt, 2016; Goodwin & Milazzo, 2017).

In Germany, where transitional restrictions delayed inflows, public opinion remained more muted until after 2011. Even then, discontent was less marked than in the UK, reflecting different institutional contexts and welfare regimes (Brücker et al., 2013). Taken together, the political record suggests that the enlargement triggered significant variation in responses across EU-15 states: where inflows were rapid and visible, they reshaped party competition and public discourse.

Population change by component (annual crude rates), EU, 1990-2024

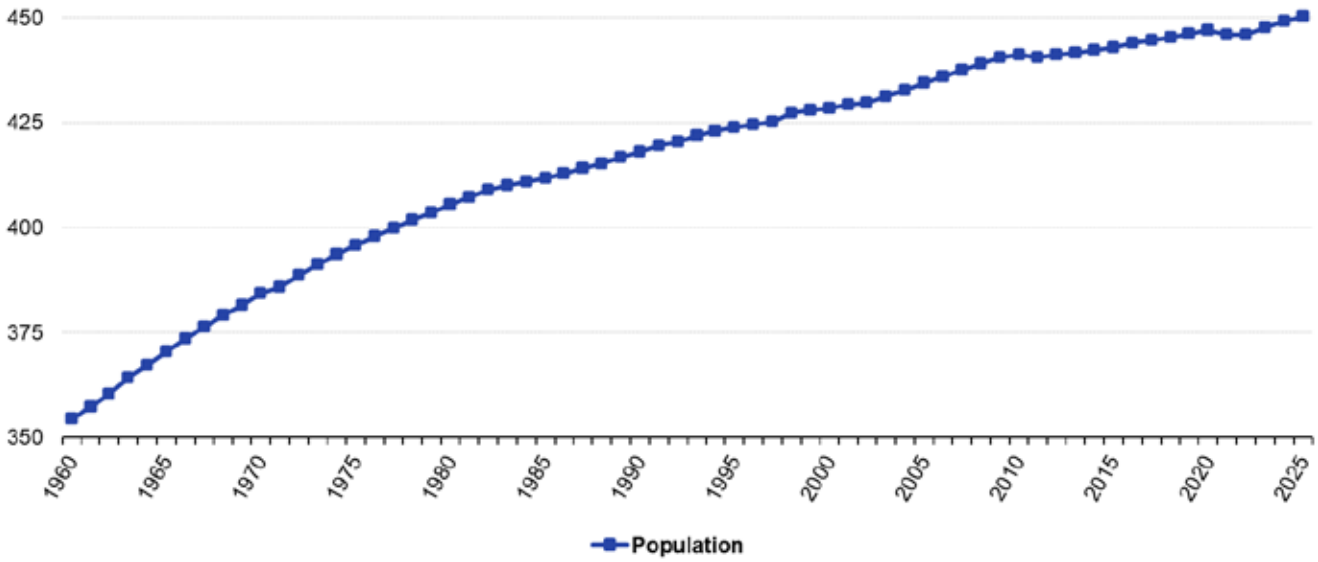


Note: Excluding French overseas departments up to and including 1997. Breaks in series: 1991, 1998, 2000-01, 2008, 2010-12, 2014, 2015, 2017, 2019, 2021-2023

2024: Eurostat estimate

Source: Eurostat (online data code: demo_gind)

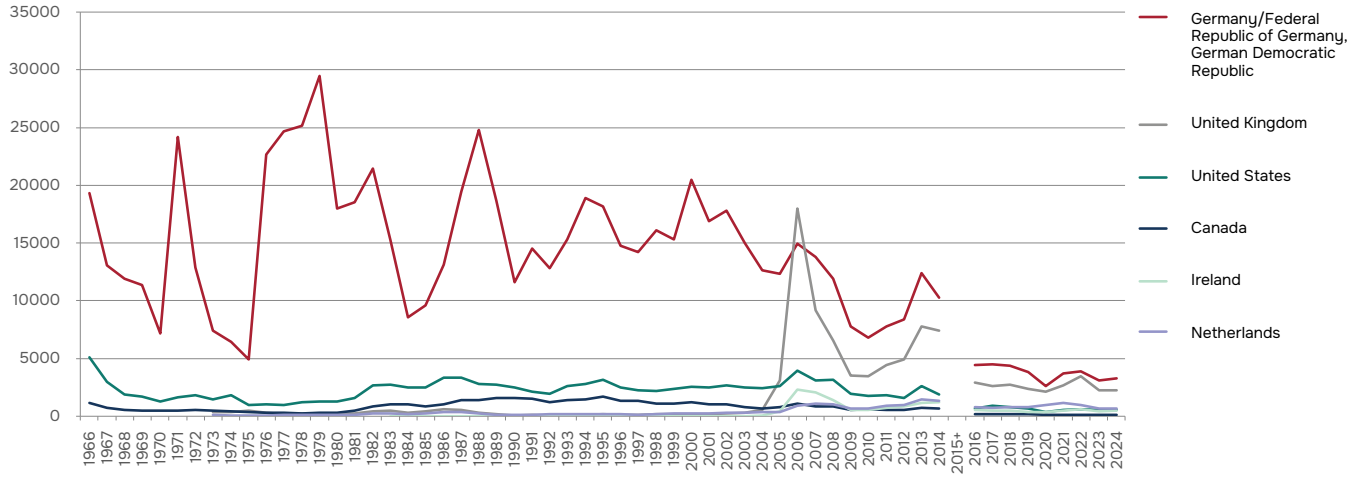
Population, EU, 1960-2025
(at 1 January, million)



Note: Excluding French overseas departments up to and including 1997. Breaks in series: 1991, 1998, 2000-01, 2008, 2010-12, 2014, 2015, 2017, 2019, 2021-2023

Source: Eurostat (online data code: demo_gind)

Main directions of emigration for permanent residence from Poland by countries in years 1966-2024 from Statistics Poland see reference above



3. Belarus in Comparative Perspective

3.1 Current Belarusian Diaspora in Neighbouring EU States

Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia all share borders with Belarus and have become key destinations for Belarusians, each hosting a long-standing diaspora that has grown substantially—first through pre-2020 labour migration and then through a large wave of political and economic migrants after the contested 2020 elections.

According to Statistics Lithuania, net migration of Belarusians has been consistently positive since the 1990s. Annual net inflows averaged a few hundred through the 2000s, but rose sharply: 934 in 2021, 1,305 in 2022, 1,938 in 2023, and a record 2,467 in 2024 (Statistics Lithuania, 2025). By early 2025, Lithuania hosted around 57,500 Belarusian residents.

Poland has seen the largest Belarusian inflows. Residence permits for Belarusians doubled after 2020, and by mid-2023, 122,000 Belarusians were registered with Poland's social insurance system. Humanitarian visas (47,000 in 2020) and Poland Business Harbour visas (approximately 90,000 issued by 2023) further illustrate the scale of post-2020 arrivals. Current estimates put the Belarusian diaspora in Poland at 100,000–150,000 people (Homel et al., 2023). Latvia hosts approximately 54,000–55,000 ethnic Belarusians, around 2.8 per cent of the population (Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia, 2024).

Together, these three countries form the core of Belarusian migration in the EU. The largest share of civic-minded Belarusians who left after 2020 reside in Poland (45%), Georgia (10%), Lithuania (8%), and Germany (6%) (Korshunau, 2023). By early 2025, approximately 360,000 residents of EU countries had been born in Belarus, equalling about four per cent of Belarus's total population, with an additional 240,000 Belarusian citizens residing in the EU (Eurostat, 2025).

3.2 What Would Be Different for Belarus—and What Would Be Similar

Belarus approaches the prospect of EU accession under conditions that differ markedly from those faced by earlier entrants in 2004. Three differences stand out.

First, remote work and transnational living are already embedded among high-skilled, non-manual workers, providing flexibility that did not exist two decades ago. These patterns are visible even in the pre-accession period and will likely expand once free movement is formally established, shaping how Belarusians connect to EU labour markets.

Second, existing migrant networks are far larger. By early 2025, Belarus's EU-based diaspora amounts to four to five per cent of the total population, with particularly dense nodes in Poland and Lithuania. By contrast, the post-Soviet Latvian diaspora in OECD countries before accession numbered only about 21,000, or one per cent of the population (Hazans, 2019). These denser structures are likely to accelerate subsequent mobility.

Third, non-economic push factors will remain strong. A large segment of the Belarusian population is employed in law enforcement and regime-linked institutions. Once the Lukashenka system collapses, many of these individuals will look for exit options. Some will move to non-EU destinations, but others will seek EU countries, adding a political and institutional dimension to post-accession migration that was less pronounced in 2004.

In terms of similarities, Belarus faces the same arithmetic of low fertility and net emigration that characterised the 2004 entrants. The pool of potential emigrants has already been partly depleted since 2020, when large numbers—particularly the highly skilled—left for destinations including Russia and Georgia; many of these may use accession as an opportunity for onward movement to EU states. Economic and educational opportunities will continue to interact with cultural and linguistic ties: wage differentials and access to higher education remain powerful drivers (Barslund, Busse & Schwarzwälder, 2015; Pszczółkowska, 2024), while cultural familiarity lowers settlement costs and shapes decisions. Varpina and Fredheim (2022) show how cultural and linguistic factors shaped Ukrainian asylum seekers' decisions to move to Latvia, even when wealthier destinations were available.

The broader lesson is that migration should not be understood only in numerical terms. Total human capital—including skills, languages, and practices—travels with migrants and circulates back through social remittances (Levitt, 1998; Grabowska & Garapich, 2016a). Without stronger institutions and policies at home, the balance of costs and gains from accession-driven migration is likely to be less favourable for Belarus than it was for the 2004 enlargement states.

4. Migration Dynamics under Accession: Scenarios and Policy Implications

4.1 Why This Accession Would Be Different

Geopolitics would dominate economics. Belarus's authoritarian legacy and proximity to Russia mean that mobility will be read as an ideological and security issue as much as a labour-market adjustment (Faist, 2016). Political narratives will track regional developments: escalation will harden opinion and policy, while de-escalation may soften them.

A Belarusian accession would likely politicise migration in a different register than 2004. Because of Belarus's long association with Russia and its authoritarian legacy, mobility would be interpreted not simply as a labour-market adjustment but as a geopolitical and ideological choice. Public debates in existing member states could frame Belarusian movers either as "Europeans seeking freedom" or, conversely, as potential carriers of instability or Russian influence. Which narrative dominates would depend heavily on concurrent events in Ukraine and Russia. If Belarus were perceived as firmly breaking from Moscow, migration might be welcomed as part of a security realignment. If uncertainty remained, populist actors could cast mobility as risky. In short, the politics of free movement would not be confined to questions of jobs or welfare, as in 2004; instead they would intertwine with security, ideology, and the EU's confrontation with Russia.

4.2 Expected Migration Dynamics

The likely pattern is a measurable but not unlimited outflow, front-loaded in the first two to four years after legal opening—driven by strong diaspora networks in Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia (Beine, Docquier, & Özden, 2011; Prieto-Curiel et al., 2023) and by labour demand in Germany (Barslund, Busse & Schwarzwälder, 2015)—and then moderating. The pool of potential movers is smaller than in 2004–07, given that many high-skilled Belarusians have already left since 2020 (Pszczółkowska, 2024).

Initial destinations will be Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia—where proximity, networks, and tailored pathways align (Okólski & Salt, 2014)—followed by Germany as a major second-stage hub. Employment rates among movers are expected to be high, with concentrations in shortage sectors such as logistics, manufacturing support, construction, care, and hospitality, alongside IT and professional services via remote or hybrid models (Kah-

anec, Zaiceva & Zimmermann, 2009). Short-run skills downgrading is likely where recognition and language support lag (Adserà, 2015).

Return flows will remain muted unless credible political openings emerge. Remittances will initially skew towards consumption (OECD, 2006; Barbone et al., 2012), and their developmental impact will remain limited without secure property rights and channels for productive investment (Gjini & Moisiu, 2013). Soft skills, norms, and organisational know-how will circulate through social remittances (Levitt, 1998; White et al., 2018), but weak absorptive capacity at home is the binding constraint (Williams & Baláž, 2005).

4.3 Risks to Anticipate

Political and security backlash in host states is a central risk. Belarusian migration may be framed as a Trojan horse for Russian influence, triggering stricter transitional regimes, tougher vetting, and heightened politicisation. At the origin, sectoral drain in health, construction, and IT could deepen shortages and accelerate ageing (Thaut, 2009; Hazans, 2013). Abroad, under-utilisation of skills will slow integration and reduce returns to education (Lanati & Venturini, 2021). At home, weak institutions will stall convergence, dampening investment from remittances and returnees (Goschin, 2014).

4.4 Policy Recommendations

Phased Access and Risk Management

Transitional labour-market regimes should open work rights first, while social rights and permanent residence are staged as rule-of-law milestones are verified (Aranson & Ordeshook, 1981). Security-tiered vetting must be applied proportionately to sensitive profiles, with clear appeal safeguards in place. Reversal clauses should be codified to allow snap-back options if democratic backsliding occurs.

Steering Migration Flows Productively

Skills corridors targeted at shortage occupations should include fast-track recognition pilots, bridging courses, and language vouchers to ensure efficient labour-market matching (Fihel, Kaczmarczyk, & Okólski, 2006). Remote-work compliance toolkits are needed to clarify contracts, taxation, and portability rules. Diaspora nav-

igation hubs in Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, and Germany could serve as one-stop services to guide migrants into legal, recognised pathways and reduce skills downgrading.

Supporting Origin-Side Absorption

An EU technical assistance compact could prioritise reforms in property rights, SME finance, vocational standards, and qualification frameworks, so that Belarus can effectively use skills and capital when conditions permit. Portable EU-issued micro-credentials would accelerate hiring abroad while easing recognition on return, and civic or academic fellowships in exile would help retain human capital while de-risking politicised profiles.

Communication and Cohesion

Evidence-first messaging, supported by public dashboards on employment, tax contributions, and filled vacancies, would counter myths and misinformation (Grabowska, 2018a). Co-financing through EU/ESF+ support for municipalities with higher inflows should be earmarked for language classes, schools, and housing mediation, pre-empting pinch points that risk politicisation.

Actors and Instruments

For EU institutions, it may be valuable to link future mobility rights to verifiable rule-of-law benchmarks, ensuring that steps forward are gradual and anchored in broader reforms. EU support could also fund digital credentialing systems, pilot frameworks for governing remote work, and establish a Belarus Mobility Observatory to track migration flows, labour outcomes, and emerging narratives (Engbersen et al., 2017). For Member States—particularly Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, and Germany—there is scope to explore Belarus Talent Pass schemes in shortage fields, light-touch skills screening with bridging opportunities, and coordinated approaches to security vetting to avoid fragmentation (D'Auria, Mc Morrow & Pichelmann, 2008). For a future reform-minded Belarusian government, priorities could include safeguarding remittance-funded SMEs, recognising EU-issued micro-credentials on return, and experimenting with sectoral compacts in health and STEM that combine wage support with housing or reintegration assistance (Grabowska, 2018a).

5. Conclusion

If Belarus were to join the European Union, migration would become one of the most visible and contested aspects of accession. Early indicators will matter: how many applications convert into permits in Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, and Germany; whether shortages in construction, care, health, logistics, and IT begin to ease; and how many newcomers rely on remote contracts rather than local employment. The tone of media coverage and the fortunes of far-right parties will show how quickly mobility becomes politicised, while the registration of new businesses by Belarusians abroad may hint at longer-term circulation and reintegration prospects.

The lesson from earlier enlargements is that migration cannot be understood in numbers alone. It shifts human capital, redistributes skills and values, and reshapes political narratives. For Belarus, these dynamics will be amplified by geopolitics. Labour-market fundamentals suggest that host countries would benefit from complementary skills, high employment rates, and the easing of bottlenecks. Yet the framing of Belarusian migration will rarely be economic. Instead, mobility is likely to be interpreted through the lens of Russia and Ukraine, with security concerns, trust questions, and ideological divides looming larger than jobs or welfare.

Return is unlikely to feature strongly unless there is a credible political opening at home. Skilled Belarusians may be particularly reluctant to return to a repressive or unstable system, prolonging the outflow of talent. Remittances will continue, but their developmental effect will remain limited if property rights are weak and opportunities for productive reinvestment scarce.

Compared to earlier candidates, Belarus stands further from EU institutional norms. This makes safeguards and conditionalities essential. Any liberalisation of migration will need to be phased, with work rights preceding social and political rights, and accompanied by mechanisms for monitoring and reversal if democratic backsliding occurs.

Above all, Belarusian accession would not be a purely economic adjustment. It would be a foreign policy flashpoint at the intersection of migration, security, and geopolitics. Whether the balance tips towards opportunity or strain will depend not only on how many people move, but on the institutions, safeguards, and narratives that accompany them.

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