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### ***Circular Migration: Belarus***

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Circular mobility being interpreted as a fluid movement of people between countries presumes that it can bring benefits to all the parties involved. However, in regard to contemporary Belarus, circular migration and - broadly - circular mobility bring more problems than benefits. In the long-term perspective, Belarus, as a country of origin, seems to lose more than to gain even if there are some short-term benefits (such as remittances and decrease of potential unemployment pressure on the Belarusian economy). In what follows I explain the pluses and minuses of circular migration.

## **1. Circular mobility between Belarus and the European Union**

Circular mobility to the EU evolves regardless of Belarusian policies on migration, and there is no possibility to stop this flow: it will grow further. According to the data on the EU visas issued for Belarusian citizens in 2011, this number was higher than for any other CIS country, including Russia (Yeliseyeu 2012: 10), 61 visas per 1000 citizens of Belarus. Of course, not all of these people are migrants: many are tourists, visitors, etc. Still, circular migrants are numerous.

The neighboring EU countries are more attractive targets for Belarusian migrants. Therefore, circular migration from Belarus to the EU often has regional character.

Circular migration to each neighboring country has some specific features. However, in all cases, circular mobility to the EU is a way to achieve a higher standard of living than the level available for these migrants if they stay in the home country, Belarus.

## **POLAND**

In 2011, almost every fifth visa (55.2 thousand out of 299.3) issued by the Polish consulates in Belarus was that of the National Long-Stay Visa category (Yeliseyeu 2012: 9). This type of visa is most often issued for those who are either studying in Poland, or working there, or have 'a Pole's Card' (all of them fall into the category of circular mobility). The author also stresses that more than 90 per cent of all the long-stay national visas of the EU countries received by Belarusians in 2011 were issued by the Polish consulates. It is possible to assume that many of these visas were issued for circular migrants.

Due to linguistic closeness of Belarusian and Polish languages, many Belarusian potential trade migrants prefer Poland, especially if they know Polish or easily understand it. This group (migrants to Poland) can be divided into two subgroups:

1. well-educated professionals (university professors, PhD lectures, trainers, doctors) who are in need in Poland as they substitute Polish professionals migrated to the West. Belarusian migrants either constantly live in Poland during the term of employment or regularly circulate for 1-2 weeks periods every month or so. Sometimes they also keep their jobs in Belarus, so that their employment in Poland is a source of additional income and support for their families in Belarus.
2. qualified workers, e.g. truck drivers (as they know Russian to communicate in the CIS, they usually drive Polish trucks to the East – Russia, Ukraine, Belarus. Such drivers are less expensive for Polish companies than Polish drivers). Having a working visa to Poland and being citizens of Belarus, they do not need visas to go to the CIS, and it is also an advantage. They live in Poland for months, but regularly visit their homes in Belarus.

Also, some workers and less qualified personnel work in Poland (partly on illegal basis), other people regularly visit their relatives in Poland.

## LITHUANIA

This is a second EU country by the number of visas issued for Belarusians (in 2011 – 144.3 thousand visas, 34 per cent of them multiple visas) (Yeliseyeu 2012: 7). The targeted group includes university professors and young well-educated scholars who have moved to Vilnius or regularly visit this city as they are employed at the European Humanities University. Hundreds of students from Belarus either live in Vilnius for the terms of education or regularly commute. Upon graduation, only half of them returns to Belarus. Some journalists and oppositional politicians also shifted their offices to Vilnius and commute regularly in both directions.

Additionally, some workers are temporarily employed in Lithuania (and Latvia) in cases when national languages are not required (e.g. in joint ventures). Some Belarusians have business in these countries, they regularly visit their partners, but not live there.

## OTHER EU COUNTRIES (without common border)

Germany is the most attractive EU country for Belarusians. According to the June 2012 national survey by the Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies (IISEPS), 53.7 % respondents expressed a desire to work/study abroad (15.1% in Germany, 11.4% in the US, 8.9% in Russia, and 9.8% in any country), while 41.4% said they wanted to move abroad forever (IISEPS 2012). Italy and Czech Republic are also popular destinations.

Meantime, it is not easy for Belarusians to find a job in the EU countries. Mainly, only researchers and IT specialists are successful: they can get temporary contracts and spend years abroad. The financial crisis in the EU made it much more difficult; nevertheless, those professionals who had already been employed were not affected on the same level as workers. In fact, all EU countries benefit from Belarusian labor migrants as most of these migrants have either vocational or university education (or scientific degrees) and try to abide by the law.

The main driving forces for labor emigration from Belarus are higher salaries, higher standards of living, and much higher quality of life in the EU (this is very attractive for professionals).

## 2. Circular mobility between Belarus and the CIS (including movements in both directions)

The driving force for migrants to Russia is a higher salary for all categories of employment. That is why both workers and professionals move from Belarus. This is a loss for Belarus, as some of migrants moved for job or study would never return back. According to experts, the level of qualification of migrants to Russia is higher than the average level of employed labor force in Belarus. The same is with level of education. According to experts' calculations, 50-60 % of migrants have higher education (complete or incomplete). Most often the qualified migrants are doctors (around 12 %), engineers (10 %), and biologists (7 %), while among the immigrants to Belarus almost 30 per cent are low qualified workers (Luchenok and Kolesnikova 2011).

**Russia** is the major destination for Belarusian circular migrants. According to some estimations, more than 90 per cent of labor migrants go to Russia (Luchenok & Kolesnikova). During the last decade and especially in 2011-2012, Russia has become more attractive than earlier because of a significant decrease in the incomes and the standard of living in Belarus. Now many workers in the fields of construction, agriculture, and petroleum production temporarily work in Russia, either for several months or years (then they visit their families only during vacations). In this case, both Russia and Belarus have some benefits: Belarus escapes from the potential growth of unemployment and receives remittances from Russia. However, Russia benefits much more: Belarusian workers are well-trained, speak Russian, have similar cultural traditions, and usually do not bring their families to

Russia that might become an extra burden for employees or the local authorities. For Russia, bringing in Russian-speaking migrants from the CIS is a part of Russian “Strategy 2020.” So, Belarusian workers and students coming to Russia are welcome. Usually, Belarusians go to particular regions in Russia where there exist networks of such labor migrants (Moscow, S-Petersburg and their oblasts, Tiumen, Hanty-Mansiysk, and oblasts near the state borders – Smolensk, Briansk). Thus, only during the first six months in 2012, Belarusian industries lost almost 18,000 employees, construction – more than 17,000, and most of them found jobs in Russia (Belstat 2012).

This trend in labor mobility is non-stop. Due to the existing Customs Union and since 2012 – Common Economic Space - Belarusians can easily find a legal employment in Russia (Kazakhstan takes the third place following Russia and Ukraine). Being in the Customs Union, Belarus increases the prices inside the country in order to make them similar to Russian, while salaries are still much lower for the similar categories of professionals (which makes it impossible to keep them at home). Therefore, the **Customs Union** is contributing to the labor mobility to Russia – whether this was expected by the Belarusian policy makers or not (at least, there are no official statements on this matter). High level of inflation in Belarus and weak currency also push some groups of people to think about moving to Russia – either for a certain time or permanently.

**Ukraine** is a less popular destination; however, during the last years, for both economic and/or political reasons, some professionals (journalists, businessmen, etc.) moved to Ukraine as they could find a better job there - in foreign firms, private sector, arts, etc. This flow is relatively small, but for Belarus this is a loss of qualified cadres and potentially innovative individuals, as well as loss of possible foreign investments.

Other CIS countries are not such significant targets for migration for the time being.

### **3. Circular mobility between Belarus and the third countries (non-CIS and non-EU)**

The US is the most attractive destination among the third countries (however, not for temporary employment), as it was with Israel in the early 1990s. Currently, “family reasons” are more often indicated for migration in these countries. A small number of Belarusians move to many third countries (e.g. Canada), however, these numbers are not significant. Recently, due to the state agreements, many foreign students go to Belarus from China, some from Lebanon, Syria, Turkey, India, and Sri Lanka.

The main driving force for Belarusians is the same as for the EU, better salaries. This mobility is often not promoted by the state policy, it develops independently.

### **4. Belarusian policy-framework on circular migration**

The National Program on Demographic Security of the Republic of Belarus (2011) provides contemporary basis for labor migration policy-framework in Belarus. The main concept applied in this program is *active state regulation of the legal migration flow*. The CIS (namely, Russia, Ukraine and Kazakhstan) is the only geographic space targeted in the policy-framework (Government 2011).

*Circular migration is not a special target in this Program*, it is not conceptualized and, therefore, not effectively analyzed here. Since the official migration balance is positive for Belarus, circular migration is not addressed within its migration policy framework. As for some latent consequences of joining the Customs Union, the government is aware of potential out-migration; however, existing administrative methods of regulating migration do not work effectively.

Therefore, it is quite probable that circular mobility from Belarus is developing mainly regardless of the official Belarusian migration policy.

## **5. Main strengths and shortcomings of Belarusian policy-framework on circular migration**

The Customs Union creates the situation that determines both strengths and shortcomings for the Belarusian policy-framework on circular migration: According to Belarusian laws, currently, the citizens of the Customs Union are allowed to combine job in two countries and/or legally find a job in any place within the Union. This situation stimulates the flow-out of labor force from Belarus. However, as the Belarusian labor market keeps its stability, jobs (mainly low-paid) are available for almost all potential employees from the Customs Union and the CIS. Also, there were no serious ethnic clashes in Belarus. These are the main strengths of Belarusian policy-framework that attract some inflow of migrants from the same region, the CIS.

The main weakness of the policy-framework on circular migration relates to the sphere of economics: low salaries in Belarus push citizens abroad. Migration policy cannot overcome this. Salaries are especially important for young specialists: the government should develop special sets of privileges (social, medical, etc.), provide houses and other social goods and increase the starting level of salaries. Only positive measures can help as the negative sanctions stimulate the young specialists to find new ways out but not to stay at a low-paid position.

Migration policy to invite all kinds of migrants is not effective as many immigrants are non-qualified workers. The level of immigrants' education is lower than average in Belarus while the average age is higher. From the long-term perspective, as the National Program on Demographic Security states, Belarus needs more qualified personnel to arrive. Also, the economic reforms of the existing labor market must reshape employment and increase labor productivity in Belarus without additional increase in employment.

According to some experts, migration forecasts are also a weakness in the migration policy-framework since these forecasts are not completely developed. This weakness relates to the estimation of influence of out-migration on the national labor market, to the perspectives of in-migration, and the scope of labor force losses due to out-migration (Avseenko 2010).

Also, sometimes policy-framework can contribute to illegal and non-documented circular mobility to Russia, if the registered labor migrants (their families) are obliged to pay in full for their apartments in Belarus. The fact that all the legal money transfers from the CIS arrive in Belarus in Belarusian currency, while money transfer from Belarus to Russia must be only in convertible currency, also may contribute that labor migrants seek illegal ways to sustain their circular mobility and the money transfers.

## **6. What can Belarusian government, the European Commission or other relevant bodies do to improve circular mobility dynamics in each of these 3 directions?**

The European Commission can establish regulations for the CIS migrants that would allow them to be employed only temporary and then be obliged to return back home. Such regulations can improve mobility dynamics and make it mutually beneficial. The EU may sign agreements with the CIS on the temporary labor contracts for the CIS migrants.

The Belarusian government already established some measures on migration (National 2011, point 6); however, they are not oriented to the improvement of circular mobility dynamics.

These measures are more targeted on compensations for immigrants, improvement of legal basis for their arrival in Belarus, and return of Belarusian scholars from abroad (however, the financial basis for above-mentioned measures is very limited). Additionally, Belarus (as well as the EU) can issue regulations on the special payments for those migrants who are returning back from the EU.

Other relevant bodies (e.g. international organizations) can increase their visibility in Belarus and employ more Belarusians (especially young specialists). Foreign countries (both the EU and non-EU) can also increase their business investments in Belarus that may create new jobs, while Belarus can invest abroad and bring Belarusian circular migrants to participate in such ventures.

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