

NEW ECONOMIC AND MIGRATORY TRENDS IN THE BALTIC SEA REGION DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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The articles in this special issue explore different types of migration processes in the countries of the Eurasian region and the EU amid the COVID-19 pandemic. The spread of the coronavirus and the ensuing closure of borders have caused a dramatic transformation in regional migration and economy. Many migrants were stranded: they could neither leave the country of employment nor return home. Having lost their jobs and sources of income, they turned into a highly vulnerable group.

The countries the Baltic Sea region have a special place in Europe. With the exception of Russia, they are members of the EFTA and the EU — the alliances that benefit from a visa-free travel regime, unimpeded movement of people, a common labour market, and unrestricted labour mobility. The populations of the Baltics are different: 1.32 m people in Estonia, 1.9 m in Latvia, and 2.8 m in Lithuania (2019) with their geographical smallness (the area of each of the countries does not exceed that of any German or an average Russian region), limited labour markets, and few employment opportunities complicate the situation of migrants in these countries. Russia is the destination for a significant proportion of migrants, including those seeking employment. The state has a visa-free regime with the CIS and a common labour market with its fellow members of the Eurasian Economic Union.

**Selected demographic and socio-economic indicators
for the Baltic Sea states, 2018-2019**

Country	GDP per capita, USD (2018)	Population, thousand people		Number of international migrants, thousand people as of mid-2019	Unemployment rate, % (2019)	All Migrants, % (2019)	Migrants from non-EU countries, % (2019)	Net migration, thousand people (2018)
		2018	2019					
Norway	81,549	5.324	5.357	75,294	3.854	16,1	4,5	140
Denmark	61,522	5.781	5.806	59,77	5.117	12,5	5,4	76
Sweden	54,295	10.230	10.328	51,404	6.325	20	5,8	200
Finland	50,074	5.513	5.518	48,809	7.425	6,9	2,9	70
Germany	47,832	82.906	83.093	46,472	3.417	15,7	7	2700
Estonia	23,181	1.322	1.325	23,757	5.371	14,7	13,5	19,6
Lithuania	19,089	2.802	2.783	19,482	6.146	4,2	1,4	- 163,9
Latvia	17,747	1.934	1.920	17,771	7.415	12,4	13,6	- 74,2
Poland	15,46	37.977	37.973	15,6	3.846	1,7	0,7	- 147
Russia	11,344	146.781	146.749	11,601	4.800	8*	—	912,3

Comment: *For Russia, the proportion of all migrants;

Prepared based on *Non-national* population by group of citizenship, 1 January 2019; Eurostat. URL: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=File:Non-national_population_by_group_of_citizenship,_1_January_2019.png (accessed 15.11.2020); *Migration Data Portal*, 2020. URL: <https://migrationdataportal.org/search/countries?text=&theme=&tags=10052&category=> (accessed 15.11.2020).

A common problem of the Baltic Sea region and Europe is the ageing of society and the excess of death rate over birth rate (depopulation). In 'old' Europe (the Nordic countries, Denmark, and Germany), the population is growing due to migration — the region's level of economic development is twice as high as that of post-socialist states (Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, Poland, and Russia).

The number and structure of migrants differ from country to country. For example, in Russia, migrants account for 8% of the population. Post-Soviet countries have few migrants from the EU. Meanwhile, in the EU 27, 35m people (7.9%) of the 446.8 m total population have a migration background¹ (21.8 m people [4.9%] are migrants from third countries; 13.3 m [3%], from the EU-27).

The countries of 'old' Europe are typical host countries, while countries of transitional economies have more complicated migration patterns. On the one hand, the citizens of the latter emigrate to more economically developed countries; on the other hand, transitional economies welcome migrants from less economically successful neighbouring countries. In Russia, about 90% of migrants

¹ Population on 1 January by age group, sex and citizenship, 2020, Eurostat. URL: <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/bookmark/6e121a48-729c-4dc9-a8bb-9cd4cf570279?lang=en> (accessed 15.11.2020).

come from the CIS. In Poland, nationals of Ukraine and Belarus account for a similar percentage. Immigration exceeds emigration in Russia, and it is vice versa in Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia. Estonia is a special case with its population involved in short-term circular migration to Finland.

The COVID-19 pandemic forced all countries of the Baltic region to impose travel restrictions. These measures varied between countries. Every state closed its borders, but travel control within countries was not the same, and some groups of migrants were allowed transboundary movement in each country. Sweden's restriction, one of the mildest in Europe and probably the world, has not dramatically influenced the lives of its citizens. In Russia, regions selected what measures to take based on the level of morbidity. Germany and other Baltic region states declared a curfew and tough lockdown restrictions. Finland suspended transboundary migration; Poland and Germany allowed cross-border travel after a one-month hiatus.

The sudden closure of borders in March 2020 to control the spread of COVID-19 tore apart the common European labour market and the existent system of migration ties and eventually paralysed many processes in the mutually complementing economies. In the EU, the lockdown stopped many industries that usually employ migrants. Among them were agriculture (11.9%), domestic services (10.3%), and municipal services (9.9%).² Migrant unemployment rose sharply, particularly so in Norway and Sweden,³ since many migrants had either short-term employment contracts or none at all. Having lost their jobs during the pandemic, they could not count on redundancy pay that laid-off employees are entitled to in the EU countries. In Russia, compensations were paid at the discretion of the employer. At the same time, in all these countries foreign nationals were allowed to extend the duration of migration documents.

Studies carried out in the EU and Russia have demonstrated that migrants are more susceptible to disease amid the pandemic because of physically demanding jobs (in agriculture or construction), deplorable living conditions, and poverty (up to 30% of all migrants in the OECD and 17% in the EU live below the breadline). Migrants' lodgings are often overcrowded. This holds true for 8% of migrants in the OECD and 11% in the EU but for the third country nationals it reaches 20%.⁴ In Russia, migrants live in congested places and run a substantial risk of contracting the virus.⁵

² Immigrant Key Workers: Their Contribution to Europe's COVID-19 Response, 2020, *European Commission*, URL: https://ec.europa.eu/knowledge4policy/publication/immigrant-key-workers-their-contribution-europes-covid-19-response_en (accessed 15.11.2020).

³ Managing international migration under COVID-19. Impact of COVID19 on migration policies: key findings, 2020, *OECD*, URL: <http://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/policy-responses/managing-international-migrationunder-covid-19—6e914d57/> (accessed 15.11.2020).

⁴ Inform # 1 — EU and OECD member states responses to managing residence permits and migrant unemployment during the COVID-19 pandemic, 2020, *European Commission*, URL: https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/oo_eu_inform1_residence_permits_and_unemployment_en_updated_final.pdf (accessed 15.11.2020).

⁵ Ryazantsev, S. V. 2020, The Situation of Migrant Workers in Russia During the COVID-19 Pandemic (Results of a Sociological Study). In: *International Conference The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Migration Mobility*, Institute of Socio-Political Research of the Russian Academy of Sciences and MGIMO University, 27 April 2020, Moscow. URL: <http://испн.рф/the-impact-of-the-covid-19-pandemic-on-migration-mobility/> (accessed 15.11.2020).

Host countries struggled with both providing medical care to and regulating the legal status of migrants who could not return home, get a job, or earn money. According to the EU legislation, once unemployed, migrants have to leave the receiving country. As it was recommended by the European Commission, most EU member states extended the duration of migrants' residence and work permits.⁶

Although the problem of visa support and renewal of residence permits was approached differently by different countries, none reacted promptly, and the rules were relaxed in most cases only for the categories of migrants mentioned in the EU Directive.⁷ For example, Estonia, Norway, and Finland accepted applications but did not issue permits.

To prevent documented migrants from becoming undocumented, the EU, Norway, and Russia renewed all migration documents and statuses of foreign nationals (residence permits, short-term and long-term visas). In some cases, EU states waived the requirement that migrants should leave the country after a certain period of stay. In fact, travel bans made complying with it impossible. In Germany, the authorities were granted the right to reduce the duration of resident permits of third-country nationals who had lost their jobs because of the pandemic. In Finland, the authorities were evaluating if the person applying for permit renewal had means of subsistence. If a new contract of employment was unlikely, the chances of residence permit renewal were also slim.⁸

Based on the procedures for renewing migrants' permits amid the pandemic, the Baltic region states can be divided into two categories:

- states that did not renew residence permits for third-country⁹ nationals who had lost their jobs (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania), but gave them a chance of obtaining a different residence permit should they find new employment (Latvia);
- states that renewed permits for migrants who had had means of subsistence during the period of the previous permit (Finland).

Russia took one of the most liberal decisions in the history of both national and European migration policy: the duration of all migrants' residence permits was extended to 15 June at first and then to 15 September and 15 December 2020. This way labour migrants had a chance to find a new job. Furthermore, tax deferral for migrants' patents was announced.

⁶ A policy framework for responding to the COVID-19 crisis, 2020, *ILO Policy Brief on COVID-19*, ILO, URL: https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/coronavirus/impacts-andresponses/WCMS_739047/lang-en/index.htm (accessed 15.11.2020); Migrants and the COVID-19 pandemic: An initial analysis. Migration Research Series. 2020. N^o 60. URL: <https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/mrs-60.pdf> (accessed 15.11.2020).

⁷ *Directive 2004/38/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council*, 2004, 29 April. URL: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex%3A32004L0038> (accessed 15.11.2020).

⁸ A policy framework for responding to the COVID-19 crisis, 2020, *ILO Policy Brief on COVID-19*, ILO, URL: https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/coronavirus/impacts-andresponses/WCMS_739047/lang-en/index.htm (accessed 15.11.2020); Migrants and the COVID-19 pandemic: An initial analysis. Migration Research Series. 2020. N^o 60. URL: <https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/mrs-60.pdf> (accessed 15.11.2020).

⁹ For EU countries all non-member states are third countries.

Countries of the Baltic Sea region try to bring home their citizens and foreign nationals via transit countries. To this end, chartered air transport connections and transit land corridors were to be arranged. EU countries returned about 500,000 citizens to their home countries and Russia — about 100,000.¹⁰

Communication with their homeland and the authorities of the host/transit country was another urgent problem for migrants across the Baltic region. Obtaining clear and reliable information was often complicated by the impossibility of contacting consulates and embassies, the closure of borders by the native country, insufficient command of the language of the host/transit country, the unclear legal status, and the absence of Internet connection. All EU countries and Russia uploaded multi-language guidelines to the websites of ministries, government bodies, and migrant support centres. The message was spread to migrants via the media, information posters, volunteers and NGOs, texts, and hotlines.

The Lithuanian researcher *Ingrida Gečienė-Janulionė* points out that, experiencing the ageing of the population, brain drains, and labour emigration, the Baltics will definitely benefit from the return and reintegration of migrants. They are importing new ways of organising work, new knowledge and skills. All this will contribute to the economic development of the countries.

Joni Virkkunen from the University of Eastern Finland argues that the visa-free regime and transboundary cooperation have been put at risk both in the EU and in the post-Soviet states, most of which enjoy visa-free travel. The severance of historical labour and trade ties has imperiled some service and development industries. Short-term, seasonal, and rotational circular migration is turning into long-term because of the impossibility of commuting and the costliness of travel and the COVID-19 testing.

Internal migration in the Baltic Sea states has been affected by not only national travel restrictions but also the decline of most industries. Kaliningrad has switched to online services and embraced self-isolation; the employment structure has changed (*Lyalina & Emelyanova*). Similar processes disrupting the usual work-life balance have been observed in Latvia (*Krisjane et al*). They have impacted on both migrants and local residents.

Sergey Ryazantsev, Irina Molodikova, and Alexey Bragin from Moscow examine the timeline of border closures and restrictions imposed across the CIS. They stress positive discrimination in Russian migration policies towards people from historically and politically proximate CIS countries.

The identification of the COVID-19 threat in the Baltics and analysis of threat representation in the Baltic media is the focus of the contribution co-authored by *Vera Zobotkina, Olga Pavlenko, Elena Boyarskaya, and Ekaterina Moiseeva*. Their investigation of the information space shows that there are at least six major media strategies: counter-active, projective, conservative, mobilising, resilient, and reflective.

¹⁰ Coronavirus: European Solidarity in action, 2020, *European Commission*. URL: https://ec.europa.eu/info/live-work-travel-eu/health/coronavirus-response/coronavirus-european-solidarity-action_en (accessed 15.11.2020).

These strategies are universal. Depending on what the goal is, they are used to communicate threats either individually or in combination. The scale of the threat and its consequences bring attention to awareness-raising and threat representation in the media.

The closure of borders and the lockdown have damaged the economies of all countries. The service industries that intensively employ migrants have borne the brunt. All this has brought to the fore global value chains, the prospects of the world economy, and the pandemic-induced closure of Chinese factories. *Yuri Simachev, Anna Fedyunina, and Yuliya Averyanova* believe that despite the tensions between the countries, the Baltics-Russian bilateral trade conducted within global value chains and operations of multinational companies is resistant to geopolitical and economic shocks, despite value chain transformations caused by the pandemic. The authors show that, over the medium term, regional cooperation is possible if sufficient attention is given to the operations of Russian and Baltic transnational companies.

The findings presented in this COVID-19-related special issue emphasise firstly: the need for coordinated international effort and the reduction of transboundary travel restrictions; secondly: setting up different border-crossing regimes for residents of different countries, depending level of morbidity; thirdly: information exchange between governments, consulates, and their citizens. The liberalisation of the migration law by host countries (the so-called ‘corona-amnesty’ of migrants) has proven effectiveness: this measure has made it possible not only to ensure that migrants retain their legal status and access to the labour market but also to curb illegal employment and migrant exploitation. The media, which increase awareness of migrants and local residents, have a paramount role in the pandemic. Finally, it has been demonstrated that regional initiatives supported by local and transnational cooperation may contribute to stronger cooperation and alleviate the consequences of the pandemic.

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