

601. International Migration

FROM EMIGRATION TO IMMIGRATION: NEW PATTERNS AND CHALLENGES IN LITHUANIA

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Short abstract

Lithuania is undergoing rapid demographic changes that reshape not only population size but also the composition of its workforce and the focus of public policy. Since regaining independence, Lithuania has faced severe depopulation caused by working-age emigration, declining fertility, and relatively high male mortality. However, in recent years, a marked shift in migration patterns has emerged: since 2019 year, immigration flow have consistently exceeded emigration, signaling Lithuania transition from a sending country to a receiving one. This change has been driven by several factors, including the crises in Belarus and Ukraine, labour shortages that encouraged migration from neighboring states, and shifts in Lithuania's economic structure. The number of foreign nationals employed in Lithuania rose 2.6 times between 2018 and 2024, accounting for approximately 10% of all employed persons. Most migrants are men aged 25-54 from Belarus, Ukraine and Central Asia, working in medium-skilled sectors such as construction, transport and manufacturing.

The paper analyses how this new migration wave affects demographic indicators, labour-market balance and policy decisions. It also outlines three potential policy paths – from uncontrolled inflows to balanced migration policies aligned with technological change, or restrictive approaches limiting both mobility and innovation.

Preliminary results suggest a dual effect: immigration brings demographic relief and short-term stability but exposes weaknesses in integration systems. Long-term outcomes will depend on how well newcomers are included in communities and access housing, education and healthcare.

While immigration helps reduce labour-force shortages and slows population decline, its long-term effect depends on integration quality — language learning, housing, access to social and health services, and inclusion in local communities. Demographic resilience will depend on aligning migration policy with education, skills development, and innovation so that immigration supports long-term renewal rather than short-term labour demand.

Extended abstract

1. Introduction

In recent years, demographic policy has become a growing concern both in the EU and in Lithuania. Current debates focus on whether public policy can shape demographic trends, and how demographic change, in turn, affects social and labour-market policies. Lithuania's demographic evolution over the past thirty years is characterized by distinct migration cycles. After independence in 1990, the country experienced one of the fastest population declines in the EU - emigration was driven by wage differentials, social mobility and EU membership facilitating free labour mobility. United Nations projections suggest that by 2050, Lithuania's population may fall to approximately 2.2 million, one-third of whom would be aged 65 or over — signaling long-term strain on the labour market and public services. In this challenging context migration becomes a key instrument of demographic policy, but public debate remains polarised: economic, security and cultural dimensions of migration collide.

Recently, a critical shift occurred in Lithuania's migration history – the country moved from being an emigration state to a receiving migration state. Between 2014 and 2018 the net migration loss reached – 96 thous., whereas from 2019 to 2023 net international migration was positive for five consecutive years, reaching 45 thous. in 2023. The main influxes are connected to the Belarusian political crisis (starting in 2020) and the Russian war against Ukraine (from 2022), which drove tens of thousands of Ukrainians, Byelorussians and Russians to relocate to Lithuania.

This study asks how migration processes affect Lithuania's demographic structure and labour market sustainability and how public policy is responding to these changes. Specifically, the research aims to: (1) analyse migration flows in Lithuania and their effect on labour force and demographic structure; (2) evaluate the effectiveness of migration management policy instruments in the context of labour market and demographic sustainability; and (3) define policy improvement strategies to ensure long-term demographic stability. The study also reflects on the interplay between technology and labour substitution: automation may ease shortages, but cannot replace social interaction and service work.

2. Theoretical Framework

This analysis is grounded in three theoretical approaches. Migration Transition (Zelinsky, 1971) posits that countries that achieve a given level of socio-economic development transition from being migration senders to migration receivers. Lithuania seems to have crossed this threshold quickly, as economic growth unfolded alongside shrinking labour supply and regional instability. Dual Labour Market Theory (Piore, 1979) explains persistent demand for foreign labour in medium-skill sectors where local supply is inadequate. In Lithuania, sectors such as construction, transport and logistics makes such demand. Integration and Migration Management Models (Castles, Haas & Miller, 2014) highlight institutional adaptability as a key factor. In the Lithuanian case, migration changes occurred more rapidly than the capacity of institutions to respond, making it an example of a semi-peripheral state adapting to external pressures. Economic necessity merges with humanitarian obligation, migration policy is reactive to short-term needs, while long-term integration systems remain under-developed.

3. Data and Methods

The study uses multiple data sources: National statistics on population, international migration and natural change for 2018–2024; data from the State Social Insurance Fund (SODRA) on third-country nationals in the Lithuanian labour market and social-protection system; administrative records from the Employment Service on foreign nationals' nationality, age and occupational fields; Statistics from the Migration

Department on residence permits, citizenship and immigration flows; Content-analysis of policy documents (national strategies).

Period of analysis is 2018–2024, covering both positive net migration periods and rapid structural change in the labour market. Methodologically the study follows an interdisciplinary mixed-methods design: secondary data analysis, policy document review, expert interview and linked micro-level data from different registries. What is new in this study is the use of linked administrative data together with broader demographic and labour-market statistics.

4. Empirical Findings

Migration Trends and the Labour Market

In recent years, migration has played a growing role in shaping Lithuania's demographics and labour market. At the beginning of 2024, Lithuania's year-round resident population stood at approximately 2.886 million — slightly increasing due to positive international migration flows. Although in 2023 immigration declined from 87.4 thousand to 66.7 thousand and emigration rose marginally to 21.7 thousand, the net migration balance remained positive at around 45 thousand. Meanwhile natural change remained negative, but its deficit is narrowing.

From a labour-market perspective, immigration has played a stabilising role by mitigating the impact of low fertility and ageing. In 2023, the share of economically active persons aged 15–64 reached 78.8% — one of the highest in the European Union. Return migration of citizens is also notable: since 2020, more Lithuanian citizens return than leave each year, and among returnees 82% are of working age.

In 2023, foreign nationals represented 10.7% of the employed population, and their number more than doubled over five years. The majority of arrivals are men from Belarus and Ukraine; numbers from Central Asia and India are rapidly rising. Foreign workers are concentrated in the transport, logistics and service sectors where labour shortages are acute. However, their involvement in high-skilled occupations remains limited — approximately 3.5%.

Overall, migration continues to boost Lithuania's population and labour market, yet it also brings new structural challenges: growing diversity of foreign nationals, shortage of medium-skilled workers and potential impacts of labour-force ageing create risks for the country's long-term economic sustainability.

Integration and Public-Policy Response

Integration outcomes remain mixed. Survey data indicate that 68% of Belarusian and 70% of Ukrainian migrants report the need for Lithuanian-language courses, and 45% face housing or documentation issues. Only 10% intend to remain in Lithuania permanently. At the same time, positive signs emerge: in 2023 the share of Ukrainians who considered staying long-term in Lithuania doubled compared with 2022, and interest in acquiring Lithuanian citizenship is rising.

Lithuania's migration policy is dual-focused: one side emphasizes national-security, cheap labour inflows and cultural-identity challenges; the other side actively constructs integration frameworks. For example, from 1 August 2022 high-skilled non-EU nationals were exempted from the work-authorization decision requirement; from 1 July 2023 a new national-visa regime removed the visa requirement for non-EU nationals coming to work under the shortage-occupations list. These measures indicate a strategic public policy intent to increase Lithuania's attractiveness for labour migration and to address qualified-labour shortages. However, geopolitical shifts, especially the war in Ukraine, have changed the structure of migration flows: Ukrainians dominated arrivals in 2022; Belarusians in 2023; and arrivals from Central Asia

and India are growing. These evolving dynamics create new challenges for public policy: foreign-national integration, language training, cultural mediation and social inclusion. Language barriers and societal attitudes, reflecting some social tension and distrust, impede integration and reduce immigrants' labour-market anchoring. This suggests that policy responses should encompass not only simplified administrative procedures for labour migration but also long-term integration measures: language-course accessibility, intercultural-competence training, and public-information campaigns promoting a positive view of migration. In so doing, the risk of human-capital supply-demand mismatch may be reduced and sustainable demographic-economic development supported.

Nevertheless, policy reflexivity remains weak: although Lithuanian strategic documents recognise migration as a condition of demographic sustainability, often there is lacking coordination between migration policy and education, social-inclusion and regional-local policy.

5. Expected Findings and Policy Implications

Lithuania's migration changes highlight two opposing trends. On one hand immigration helps address ageing and labour-force shortage, providing economic stability and new cultural interactions. On the other hand migration is often short-term, integration systems are not fully developed, language and social-inclusion barriers persist, and public attitude may act as a limiting factor. Migration now plays a lasting role in shaping Lithuania's demographic outlook. Yet a quantitative increase in population alone does not guarantee demographic equilibrium. Achieving long-term sustainability requires a shift from mechanistic migration regulation toward qualitatively coordinated policy, integrating education, labour market, health and social-inclusion measures.

Migration processes are increasingly intertwined with geopolitical events — the war in Ukraine, unrest in Belarus, and rising labour-force demands shape migration-flow volatility. Consequently, Lithuania faces the challenge of transforming a temporary demographic respite into a long-term renewal mechanism. The social-integration dimension assumes particular significance. Beyond language acquisition, housing and labour-market inclusion, the community dimension – trust, sense of belonging and social capital – are vital. Sociologically, integration depends not only on how migrants adapt but also on how local communities respond and include them.

Labour-market analysis indicates growing dependence on medium-skill foreign workers, while the share of older local workers (aged 55 +) increases rapidly. This suggests in the coming years a systematic upgrading of qualifications, language-training and integration measures will be required to ensure immigration contributes to long-term economic balance. The study's context also considers technological processes: automation and artificial-intelligence solutions may partially substitute for labour-force shortages but cannot replace functions requiring human interaction. Long-term response should be a balanced strategy combining targeted migration with technological advancement.

The study will further examine Lithuania's shift toward a receiving state, the implications of reliance on third-country nationals, and the gaps between migration policy and local-level integration. Flexibility and institutional reflexivity will determine whether short-term fixes evolve into lasting demographic resilience. Importance of policy flexibility and reflexivity in managing rapidly changing migration processes. Results on analysis of potential policy models: (i) mass unregulated immigration; (ii) balanced immigration attuned to technological change; (iii) conservative immigration with strict restrictions, limited automation and stagnation.