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Forced migration in Belarus

**Liudmila Shakhotska
Anastacia Bobrova**

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Belarusians as forced migrants

There is limited information on the number of forced migrants from Belarus. Key information can be found in the statistical publications of the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Belarusian office of this organization gives the following explanation: “countries are guided by the principle of confidentiality of information submitted by an applicant. Public bodies of the asylum country have no right to transfer or provide any personal information about an application to his/her state of citizenship” (*Delovaya Gazeta*, 2013). According to UNHCR, the total number of persons from Belarus applying for refugee status, asylum or complementary protection was 6839 in 2011 and 6194 in 2012 (UNHCR, 2012; UNHCR, 2013). European countries (the Netherlands, Sweden, and Switzerland) and the USA were their countries of preference.

Some estimates are available at the websites of Eurostat and US National Security Agency. According to the data for 1998-2007, 16255 citizens of Belarus sought asylum in EU member states (Eurostat Statistics). The main recipient countries were Germany, the United Kingdom, Sweden, France, the Czech Republic and Austria. The US National Security Agency also posts data on Belarusian refugees who arrived in the US territory. According to its estimates, there were 2844 of them 2003-2012 (Department of Homeland Security: 2012).

Forced migrants in Belarus

In Belarus the procedure for granting refugee status has been in place since 1997. Today there is an efficient system for granting asylum, complementary protection and refugee status that meets international standards in the field of forced migration. In Belarus forced migration is defined as movements of persons from the state of citizenship or previous customary place of residence due to: the fear of persecution because of race, faith, citizenship, nationality, membership in a social group or political beliefs; or due to the threat of death penalty, torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment; or movements as a result of violence in the course of international or national armed conflict (Law, 2008). Even though Belarus only joined the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees in 2001, experience accumulated earlier and adopted normative acts allowed for a prompt amendment of the Law “On Refugees” of 1998 and the adoption of the Law “On Granting Refugee Status, Complementary and Temporary Protection to Foreign Citizens and Stateless Persons in the Republic of Belarus”. This law complies with the 1951 Convention and entered into force in July 2009. For instance, the period for examination of foreigners’ applications was reduced by two weeks and is now equal to one month. In addition to that, a foreigner has an opportunity to obtain complementary protection, until he/she is granted refugee status, which gives him/her a right to a number of social guarantees. This includes the right to legal employment in Belarus.

All aspects of asylum procedure in Belarus are regulated by the Regulation on Granting Asylum to Foreign Citizens and Stateless Persons in the Republic of Belarus and Loss and Revocation Thereof adopted in 2006. According to that document, asylum “can be granted to foreigners present in the territory of the Republic of Belarus who were forced to leave the state of citizenship or state of previous customary place of residence due to their persecution for political, religious beliefs or nationality” (Decree, 2006).

Over 15 years, from 1997 to 2012, refugee status was granted to 854 foreign nationals, or one fifth of all applications in 1997-2012. Applicants came from over 40 countries, but the status was granted to citizens of only 15 countries. 70% of persons granted refugee status in Belarus were citizens of Afghanistan. Other countries whose citizens were granted refugee status more often than others were Georgia, Azerbaijan, Tajikistan, Ethiopia and Iran. The main influx of migrants who applied for refugee status came in 1997-2003 (table 1). Subsequently (in 2004-2012) the number of applications became three times smaller and was equal to 1030 with 135 petitions granted.

One should note that along with applications from citizens of countries where armed conflicts took place or where they are currently taking place (Pakistan, Iraq, Syria) there is also a growing number of applications from the third-world countries. Furthermore, 40 citizens of Ukraine and 31 citizens of Russia applied for refugee status in 2004-2012. The situation with Russia is especially ambiguous, as it is unclear why those who have practically the same rights as Belarusians and access to facilitated citizenship acquisition procedure would ask for refugee status. Probably they are not native Russians. But it is impossible to find out for sure.

Table 1. Number of foreigners who were granted refugee status in Belarus, 1997-2012

Country	Refugee status granted		Applied in 2004-2012	Refugee status granted
	1997-2003	2004-2012		Total for 1997-2012
Azerbaijan	27	2	26	29
Armenia	1		12	1
Afghanistan	521	78	513	599
Georgia	99	37	155	136
India	2		2	2
Iraq	1	1	26	2
Iran	5	7	28	12
Cameroon	1		2	1
Liberia	1		1	1
Libya		1	1	1
Pakistan		5	28	5
Palestine	9		5	9
Rwanda	1			1
Tajikistan	28	4	14	32
Ethiopia	23		10	23
Total	719	135	1030	854

Source: Ministry of Interior of the Republic of Belarus

At the legislative level the rights of acknowledged refugees are to a large extent equal to the rights of foreign nationals permanently residing in Belarus. They have access to healthcare and educational institutions, the right to judicial protection, the right to employment or unemployment benefits, the right to social and retirement benefits, and they also have some special rights, such as, for instance, the right to financial assistance, assistance in getting housing and registration. Refugees have a right to the citizenship of the Republic of Belarus, if they meet all the formal requirements (seven years of living with refugee status, knowledge of the state language, available source of income, absence of other state's citizenship), which they actively use in practice.

Complementary protection is granted to the most vulnerable categories of refugees, namely children.

Office of UNHCR in Belarus, Belarusian Red Cross and other non-governmental organizations render both social and material support on a regular basis.

The Belarusian Ministry of Interior, as a regulating body in the field of refugee affairs, emphasizes the role of the UNHCR office in rendering assistance to refugees and asylum-seekers and funding support projects (Matus, Tumashik, 2007). Funding of such projects is especially important in the context of the limited resources allocated from the state budget.

Nevertheless, there is a pressing issue: drafting legislation that would list measures aimed at stimulating the integration of migrants in general and refugees in particular. According to UNHCR programme officer Tatiana Selivanova, “among problems that acknowledged refugees face most often one can primarily mention issues associated with employment, housing and language learning. They are the key obstacles for efficient integration and adaptation of acknowledged refugees in Belarus” (Tumashik, 2009). At the same time some problems can be quickly resolved with minimal costs. Experts note the “unwillingness of refugees to show initiative in resolving integration problems”. Studies show that even when they have the necessary qualifications and high levels of education, they prefer to work at the markets, though “there are those who work at enterprises, collective farms, different organizations, are registered as individual entrepreneurs” (Matus, Tumashik, 2007).

There are sufficiently favorable conditions for the social integration of refugees in Belarus. An example of assistance in the integration of refugees in Belarus is Integration A, the foundation located in the city of Gomel that supports forced migrants and offers Russian language courses that everyone can attend. Another example is the anti-crisis division “Facility for temporary accommodation, psychological and social adaptation of refugees”. Women and children are supported by the Children and Youth Creativity Center “Eureka”, where arts and sports training and events are held for refugees.

Therefore, one can list the following main policy priorities in the field of forced migration in Belarus at this stage:

- development of national plans for the integration of refugees;
- assessment of the national asylum system prospects within the Common Economic Space;
- enhancement of efforts undertaken by local public agencies when working with refugees.

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