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Brain drain in an authoritarian regime on the example of Belarus

Master's Thesis

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The author's declaration

I have written this Master's thesis independently. All viewpoints of other authors, literary sources and data from elsewhere used for writing this paper have been referenced.

Mariana Tulf / signature of the author /

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Abstract

Brain drain and the competition to attract top talent have become increasingly relevant in recent years. However, there has been a lack of in-depth research on brain drain in authoritarian regimes. The political situation in Belarus has experienced significant turmoil, particularly after the falsified official presidential election results in 2020, which sparked widespread protests. As a result of the unstable political climate, many talented Belarusians have chosen to emigrate from the country. This thesis aims to identify the factors that influence highly skilled individuals' decision to emigrate from an authoritarian regime on the example of Belarus. The hypothesis is that the decision-making process for highly skilled individuals in authoritarian countries, such as Belarus, is complex and influenced by a combination of push and pull factors.

Process-tracing methodology is employed in this thesis to trace the relationship between the 2020 presidential election and the progressive process of autocratization and repression in Belarus. Ten in-depth expert interviews were conducted with both Estonian and Belarusian experts to gather data. The findings reveal that since 2020, the primary push and pull factors influencing the decision to emigrate have become more politically oriented, whereas prior to 2020, they were predominantly economic. The impact of intervening obstacles, such as COVID-19 restrictions and sanctions, remains uncertain due to varying expert opinions.

In addition to presenting the results, this thesis also offers a brief overview of potential policy implications that could help address brain drain in an authoritarian context.

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As a gesture of support to the Belarusian diaspora, I will use the Belarusian spelling of names whenever possible.

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Introduction

Brain drain refers to the phenomenon of highly skilled individuals emigrating from their home country to another. It is a lesser-known form of international migration, and it has become an area of concern for many governments due to its potential consequences. While brain drain has been studied in various contexts, there is a lack of research on brain drain in authoritarian regimes, where accessibility to data and information is often limited. In recent decades, Belarus has been under an authoritarian regime and the ongoing oppression and violation of human rights have contributed to the loss of highly skilled individuals, leading to negative impacts on the country's economy, innovation, and overall development.

The political situation in Belarus has undergone significant turbulence in recent times. The situation worsened deeply when the official presidential election results were announced in August 2020, triggering nationwide protests. The aftermath of the last election is still ongoing, and an efficient solution has yet to be found. Additionally, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Belarus are being liquidated by the government and disregard of human rights in Belarus continues to happen (Guillot, 2021). This state of affairs is triggering and forcing more talented Belarusians to find a new environment that is more suitable for them.

This thesis addresses brain drain in an authoritarian regime and investigates why highly skilled individuals are leaving Belarus. The objective of this thesis is to identify the determinants that influence the decision of highly skilled to emigrate out of an authoritarian regime using the example of Belarus. In other words, the hypothesis is that the decision-making process of highly skilled individuals to emigrate from an authoritarian country such as Belarus is complex and influenced by a combination of push and pull factors. In addition to the aforementioned objective, an additional outcome of this study is to provide policy recommendations for addressing brain drain. Prior research has identified strategies for transitioning from brain drain to brain circulation within a society, but brain drain in an authoritarian regime together with efficient solutions has not been investigated in depth yet.

To clarify, the phenomenon referred to as brain drain has several definitions, but in this thesis, it is used to refer “to the movement of talented (and often expensively trained) people from developing nations to developed ones” (Brock & Blake, 2015: 2). The definition of highly skilled migrants also varies in different studies. For example, in “Brain Drain and Brain Gain: The Global Competition to Attract High-Skilled Migrants” individuals were defined by higher educational attainment, this includes advanced academic or professional certification beyond high school qualifications (Boeri, 2012: 39, 54). In another study highly educated were defined as individuals who have completed 13 or more years of formal education (Mayr and Peri, 2009: 4). In a third study which investigated emigration of highly skilled in Belarus in 1995 brain drain was measured through change in the rate of research and development (R&D) personnel (Nesvetailov and Artyukhin, 1995:74). Prudencio has concluded it quite well in his thesis: “There is no universal definition of a highly-skilled (migrant), and the diversity of terms and definitions vary from country to country, mostly in accordance to their own legislation – i.e. their own policy objectives” (Prudencio, 2014: 12). In this study, "highly educated", "highly skilled", and "talents" refer to individuals who have attained tertiary education level or who are professionals in some field (e.g., IT or medicine sector). Furthermore, these terms are interchangeable and considered synonyms. However, measuring brain drain is challenging because it is difficult to differentiate migration of highly skilled individuals (including those who have attained tertiary education level) from overall migration.

In this thesis, the main research question is: What are the primary push factors contributing to brain drain in Belarus, and how have they been affected by the progressive process of autocratization and repression in the country? This thesis aims to stimulate discussions about the impact of authoritarian regimes, with a particular focus on recent developments in Belarus. In the first chapter of this thesis, a concise historical overview of the authoritarian regime in Belarus is provided. The second chapter offers an introduction to the main international migration theories, the theoretical perspective adopted in this work, the phenomenon of brain drain in an authoritarian regime, and presents background information and available statistics on the emigration of highly skilled individuals from Belarus. The third chapter details process-tracing as a research methodology and outlines the data gathering methods employed in this study. Specifically, ten semi-structured in-depth expert interviews were conducted to examine brain

drain in Belarus, investigating the aftermath of the August 2020 events and the main push and pull factors that influence the decision to migrate. Interviewed experts are from Belarus and Estonia and author acknowledges that the background of the experts may influence the findings. All the Belarusian experts have already emigrated themselves and are active members of diaspora across Europe. Furthermore, all the experts from Estonia have extensive experience in working with Belarus and valuable up to date information. The last chapter presents the empirical findings. In this thesis, the primarily focus is on the time period after the events of August 2020. However, in some instances, comparisons and examples from earlier years will be introduced to illustrate the causal mechanisms.

It is worth mentioning that the ongoing Russian war in Ukraine has deepened the divide between the EU and Belarus. When the author conceived the idea for this thesis, the conflict had not yet started. It is now clear that the Belarusian government's support for Russian aggression has made it extremely challenging for the EU to continue advanced diplomatic relations with Belarus. Therefore, while this thesis will not focus on the Russian war in Ukraine, it will consider the impact of intervening obstacles for emigration, in this case such as COVID-19 restrictive measures, sanctions against Belarus, and the conflict in Ukraine on the emigration of talented and skilled Belarusians. Furthermore, the results of this study demonstrated that, despite not being the primary focus, the Russian war in Ukraine has a significant impact on brain drain in Belarus.

1. Authoritarian regime in Belarus

The historical background of the authoritarian regime in Belarus is presented in this chapter to provide a contextual foundation. Kathleen J. Mihalisko's essay "Belarus: retreat to authoritarianism" will serve here as a main source. Mihalisko observed step by step the process of Belarus into an authoritarian regime. This section concentrates more on the post-Soviet Union era that led to authoritarian regime and concludes with the presidential election and the aftermath of the nationwide protests of August 2020.

Firstly, the power of russification and sovietisation of Belarus should not be underestimated. The USSR system had a catastrophic influence on the Belarusian language, and one could say that the Belarusian language paid the price for educational achievement under the Soviet system. (Mihalisko, 1997: 233-235). The 2019 census reveals that approximately 60% of the population acknowledges Belarusian as the native language of the country; however, only slightly more than a quarter of the population utilizes it in their daily lives (Coakley, 2022). Belarusian language is now considered more hostile after the August 2020 election by the regime, and it symbolises resistance. Furthermore, bookstores and Belarusian-language based newspapers are being targeted by the authoritarian regime (Coakley, 2022). This is proved by the fact that UNESCO has marked Belarusian as a vulnerable language due to "the widespread use of Russian" (UNESCO, 2010: 37).

Brain drain of Belarusians has been noted even before the collapse of the USSR. In her article Kathleen J. Mihalisko writes that "the quality of secondary schools was on par with all-Union standards but was mixed when it came to institutions of higher education". She adds that "many of the most talented minds and artists quit Belarus for Moscow were opportunities and facilities where superior" (Mihalisko, 1997: 235). Although, this fact is not surprising as same talent mobility occurred all over the Soviet Union. The disintegration of the Soviet Union created a vacuum in Belarus, which President Lukashenka effectively exploited to fulfill his personal ambitions. His rise to power can be viewed as a striking case of how populism can morph into despotism and authoritarianism (Mihalisko, 1997: 224-225, 253-254). In addition, Belarus was

the last country in Eastern Europe to replace Soviet-era parliament, the last “to create the post of president and hold a presidential election” (Mihalisko, 1997: 247).

Already in the 1990s Lukashenka promised “to merge the Belarusian economy with Russia’s” to improve living standards (Mihalisko, 1997: 254). This demonstrates that contradictory to the Baltic States the idea was never to separate the state from Russia. It did not take Lukashenka’s government long to start restricting the development of independent media and access to information. Within his first year of presidency the protests started, and this marked the arrival of riot police and violence (Mihalisko, 1997: 257, 264). The 1995 elections were considered neither free nor fair by the international election monitors (ibid.).

The first restrictive measures against Belarus were introduced in 2004 because of “unresolved disappearances of two opposition politicians, one businessman and one journalist in 1999 and in 2000” and the measures included amongst others arms embargo and a ban on the export of goods (The Council of the EU and the European Council, retrieved on 08.02.2023 B). During the 2000s there was liberalization to some degree. The government “launched a Hi-Tech Park, offering special rules to encourage digital businesses” (Wilson and Giczan, 23.03.2023A). In 2019, the IT sector became a key factor for the economic growth, and it created expectations that it could lead to the opening up of Belarus’ economy and bring about changes in the political landscape (ibid.).

Further deterioration into authoritarianism happened in August 2020 when official presidential election results were announced, and Lukashenka was declared winner for a sixth presidential term. General public and democratic states rejected the results considering them falsified. One of many reasons to doubt the official results is that the election process was not observed by the Office of Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) and before the election they shared their concern regarding the intimidation of prospective candidates and arrest of opposition activists (OSCE, 2020). Unlike in previous instances where fraudulent election results were met with a sense of resigned acceptance (with some exceptions), the recent events witnessed thousands of Belarusians taking to the streets to challenge the outcome (Bedford, 2021: 808). The aftermath of the fraud election led to mass protests, police oppression and sanctions from the EU, UK, Canada, USA, and other countries. Opposition leader Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya fled the country,

and thousands were arrested (Hurst, 2021). As of June 2021, Belarus suspended its participation in the Eastern Partnership which can be considered as another step backward. Since the fraud election and Belarus' involvement in Russia's military invasion of Ukraine, the EU has adopted a variety of restrictive measures against Belarus (European Council, retrieved on 08.02.2023 A).

Hundreds of thousands of highly skilled Belarusians, including IT specialists, have left the country after the fraud election. "During the first year of the political crackdown, up to 20,000 IT workers left the country, an estimated 5 to 10% of the total sector employees" (Wilson and Giczan, 23.03.2023A). The real numbers of brain drain in Belarus are unknown as the authoritarian regime downgrades the issue and hides the numbers and from the receiving countries' perspective it is difficult to separate highly skilled from the rest of the migration flow. In conclusion, upon reviewing the historical events, it can be concluded that the origins of the dictatorship in Belarus can be traced back to the mid-1990s. The latest developments include the fraudulent presidential election of August 2020 and the country's involvement in the war in Ukraine. The historical background presented in this chapter provides the reader with the necessary contextual foundation, thereby facilitating a better understanding of the possible causal mechanism between authoritarianism and brain drain.

2. Theoretical discussion

In the first part of this chapter, an overview of international migration theories is presented. For the purpose of this thesis the push-pull framework is adopted to explain the phenomenon of brain drain in Belarus. After the overview of the chosen theoretical approach, the phenomenon of brain drain is examined. Finally, background information on brain drain in Belarus is provided through available statistics. This section offers a theoretical understanding and multifaceted view of the impact of brain drain in Belarus.

2.1 Neoclassical economics theory and push-pull framework

International migration is a comprehensive and complex matter because there are many types of migration (e.g., retirement migration, population displaced, highly skilled migration) (King, 2012: 11). Multiple theories have been developed to explain international migration, however there is not one coherent theory of international migration, but rather a collection of theories that have evolved separately from each other (Massey et al., 1993:432). The main international migration theories are the neoclassical economics macro and micro theories and push-pull framework, the new economics of migration theory, dual labour market theory, world systems theory. Due to the limited length of this thesis, it is impossible to analyse all the abovementioned theories in depth. After careful consideration neoclassical economics and push-pull framework will be chosen as primary models to investigate brain drain in Belarus. In this chapter the chosen theoretical approach is introduced.

One of the earliest and most recognized theories of international migration is neoclassical economics theory, and Ravenstein's "laws of migration" from 1885 and 1889 are regarded as important and groundbreaking contributions to this school of thinking (Prudencio, 2014: 11). Critics have pointed out that these laws to some degree are outdated and rather empirical generalisations (King, 2012:12). However, it is impossible to disregard Ravenstein's laws of migration as they were fundamental for future developments in migration research and theorization. Russel King (King, 2012: p 12) has well summarized and paraphrased them:

1. *Migrants move mainly over short distances; those going longer distances head for the great centres of industry and commerce.*

2. *Most migration is from agricultural to industrial areas.*
3. *Large towns grow more by migration than by natural increase.*
4. *Migration increases along with the development of industry, commerce and transport.*
5. *Each migration stream produces a counterstream.*
6. *Females are more migratory than males, at least over shorter distances males are a majority in international migration.*
7. *The major causes of migration are economic. These laws are more about internal migration and rather empirical generalisations. However, they are considered cornerstones in migration theory and inspired Everett Lee's push and pull framework. (King, 2012: 12-13)*

Neoclassical economics macro theory with its simple and compelling explanation of international migration has significantly influenced public opinion and functioned as the intellectual foundation for many immigration policies (Massey et al., 1993: 433). This theory was originally developed for explaining labour migration and according to neoclassical economics macro theory international migration “is caused by geographic differences in the supply of and demand for labor” (ibid.). In other words, differences in salaries causes workers “from the low-wage country to move to the high-wage country” (ibid.). The result is that by moving from low-wage to high-wage economies migrants alter the dynamics of supply and demand for labour in both sending and receiving country, eventually leading to a scenario where wage disparities are eliminated, and so is the need for migration (King, 2012: 13-14).

At the micro level, migration is the outcome of choices made by rational actors (individuals) who balance the advantages and disadvantages of relocating based on available comprehensive information (ibid.). People decide to migrate “because a cost-benefit calculation leads them to expect a positive net return, usually monetary, from movement” (Massey et al, 1993: 433). So, in comparison when the macro theory is based on country/society level then micro theory is based on individual level. The disadvantage of neoclassical approach is that it considers geographic and wage differences but no other factors such as personal matters nor socio-cultural factors. In addition, this theory does not acknowledge the political reality of numerous obstacles to international mobility and critics have furthermore pointed out that this approach is disconnected

from the reality of migration (King, 2012: 14). Lastly, this theory fails to explain different variations of migration (such as brain drain).

In 1966, inspired by Ravenstein's laws of migration, Everett S. Lee wrote "A Theory of Migration" which colloquially is known as the push-pull theory (King, 2012: 13). It is considered to be a component of neoclassical economics theory (Prudencio, 2014: 16) or an extension of neoclassical migration theory. According to this model, migration is influenced by a combination of push factors that arise in the region or country of origin and pull factors that originate in the destination region or country (King, 2012: 13). The push factors can, for example, be poverty, unemployment or political repression and pull factors include better income, welfare system and political freedom (ibid.). Lee himself does not call them as push-pull factors but rather establishes them as streams and counterstreams (Lee, 1966: 57).

Lee's migration framework divides factors into four sub-categories. They are following:

1. *Factors associated with the area of origin.*
2. *Factors associated with the area of destination.*
3. *Intervening obstacles.*
4. *Personal factors.* (Lee, 1966:49-50)

Figure 1 shows the push-pull framework and how the first three factors interact with each other. "In every area there are countless factors which act to hold people within the area or attract people to it, and there are others which tend to repel them. These are shown in the diagram as + and - signs. There are others, shown as 0's, to which people are essentially indifferent" (Lee, 1966: 50). In addition, there are personal factors which influence the decision to migrate as well and each individual responds differently to a set of push and pull factors, depending on their economic situation, life phase and character (King, 2012: 13). Lee also notes that highly educated persons are more influenced by the pull factors than push factors as they "are under no necessity to migrate" but do so frequently because they receive better offers elsewhere (Lee, 1966: 56). However, this can be different in the case of Belarus. It can be argued that for many Belarusians push factors, such as lack of freedom of speech and oppression, are more influential than pull factors. In other words, Belarusians are under necessity to migrate.

Lee's Theory of Migration

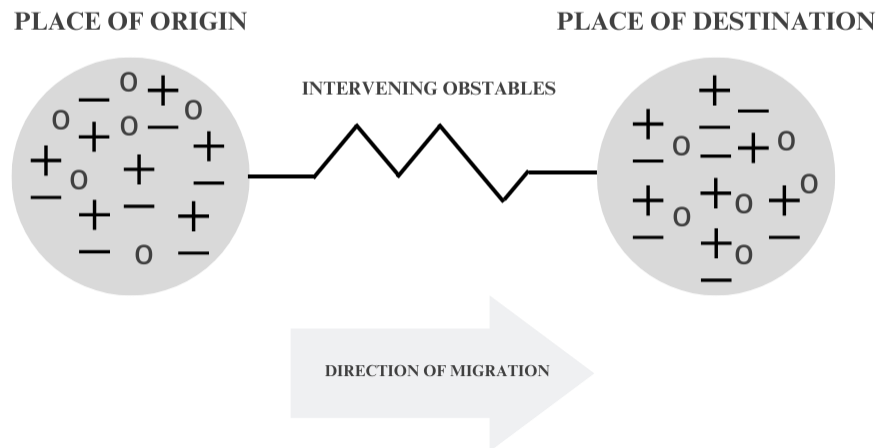


Figure 1: Push-pull framework based on Lee's theory of migration. Created by the author of this, based on Lee's theory (1966).

Lee reaches a conclusion, the decision to migrate is never completely rational and therefore there are many exceptions to the theory (Lee, 1966: 51). Russel King notes that push-pull models “reflect the neoclassical economics paradigm, based on principles of utility maximization, rational choice, factor-price differentials between regions and countries, and labour mobility” (King, 2012: 13). The disadvantage of this theory is that the focus is on the desire to migrate, while ignoring the ability to migrate (e.g., poverty). For example, with Belarusians, they may have the desire to migrate, but sanctions that make it extremely difficult to obtain a visa can decrease their ability to migrate. As a result, we can argue that individuals are less likely to migrate than this framework suggests.

Despite the criticism, neoclassical and push-pull model remain the best framework for explaining migration of highly skilled for multiple reasons. Firstly, compared with alternative theories such as the new economics of migration theory and dual market theory, chosen approach considers most of the factors that influence the decision to migrate. For example, the new economics of migration theory argues that migration theories are made typically by families and the goal is to maximise expected income of the household (Massey et al., 1993:436). Another example is dual

market theory, where international labour migration is primarily explained through pull factors in receiving countries (King; 2012: 16). However, in the case of Belarus the decision to migrate is influenced mainly by push factors, so it is important that the chosen theoretical approach includes push factors. The third alternative approach would involve examining brain drain from the perspective of Hirschman's theory of exit and voice. According to this theory, exit refers to an individual's choice to terminate their association with an organization (or in this case, a country) due to dissatisfaction, whereas voice involves expressing discontent (e.g., protests) in the hopes of influencing and potentially altering the policies of the organization (Barry et al., 2014: 575). While Hirschman's theory is applicable to some extent to the context of countries and provides valuable insights into the decision-making process of individuals during exit (emigration), it falls short in fully addressing the broader systemic issues within Belarusian political system and fails to adequately examine the specific factors that influence the decision to emigrate.

Taking the abovementioned points into account, the selected push-pull theory, which encompasses individual push and pull factors, personal considerations, and intervening obstacles, emerges as the most suitable approach for examining brain drain in an authoritarian regime. In the case of Belarus, there are a multiplicity of evident push factors (authoritarian regime), pull factors (freedom of speech, fear free society), but also many personal matters (situation with family) and intervening obstacles (absence of visa). All of these influence the decision of highly skilled to move out of Belarus. Another benefit of this approach is that the neoclassical economics theory allows to study brain drain in Belarus on both macro and micro level (Prudencio, 2014: 17). Emigration of highly skilled Belarusians can be explained by differences in the supply and demand for labour in sending and receiving countries. However, at the same time, brain drain in Belarus is also a result of individuals making decisions based on cost-benefit calculations.

2.2 The phenomenon of brain drain

This chapter introduces a variation of international migration called brain drain. As stated earlier in the introduction, brain drain refers to the emigration of skilled individuals (who may have

received costly education and training) from developing countries to developed ones. (Brock & Blake, 2015: 2). In other words, it is a high rate of emigration of skilled personnel. The term "brain drain" was introduced by the British Royal Society to describe the migration of scientists and technologists from the United Kingdom to the United States and Canada during the 1960s and early 1970s (Cervantes and Guellec, 2002).

Brain drain as a subject of study has become more relevant. According to EBSCO Discovery database there were over 1500 peer-reviewed results in 2002-2012. Meanwhile between 2013 and 2023 with the same criteria there are over 6000 results (EBSCO Discovery, retrieved 12.03.2023). Recent studies have exhibited a significant trend of increased empirical research, encompassing not only improved descriptive data on a cross-country scale but also thorough analysis of individual country scenarios (Gibson and McKenzie, 2011: 108). There are numerous reasons why skilled workers want to or must leave their country of origin. These include low salaries, unfavourable working conditions, limited opportunities for professional advancement and security concerns (Brock & Blake, 2015: 12).

Brain drain as an overall phenomenon of international migration has been investigated by multiple academics and experts. For example, the book titled "Brain Drain and Brain Gain: The Global Competition to Attract High-Skilled Migrants" by Boeri et al. states that brain drain is "politically more acceptable as inflows of skilled workers tend to reduce earning inequalities in the host country" and highly educated migrants typically integrate into the job market more swiftly and thus assimilate into society with minimal friction within the native population (Boeri, 2012: 3). The aforementioned study highlights that skilled migration does not generate concerns in host country as "skilled migrants do not compete with unskilled natives in terms of accessing the welfare state" (ibid).

This phenomenon occurs in most sectors, but it is especially prevalent among health professionals. (Brock & Blake, 2015: 12). In the case of Belarus, the brain drain has been mostly observed through the technology sector due to its rapid growth before 2020. During the 2000s the government of Belarus launched an innovative tech industry, including a Hi-Tech Park outside Minsk, which had its own reduced tax and legal regime (Jackson, 19.03.2023). The

initiative was extremely successful and raised hope for a reform in a regime. After August 2020 IT specialists were one of the firsts to identify numerous falsifications in the election and to participate in the mass protests (Wilson and Giczan, 2023A). The regime counterattacked and this led to a fleeing of the IT sector. The brain drain of tech workers accelerated with Russia's invasion of Ukraine (Wilson and Giczan, 2023B). Emigration of highly skilled Belarusians as an overall phenomenon has not been studied in-depth yet but growing number of articles and interest shows the relevance of this topic. One of the earliest available mentions of brain drain in Belarus dates to 1995 Science and Technology Studies peer-reviewed journal. The article points out that from 1990-1993 "there was a decrease of 63 per cent in the number of scientific professionals" and already then Belarus was far behind compared to other transforming Eastern-European states (Nesvetailov and Artyukhin, 1995:73).

The author of this thesis believes that the process of brain drain in democratic states and in non-democratic states varies because push and pull factors are different between those two situations. Due to that it is important to explore available literature on brain drain in Eastern Europe and in authoritarian regimes as well. Firstly, an authoritarian regime is characterized by leaders acquiring power through undemocratic methods or, in some cases, initially winning office through fair elections but subsequently curbing electoral competition (Frantz, 2018: 6), which is the primary distinction between democratic and authoritarian regimes. Secondly, brain drain in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) has been previously investigated. The highly skilled individuals from former USSR countries prefer to emigrate in search of an increased sense of security, recognition, and financial rewards (Ienciu and Ienciu, 2015: 284). Additionally, highly skilled individuals from CEE countries migrate to Western or Northern Europe seeking improved access to medical care, greater financial support, professional training programs, and better working conditions (ibid.). The study by Ienciu and Ienciu utilized data from the World Economic Forum's Global Competitiveness Report 2014-2015 to analyse the factors influencing brain drain from 12 CEE countries, but it did not include Belarus.

Freedom of foreign movement in a non-democratic regime has also been studied. For example, an article by Barry et al. "Freedom of foreign movement, economic opportunities abroad, and protest in non-democratic regimes" states that the main push factors in an authoritarian regime

are the absence of economic and political prospects and oppressive circumstances in the sending country (Barry et al., 2014: 577). It is also added that the pull factors, such as the “existence of political and economic opportunities abroad”, influence the decision to emigrate as well (ibid.). The objective of this study was to examine the potential negative relationship between freedom of international mobility and anti-government protests in non-democratic nations and they used dataset of 125 countries for 26 years. Another study about brain drain in a growing authoritarian regime was conducted about Turkey. In this study it is discussed that highly skilled are frustrated with the growing political instability and as the repressive measures of the regime intensify more educated citizens are interested in emigrating (Elveren, 2018: 1, 49, 52).

While studying international migration in an authoritarian regime it is interesting to observe the reaction of the regime itself as well because authoritarian regimes have a different approach compared to democratic or hybrid regimes when it comes to free movement. From one perspective, authoritarian regime can decrease the attractiveness of protests and other forms of dissent by enabling emigration and thereby reducing the associated costs for individuals expressing dissatisfaction (Barry et al., 2014: 574-576). In other words, if a non-democratic country permits highly skilled individuals to emigrate, there is a possibility that the remaining society is less inclined to challenge the regime (ibid.). Additionally, the talents who have left often send remittances back, thereby improving the standard of living within the authoritarian regime (ibid.). The alternative option is for the authoritarian regime to restrict freedom of foreign movement. Highly skilled individuals often earn higher incomes compared to low-skilled individuals, resulting in greater contributions to the regime's budget. Furthermore, they actively try to control their population, and this can lead to implementing strategies to prevent individuals from leaving the country. For example, to prevent emigration of young specialists, Belarus has implemented a mandatory work placement scheme. To clarify, it is a scholarship program in which the government funds the education of talented individuals. These individuals must then work in a designated position (and location) assigned by the authorities for two years to repay the cost of their education. The alternative is to pay for their own education, which is not financially feasible for many. This system has received a lot of criticism and has been called a “form of forced labour” (Ramirez, 15.04.2019).

Countries are starting to recognize the benefits of implementing selective immigration policies that target skilled individuals (Boeri et al., 2012: 17-18). “Highly qualified migrants can bring valuable skills which are in short supply, new entrepreneurial spirit, and they can also be a booster to local welfare systems” and experts believe that there will be an increase in competition for skilled individuals in the coming decades (ibid.). However, from the perspective of the sending country it is more of a negative phenomenon. Brain drain increases inequality between countries and societies and decreases the chances for sending society to develop its institutions (Brock & Blake, 2015: 3). Developing countries often subsidize education with taxpayer money and highly skilled individuals who emigrate do not contribute back into the tax system (Gibson and McKenzie, 2011: 112).

The race to attract the best talents continues and so far, it “has been run mainly through adjustment of migration policies” (Boeri et al., 2012: 3). Multiple solutions have been offered by academics to overcome brain drain. Firstly, the overall objective should be to move from brain drain to brain circulation. The definition of brain circulation is “international bi-directional human mobility” or in other words, “two-way mobility instead of one-way mobility” (İnce, 2020: 1095-1097). This means that after temporarily living in a receiving country, highly skilled later transfer obtained skills to the sending country. Another solution offered precisely for the case of Belarus is the following: “For instance, Belarus could promote the flow of capital from those who have left home by lowering taxes on the transfer of money from abroad, cooperating with the diaspora, and providing more educational opportunities for young Belarusians” (Rudnik, 2017). In another study about brain drain in Turkey (also politically unstable regime) the recommendations were the following: to increase funding of research and development, raise the quality of education, to increase cooperation with diaspora and more international study programmes (Elveren, 2018: 134-135).

To summarise the third chapter, brain drain as a phenomenon and authoritarian regime in Belarus have both been studied in-depth separately. The earliest mentions of brain drain in Belarus date back to 1995. After the 2020 events, there have been a couple of articles mostly concentrating on the tech industry. For this reason, the author of this thesis claims that brain drain in Belarus has not been investigated enough. Brain drain in authoritarian context is complex because it includes

more factors beyond just economic determinants and that emigration of highly skilled in this case is not just migrants moving from developing country to a developed one or from low salary to high salary society.

2.3 Background statistics on brain drain in Belarus

This subchapter provides an analysis of available statistics on brain drain in Belarus, utilizing data from Eurostat and previous studies on this topic. It is worth noting that many databases and governments do not specifically collect data on talent mobility, but rather on overall international migration. Nevertheless, prior research has demonstrated that the emigration rates of highly educated individuals are significantly higher than those of less educated individuals (Mayr and Peri, 2009: 4). From this, we can infer that if overall international migration has increased, so has talent mobility. However, the author primarily relies on sources that specifically address brain drain whenever possible.

Eurostat annually measures the number of first residence permits issued in the EU. In 2020, Belarus was among the top six countries whose citizens received first residence permits. A year later, in 2021, the number increased from 63 565 to 149 020 citizens, and only Ukraine and Morocco had more citizens receiving first residence permits (Eurostat, 2022). These statistics reflect overall international migration, but as previously mentioned, international migration includes brain drain, and highly educated individuals are more likely to migrate than those with less education. Eurostat does not measure talent mobility separately. Since these statistics are from 2020 and 2021 when the Russian war in Ukraine had not yet started, and consequently, the aggression had not impacted the growth. The following figure illustrates that during the more stable period in Belarus (2016-2020), the amount of first residence permits acquired by Belarusians in the EU was lower and after August 2020 events, in 2021, the number of acquired permits increased rapidly.

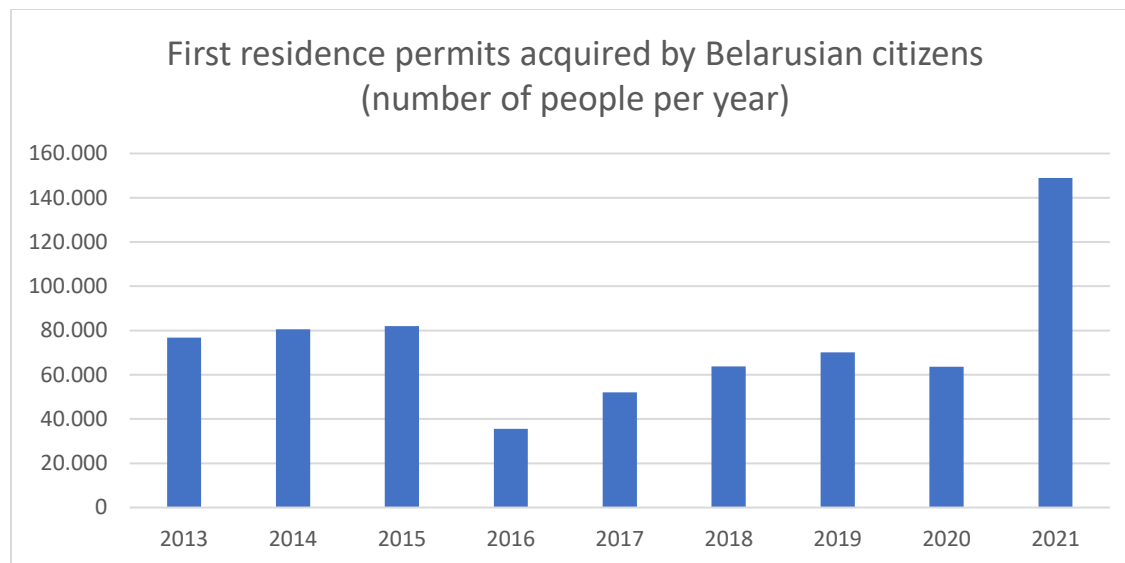


Figure 2: First residence permits acquired by Belarusian citizens (number of people per year) in the EU. Graph created by the author of this thesis, based on Eurostat data.

Johannes Wachs, a researcher at Complexity Science Hub Vienna, concentrated in his study on brain drain in IT sector in Belarus and Russia after the start of the Russian war in Ukraine. He measured brain drain using metadata of GitHub users. GitHub is widely recognized as the leading online global platform, serving as a hub for hosting and facilitating open-source IT projects (Martynuk, 13.01.2023). Wachs' findings highlight the striking extent of brain drain in Belarus (in IT sector), which surpassed even the levels observed in Russia. According to the data, a notable proportion of GitHub users (13.6%) chose to change their country listed on their GitHub profiles by June 2022. This percentage further escalated to 19.2% by November 2022, indicating a significant increase in emigration trends among the Belarusian developer community (Martynuk, 13.01.2023). Although, Wachs' study concentrated only on IT sector and this data is not interchangeable to other business sectors, it illustrates the growing brain drain in Belarus.

Another way to measure brain drain is through human flight and brain drain indicator, “The human flight and brain drain indicator considers the economic impact of human displacement (for economic or political reasons) and the consequences this may have on a country’s development. The higher the index, the greater the human displacement” (TheGlobalEconomy.com, retrieved 12.03.2023A). Figure three shows increase of brain drain since 2018, which could potentially be attributed to the improved relations with the EU and

certain liberalization measures undertaken by the regime. The human flight and brain drain index continues to also increase after August 2020 events. Europe’s average for 2022 was 3.66 index points based on 41 countries and for Belarus it was 4.2 (ibid.). However, it is necessary to also note for comparison that the same index for Estonia was 4.4 (ibid.), which is considered a democratic country. This index involves voluntary emigration of professional workers, forced displacement of highly skilled intellectuals who are fleeing their country due to fear of repression, and the economic impact of brain drain (Fragile State Index, retrieved 10.04.2023).

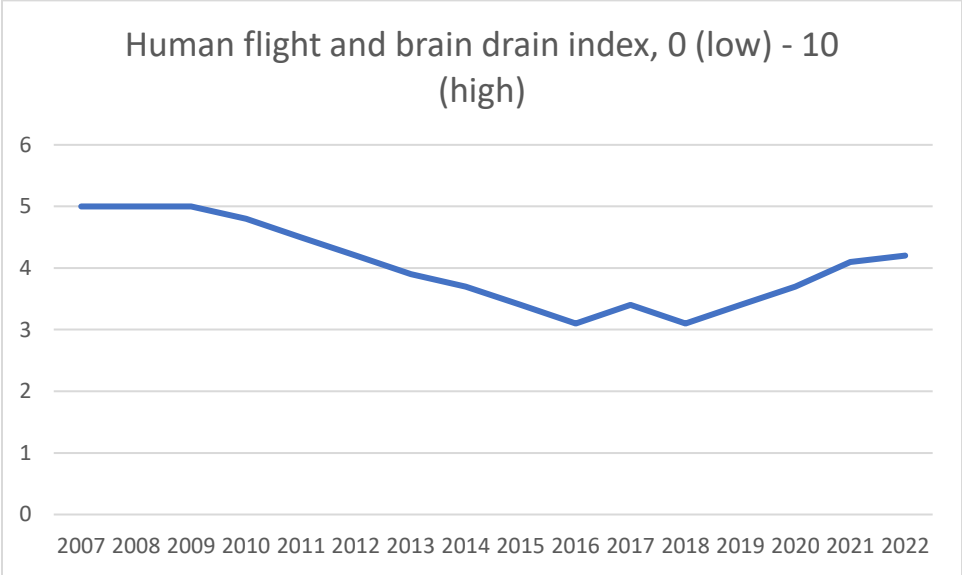


Figure 3: Human flight and brain drain index in Belarus, graph created by the author (Source: TheGlobalEconomy, retrieved 12.03.2023)

One way to identify and confirm the correlation between the emigration of highly skilled and the political situation is to compare the results of human flight and brain drain index with political stability index. The political stability index assesses the perceived likelihood of government destabilization or overthrow through unconstitutional or violent means, which encompasses politically motivated violence and terrorism (TheGlobalEconomy.com, retrieved 01.05.2023B). The index is a combination of various indexes obtained from numerous sources, such as the Economist Intelligence Unit, the World Economic Forum, and the Political Risk Services (ibid.). These underlying indexes indicate the probability of an unstable transfer of power, armed conflicts, violent protests, civil unrest, international tensions, terrorism, as well as ethnic, religious, or regional conflicts (ibid.). If we compare the two indexes (figure 4 and 5), we can

observe that as political stability decreased, the index of human flight and brain drain grew, indicating an increase in the number of citizens who left.

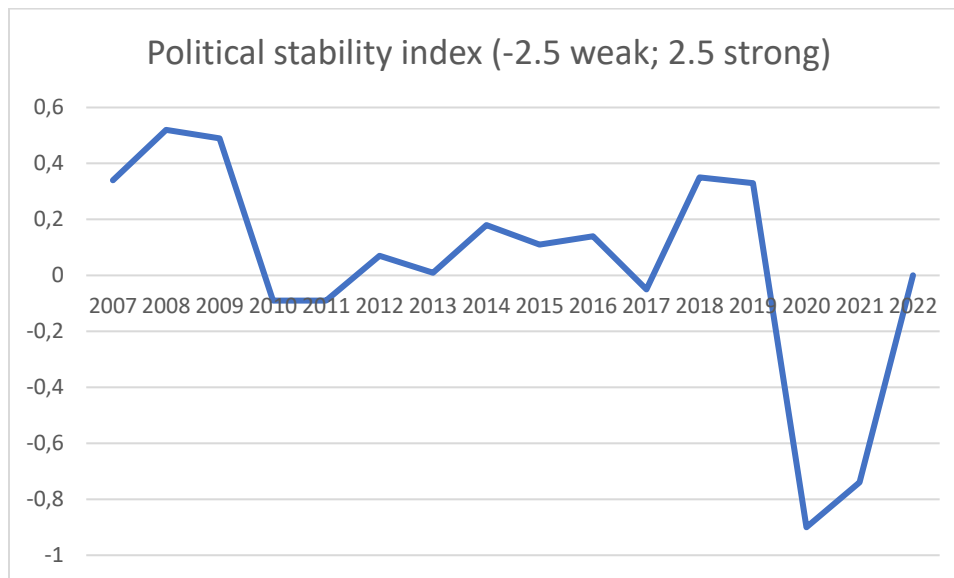


Figure 4: Belarusian political stability index 2007-2022, graph created by the author (Source: TheGlobalEconomy, retrieved 01.05.2023)

In October 2022 a survey was conducted by National Poll and The Center for New Ideas to study the Belarusian diaspora. 1 631 respondents took part in this survey. The author of this survey highlights that a significant number of Belarusians have left their country as a result of the political crisis, yet precise data regarding the exact number of emigrants remains unavailable (Korshunau, 2023). According to the study 74 % of the respondents have higher education and 13 % claimed that they have completed a post-graduate degree (ibid). This indicates that the Belarusian diaspora mainly consists of highly educated. Another interesting aspect is that 96 % of respondents left Belarus legally but the highest percentage of illegal emigration happened in 2021 due to COVID restrictions (ibid). Furthermore, respondents were asked if they plan on returning to Belarus to live: 42 % wished to return to Belarus and 25 % said they do not plan to return (ibid.).

Lastly, which is the most relevant in this thesis' context, the respondents of National Poll and The Center for New Ideas survey where asked why they left Belarus. The results of the survey

indicate that the factors influencing emigration from Belarus can be categorized into several groups: security concerns, limited opportunities, and economic factors. The first and most prominent group pertains to individuals who have left Belarus due to security considerations. This includes a heightened sense of insecurity, fear of persecution by the regime, and a desire to avoid regime-imposed penalties. These reasons are particularly relevant in the context of the recent wave of migration triggered by the events of 2020. The second group is associated with a perceived lack of prospects within the country, as individuals seek new experiences and a broader worldview. Lastly, the third group encompasses economic reasons, which were more prominent in earlier waves of migration before 2020, with reduced popularity among the most recent wave. The following figure summarises Korshunau’s findings.

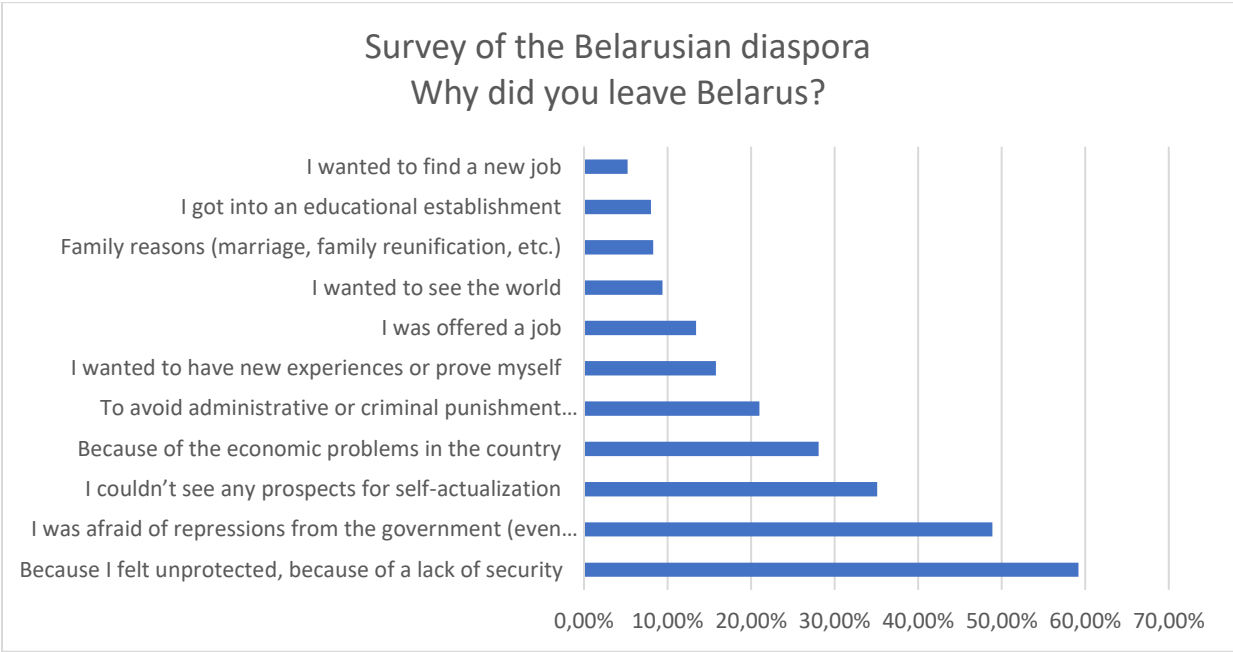


Figure 5: Survey conducted of the Belarusian diaspora in 2022 with 1631 respondents, graph created by the author of this thesis (Source: Korshunau, 2023)

In conclusion, the background information and the statistical data provided an overview of the present scenario concerning brain drain in Belarus. The sources have confirmed that since 2020, emigration of highly skilled individuals has increased, and in addition, the Russian invasion of Ukrainian territory has accelerated brain drain even further. While IT sector has been affected the most, other business sectors have been affected as well. Furthermore, the background statistics demonstrated that the prominent push factors are associated with security concerns

(feeling unprotected, afraid of repressions). Thirdly, the survey revealed that the main reasons for leaving Belarus were security, fear of repressions, lack of prospects and the economic crisis.

3. Research methods and questions

In the third chapter, the methodology and sample selection are explained. Firstly, the data gathering process is introduced, which involved conducting ten semi-structured expert interviews. Secondly, the interview guide is presented in detail. Thirdly, the primary research method, process-tracing, is presented. This is used to identify causal mechanisms between various events and actions. The empirical part of the study involved several stages: preparation of the interview guide for semi-structured expert interviews, conducting the interviews, transcribing the interviews and qualitative data analysis using process-tracing methodology.

Due to the limited scope of this thesis, the author chose to interview only Belarusian and Estonian experts, acknowledging that the results are confined to their perceptions of the phenomenon. The selection of Belarusian experts was based on their understanding of the unique social, economic, and political context of the country, as well as their firsthand experience. Additionally, they possess access to local networks and resources, thereby enhancing the validity of the data. All the Estonian experts included in the study are advisors or diplomats in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Estonia. They were chosen for their political and diplomatic perspectives on the situation. These experts shared extensive experience and up-to-date information, which is valuable for understanding brain drain in Belarus. Furthermore, their inclusion adds diversity to the study, as interviewees from different backgrounds provide a range of perspectives.

The principal research question is:

What are the primary push factors contributing to brain drain in Belarus, and how have they been affected by the progressive process of autocratization and repression in the country?

The objective of the question is to identify the main factors that drive the decision to emigrate, with a focus on the push factors. The research question aims to explore how the progressive

repressions in the country have influenced those determinants. By examining these aspects, the question aims to gain a deeper understanding of how political developments, specifically the progressive process of autocratization and repression in Belarus, are connected to the emigration decisions of highly skilled individuals.

3.1 Data and sources

The main data gathering method in this thesis is semi-structured in-depth interviews. Interviews with experts gave detailed overview and shed light to the present issue. Compared to survey/questionnaire interviews give the experts a chance to explain the phenomenon in detail and researcher obtains exclusive (in-depth) access to expert knowledge. Since Belarus' government does not publicize trustworthy and non-altered data, it was difficult for the author to give local viewpoint. Interviews with Belarusian nationality experts helped to overcome this issue.

It is important to define who is considered an expert in this research. In simple terms, experts are a form of information source. "Experts are people who have special knowledge about social facts, and expert interviews are a way of gaining access to this knowledge" (Bogner & Menz, 2009: 47). Furthermore, it is important to understand that experts with different backgrounds describe the same social phenomena in different ways and "it is also possible for diverging descriptions to conceal similar phenomena (Bogner, Littig & Menz, 2009: 9). Usually, experts can be identified by the following criteria: they have published in the relevant literature and are active in the corresponding associations and organisations (Bogner & Menz, 2009: 50).

During this study purposive sampling and snowball sampling methods were used to select experts. "Purposive sampling is a selection method where the study's purpose and the researcher's knowledge of the population guide the process" (Tansey, 2007: 770). This was helpful in sampling those deemed most appropriate. To avoid data saturation, experts with diverse backgrounds were interviewed. The sample includes Belarusian researchers and highly educated who had left their country (diaspora), representatives of business sector, Estonian diplomats whose field of work is associated with Belarus and a former NGO representative. In

addition, the so-called snowball method of recruitment was used to enlarge the sample pool. The snowball method means that interviewed experts were asked if they know and could recommend anybody else suitable for this research (Morris, 2015: p 58). When possible face-to-face interviews were conducted in Estonia. However, as multiple experts lived elsewhere, some interviews were conducted via videocall (Zoom, Pexip, Messenger).

In total ten expert interviews were conducted with Belarusians and Estonians to investigate the aftermath of August 2020 events and the impact of brain drain. It is important to note that multiple experts (4 out of 10) wished to remain confidential due to security concerns. Furthermore, some experts agreed that their names could be revealed in this study but did not wish to be associated with any particular citations. Therefore, while presenting results and opinions of the experts all the names of the experts were replaced with pseudonyms (Expert 1, Expert 2, etc.) to guarantee the safety of interviewees. The order of the pseudonyms was randomised, and it is not in correlation with the order of experts presented in Table 1. These safety steps were taken due to the sensitivity of the research topic. Prior to conducting the study, the experts were asked for their consent to participate in the research. The ethical considerations of informed consent were thoroughly explained to the participants, and they were given the option to opt-out of the study at any time. Average interview lasted 45 minutes. About half of the interviews were conducted in Estonian as both the author and the interviewee were Estonians, and the rest were in English. Interviews conducted in Estonian were later translated. For transcribing interviews in Estonian, speech recognition and transcription editing service by Aivo Olev and Tanel Alumäe was used (Olev and Alumäe, 2022). Similarly, to transcribe interviews conducted in English speech-to-text platform rev.com was used. After transcribing qualitative data analysis software Delve was used for categorising and coding collected data. Once the interviews were coded process-tracing was used to analyse the data. All the audio recordings of the interviews were saved and are at the hands of the author. The files will be deleted once the thesis is complete.

	Name/Description	Additional notes	Time of interview
1.	Former activist in NGO in Belarus	Currently working in IT field in Poland, wishes to remain confidential	17.03.2023
2.	Diplomat of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Estonia	Wishes to remain confidential	23.03.2023
3.	Kärt Juhasoo-Lawrence, Advisor of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Estonia		27.03.2023
4.	Anastasiya Fiadotava, Belarusian researcher		27.03.2023
5.	Marko Koplmaa, Estonia's Special Representative to the Belarusian opposition in Vilnius		27.03.2023
6.	Sergey Vorozhun, Belarusian businessman located in Estonia		29.03.2023
7.	Belarusian researcher located in the EU	Wishes to remain confidential	29.03.2023
8.	Irina Suursild, Representative of Valgevene Maja MTÜ		07.04.2023
9.	Vitaliy Molchanov, Representative of the Office of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya in Estonia		10.04.2023
10.	Advisor of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Estonia	Wishes to remain confidential	12.04.2023

Table 1: Overview of the interviewed experts in chronological order, created by the author of this thesis.

3.2 Interview guide

While developing the interview guide Alan Morris' book called "A Practical Introduction to In-Depth Interviewing" was used for guidance. "The interview guide is constituted by key topics that fundamentally structure the interview" (Morris, 2015: 41). Questions used in the research are open-ended and divided into opinion/value questions and knowledge questions.

Opinion/value questions “involve asking interviewees what their opinion is of something related to the topic under the discussion” and knowledge questions “ask interviewees about their factual knowledge of a situation, policy or process” (Morris: 2015: 44). As the interviews were semi-structured it gave the possibility for the experts to give long and detailed answers. There were four main interview categories: *Belarus as an authoritarian regime and history of brain drain in Belarus, reasons why Belarusians are leaving Belarus, impact of brain drain in Belarus and the relationship between the EU and Belarus, overcoming brain drain and future of Belarus.*

Interview guide
<p><i>Topic 1: Belarus as an authoritarian regime and history of brain drain in Belarus.</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is your connection to Belarus? • Could you describe the situation with Belarusians leaving their country after August 2020? What were the events that led to the emigration of talents and skilled people? When did brain drain in Belarus start? • What were the reasons that during 2015 presidential elections there were no massive protests and in 2020 there were massive protests?
<p><i>Topic 2: Reasons why Belarusians are leaving Belarus.</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are the main pull-factors for Belarusians to move to another country? • What are the main push-factors for Belarusians to leave their country?
<p><i>Topic 3: Impact of brain drain in Belarus and the relationship between the EU and Belarus.</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is the impact of brain drain in Belarus? How does brain drain affect Belarusian government, Belarusians? What has changed in Belarus due to brain drain? • Is the current regime stopping Belarusians from leaving the country? • How has the Russian war in Ukraine influenced brain drain in Belarus? • What is the impact of the EU’s sanction packages regarding brain drain in Belarus?
<p><i>Topic 4: Overcoming brain drain and future of Belarus.</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do you see brain drain in Belarus in the future? • Do you have any other remarks or additional information on this topic?

Table 2: Interview guide, created by the author of this thesis.

3.3 Process-tracing method

This thesis assumes process-tracing (PT) as its main method. As mentioned above process-tracing method is used as a tool to identify the process that led to brain drain in Belarus. “Process tracing (PT) is a research method for tracing causal processes using case studies” (Beach, 2017: 1). The main idea behind the PT is “that through seeking the key elements of a hypothesized

causal mechanism within a case, it should be possible to identify whether the mechanism is operating – that is, one should be able to trace the mechanism from the cause to the effect” (Crasnow, 2017: 7). PT is used to understand how a specific outcome or event happened and it involves gathering detailed information about the relevant events, actions and actors involved in the chosen process. For tracing the process, it is possible to use various sources, such as interviews, relevant literature or observations. Through process-tracing we should be able to trace the process and identify the causal mechanism. The objective is to find evidence to support the theory. Process tracing is not just a historical explanation of events, but rather “it draws on theories to explain each important step that contributes to causing the outcome” (Bennet and Checkel, 2014: 8, 10). This way of thinking (causality and causal explanation) dates back over two hundred years and was strongly influenced by David Hume (ibid.). Hume’s argument was “if the first object had not been, the second never had existed” (Hume, 1999: 146). So, in this case the author is trying to find evidence whether the development of the authoritarian regime triggered brain drain in Belarus.

There are three different process-tracing methods for distinct research purposes: theory-testing PT, theory-building PT and explaining-outcome PT. “Theory-testing process-tracing deduces a theory from the existing literature and then tests whether evidence shows that each part of a hypothesized causal mechanism is present in a given case” (Beach and Pedersen, 2016: 11). With theory-building the researcher is searching “in the theoretical literature to gain clues about potential mechanism that could link a cause and outcome together” (Beach, 2017: 1). Explaining-outcome process-tracing does not seek to test or build theories and it is not theory-centric, but rather tries “to craft a sufficient explanation of the outcome” (Beach and Pedersen, 2016: 11).

In this thesis theory-testing method will be applied. The author will use the push-pull framework and the goal is to evaluate the existing theory by tracing the causal mechanisms which link the causes of August 2020 mass protests to the brain drain of Belarusians. We will evaluate the validity of the chosen theory and identify any gaps and weaknesses of the theory. Theory-testing process-tracing consist of the following steps: the first step “is to conceptualize a causal mechanism between” the cause (X) and outcome (Y) based on reviewed literature and theory

(Beach and Pedersen, 2016: 14). The second step is the operationalisation of the theorised causal mechanism, and the third step is to collect empirical evidence which “can be used to causal inferences” (ibid). The same steps were followed in this thesis as well. Through this process we can see if the causal mechanism was present and to which degree.

Crasnow explains the importance of theory and background information followingly “Theoretical frameworks and background knowledge point to possible causes and effects in a similar way” (Crasnow, 2017: 10). So, in this case push-pull theoretical frameworks points us to look at the push and pull factors of highly educated migrants including intervening obstacles (e.g., traveling restrictions, sanctions) and personal matters (e.g., family). Supporting literature about repressions and attacks on protestors directly illustrates the political instability which has led to progressive brain drain. The regime works actively to intimidate and harass everyone who is anti-Lukashenka. As the majority of the protestors are highly skilled (students, academics, specialists, medical professionals), and due to that sectors where highly skilled workers predominant are influenced by the repressions as well. For example, Belarus is now experiencing one of the most substantial declines in academic liberty globally (Van Elsuwege, 2021). Furthermore, the background statistics presented in subchapter 2.3 give us evidence that brain drain has increased after 2020. To conclude once we have the results from process-tracing we will compare them to the theoretical assumptions and final conclusions will be revealed. Going back to Lee’s migration framework and focusing on push and pull factors of highly skilled, the process-tracing helps to link the factors which influence the decision to migrate.

Bennet and Checkle have summarized ten aspects for transparent application of process tracing (Bennet and Checkel, 2014: 21). The practices of PT include the following:

1. *Cast the net widely for alternative explanations*
2. *Be equally tough on the alternative explanations*
3. *Consider the potential biases of evidentiary sources*
4. *Take into account whether the case is most or least likely for alternative explanations*
5. *Make a justifiable decision on when to start*
6. *Be relentless in gathering diverse and relevant evidence, but make a justifiable decision on when to stop*

7. *Combine process tracing with case comparisons when useful for the research goal and feasible*
8. *Be open to inductive insights*
9. *Use deduction to ask “if my explanation is true, what will be the specific process leading to the outcome?”*
10. *Remember that conclusive process tracing is good, but not all good process tracing is conclusive (Bennet and Checkel, 2014: 21)*

The author of this thesis will follow these ten criteria. As the fifth and sixth criteria point out it is important to choose carefully the starting and the ending point. For example, the historical overview provided before, established that in 1990-1993 there was a significant decrease in researchers (Nesvetailov and Artyukhin, 1995: 73), but it would be too long of a period to analyse within the frame of this thesis. Therefore, the starting point is the 2020 presidential election, and the end point is 2023 (time of writing this thesis) as the process of brain drain is still happening. It is important to note that the process-tracing takes into account Russian war in Ukraine and its impact on talent mobility in Belarus. Theory-testing process tracing will demonstrate the linkage between the cause and outcome. The found evidence will give an overview of the causal mechanisms in brain drain in Belarus.

In conclusion, theory-testing process-tracing is the most fitting method for this research for the following reasons. In the case of brain drain in Belarus, it is important to firstly analyse the phenomenon through general theory (such as multiple push and pull factors including political instability and repressions) and then to develop specific hypotheses about how these mentioned factors may be causing the emigration of highly skilled in Belarus. By using theory-testing process-tracing it is possible to systematically examine the causal mechanism and to potentially identify strategies for brain circulation and decreasing brain waste.

4. Results

In the fourth chapter, the results of process-tracing will be presented, which will assess the causal mechanism of brain drain in Belarus through theory-testing process-tracing. As of 2023, it is a well-known fact that the Belarusian democratic movement is dissatisfied with the authoritarian regime that has governed the country since the mid-1990s. Additionally, repressions by the authoritarian regime are expected to be one of the main push factors for highly skilled Belarusians to leave their country. Although the author of this thesis believes that the following causal mechanism can be applied to various moments in Belarusian history, the study will focus mainly on the aftereffects of the August 2020 events. Figure 6 summarizes the process-tracing results and the links between the causal mechanism will be evaluated with the data gathered through expert interviews. The fraudulent presidential election is the starting point, and the outcome is that the progressive process of autocratization has affected the primary push factors.

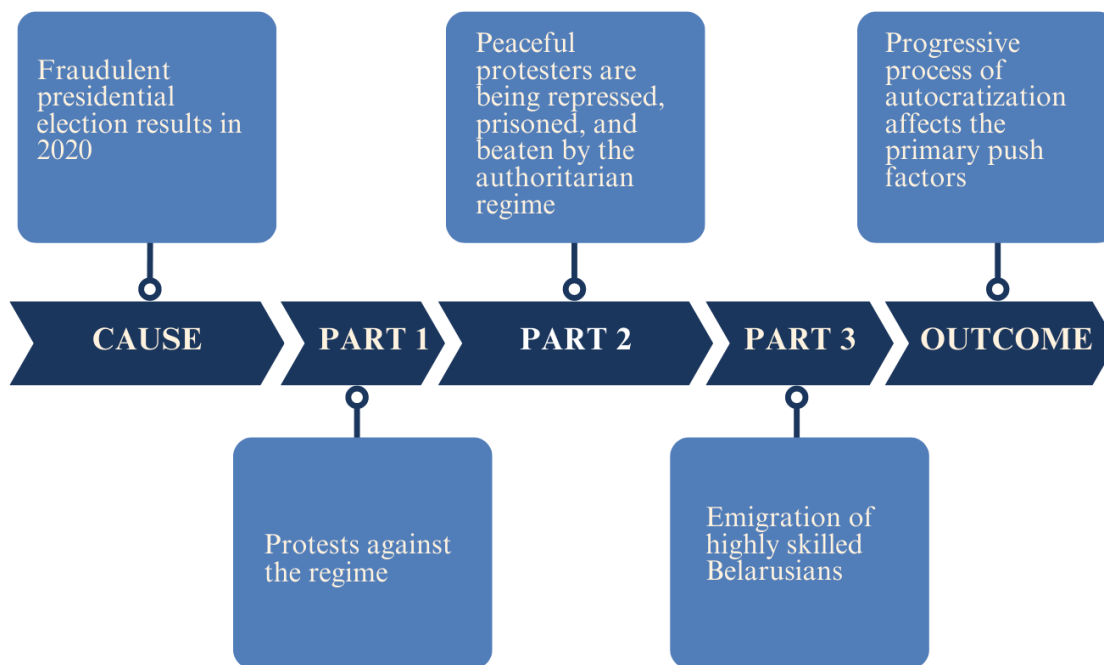


Figure 6: Tracing brain drain in Belarus through process-tracing, created by the author of the thesis.

4.1 Fraudulent presidential election in 2020

The simple explanation for the cause of the mass protests in August 2020 is the fraudulent election in Belarus in 2020. However, the situation is much more complex, as the 2020 protests were not the first time when citizens expressed their dissatisfaction with the authoritarian regime and with the falsified presidential election results. The regime had some moments which could be considered more liberal (such as launching the Hi-Tech Park in the early 2000s), in general, its actions are motivated by fear, repressions, and the destruction of opposition. It is important to uncover why such massive protests had not occurred previously and to identify the factors that had changed within the past five years.

The interviews revealed that the results of the 2015 presidential election led to some protests, but these were not comparable to those seen in 2010, and especially not to the ones in 2020. Furthermore, 2020 marked the first time when a substantial portion of the population actively demonstrated their discontent and took to the streets (Bedford, 2021: 808). Therefore, it can be argued that the same causal mechanism was not present post 2015 elections compared to 2020 elections. There is not one clear explanation for this, but rather a range of factors that played a role. In 2015, Belarusians were afraid and cautious due to Russia's actions towards its neighbouring countries that sought democracy. Additionally, there were massive repressions during the 2010 protests, and people were still recovering from that experience. Moreover, in 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic and the regime's inactivity in dealing with the health crisis, along with the emergence of new strong opposition leaders, motivated people to stand up for their beliefs. Experts explained the difference between 2015 and 2020 elections and subsequent events accordingly:

Expert no. 2: “In 2020, there were new candidates who were close to the middle class. Viktor Babaryka was a bank manager, and Siarhei Tsikhanouski, who was already quite popular at the time, went to small towns and villages in Belarus and talked to people, giving them a voice in the political process that they had not had in 10-20 years.”

Expert no. 4: “I remember that the war in Ukraine started with the occupation of Crimea, and then Belarusians became really scared about this and afraid that the conflict

would spread to their own country. So, people who were opposed to Lukashenka's government understood that protesting could potentially provoke a dangerous situation. The quick occupation of Crimea by Russia and the relatively weak response from Western countries made it clear that it was not the right moment to protest [in 2015]."

Expert no. 2: "A particularly important aspect was the COVID-19 pandemic. There was no clear strategy to combat the pandemic."

Expert no. 6: "It is not just due to the coronavirus situation, but also because a new generation had emerged, or grown up with the right to vote. Additionally, due to the wider variety of different social media platforms, Belarusians can communicate with each other more easily, travel more and compare their lives here and abroad. Also, I think that in general, the tiredness of the stagnation in Belarus has had an additional impact, but this is also due to the new candidates and leaders."

Another explanation to the trigger in 2020 is the partial liberalization between 2015 and 2020. For example, the Hi-Tech Park launched by Lukashenka's government was extremely successful and encouraged by the success in 2017 the government liberalized even further (Wilson and Gazan, 23.03.2023A). "The growing prominence of Belarus' IT sector raised hopes that it could help open the country's state-dominated economy and, perhaps, reform its stagnant, repressive politics" (ibid).

Expert no. 9: "Before the 2020 elections, there was a significant amount of freedom to the extent that an individual could openly express their intention to run for president. Such an act in Belarus was considered outrageous and seen as an attempt to overthrow the government. The softening of the regime was a result of the warming of relations with the European Union and the deterioration of relations with Russia. During that time, Lukashenka's objective was to alleviate the sanctions imposed on Belarus after the 2010 elections."

Expert no. 1: "People were empowered to fight back by the hope that Belarus's policy had given during the past five years. The government decided that it was necessary to modernize the economy, open it up, and provide greater opportunities for private entrepreneurs to succeed. As a result, people, especially the younger generation, had a

legitimate hope that society was changing, and that the country, which had lived in a post-Soviet dream until that moment, was finally changing.”

Additionally, one rare occasion when the regime listened to public opinion, was with the unemployment tax (so called “parasite” tax) which was established in 2015 and which also triggered mass protests. The unemployment tax was especially unpopular among youngsters who were ready for the society’s change (Bedford, 2021. 813). Lukashenka cancelled the controversial law in 2018 (RFE/RL, 26.01.2018). This experience gave hope that maybe the regime will listen the voters during the next presidential election.

Expert no. 5: “People started to protest already sometime before 2020 when the anti-parasite law was issued. This new law was initiated, approved, and then withdrawn under popular pressure. It was something new in the Belarusian context and it was the moment when people felt quite empowered, realizing that they could take action without relying on the state.”

To summarise, the tiredness with the authoritarian regime’s actions and primarily fraudulent elections led to mass protest in 2020 August. The trigger included government’s ineffective response to COVID-19 pandemic and the deceptive feeling of liberalization in the society and in the economy. Moreover, the partial liberalization that occurred before 2020 had instilled hope among the people that the regime was on a path towards reform. Empirical evidence shows that the authoritarian regime has negative impacts on the country's economic development, generates a climate of fear, and increases the nation's dependence on Russia. It is due to these multiple factors that individuals are motivated to protest against the regime.

In 2020 when it was clear that these elections would not be free nor fair people decided to act and show their dissatisfaction once again. And when the protests started, highly skilled people were among of the first to participate, especially the talents from the IT sphere “created digital solutions to coordinate protests and strikes” (Wilson and Gazan 1, 2023A). There are various estimates on how many people came to the street, but everyone has agreed that nobody expected

“this level of mobilization” and reportedly there were at one point 200 000 protestors together in Minsk (Bedford, 2021: 808). There was hope that the protestors would win:

Expert no. 7: “Everybody was involved, and you could feel this in the air. People believed the protest will win”.

Expert no. 10: “In 2020 there was a revolution for the middle class. Mostly educated people with good jobs and businesses, managers of different levels, took part in the protests.”

However, protests were followed by violent repressions which lead to the second step in the causal mechanism. Lukashenka's regime usually always responds to protests with violence and repressions, and this was no different after the protests in 2020. Experts have noted that the judicial system ceased to function properly, as many lawyers were banned from the bar and had their licenses revoked because they had provided legal assistance to individuals participating in the protests. As of April 14, 2023 there are 1 496 political prisoners (bloggers, businessmen, peaceful protesters, presidential campaign members) and “most of these people were targeted by politically motivated criminal prosecution in connection with the events that took place during and after the presidential election of August 2020” (Viasna, retrieved 14.04.2023). The experts described repressions followingly:

Expert no. 7: “Everybody understood the risks that if you were in Belarus, you were not safe, even in your own home. The police and KGB could just come and arrest you, and the judicial system has stopped working altogether. I mean, it was not very transparent before, but now it is not working at all. And you never know what you can be found guilty of, and you do not have anything to say about it.”

Expert no. 1: “Lukashenka, as a true dictator, did not take resistance lightly and resorted to full-scale repression.”

Expert no. 8: “There is also a direct fear of repression for those who participated in the protests. They are being actively pursued, and their phones are being monitored and all photo and video recordings are reviewed to identify participants.”

Expert no. 3: “The circle of people who are being repressed is expanding in 2023.”

According to the experts, the photos and recordings of the protests are still being reviewed retrospectively and participants in the protests are still being arrested. As an answer to the ongoing repressions in the country the EU imposed sanctions in August 2020 “against those responsible for internal repression and human rights abuse” and has prolonged them till 28.02.2024 (Council of the EU, 27.02.2023). In conclusion, in this sub-chapter the connection between the cause, protests and repressions was tested and proved.

4.2 Decision-making process of highly skilled Belarusians

The emigration of highly skilled Belarusians did not begin in 2020. Multiple experts mentioned during interviews that brain drain in Belarus was witnessed as far back as the Soviet era, when it was common for individuals to move from one Soviet state to another. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, brain drain did not abate; in fact, every illegal referendum brought with it protests and/or emigration by those who did not support the authoritarian regime. The author of this thesis argues that as a result, there have been multiple waves of brain drain in Belarus, each of which was triggered by economic or political factors stemming from the authoritarian regime. In other words, one way to see brain in Belarus is through waves of migration:

Expert no. 7: “I would say that the brain drain started even during Soviet times. Especially people from developed areas of science like physics, mathematics, chemistry, and so on, were migrating from the Soviet Union in the 1980s, for example, to different countries, mostly to the United States or other English-speaking countries.”

Expert no. 5: “Every time there were protests or a new wave of social activism against re-elections or unconstitutional referendums, which happened twice in Belarus in 1996 and 2004, or protests against integration with Russia, which was especially intense in the late 1990s, many people were fleeing.”

Expert no. 2: “People started leaving as early as the late 1990s. In 1996, there were significant protests, and after that, several politicians and activists disappeared, which prompted people to leave. There was also a wave of emigration after the collapse of the USSR. In 2006, there were also protests, and people left again in 2010. After each

presidential election, some people emigrated, but it was not as massive as in recent years.”

However, some experts argue that there have not been waves of migration but rather a constant brain drain over the decades. The fact remains that brain drain has been occurring since the collapse of the USSR and has further intensified with the progressive process of autocratization.

Expert no. 9: “I would not say there have been waves of migration; the brain drain has been constant. For example, in 2010, during previous turbulent presidential elections, there was not a significant wave of brain drain like the current situation. Although some individuals connected to the elections went into exile, the number was not very large.”

Interviews revealed that there are various push and pull factors that motivate Belarusians to emigrate. The main push factors listed by the experts were as follows: insecurity, lack of opportunities, repressions, feelings of hopelessness and uselessness, economic stagnation, sanctions, financial reasons, and fear. The experts pointed out that prior to 2020, the primary reasons for leaving were economic. However, after the massive repressions in 2020 and 2021, the push factors shifted from economic to political. The author of this thesis argues that economic and political factors relate to each other. In other words, “A politically stable state means possibilities for economic and social growth that can offer better opportunities to individuals” (Ienciu and Ienciu, 2015:284). Experts from the interviews commented on the push factors before 2020 followingly:

Expert no. 9: “From 2010 to 2015, Belarus had one of the highest per capita rates of Schengen visa applications, which indicated the country's openness to the West. The majority of individuals who chose to relocate from Belarus during that period were primarily motivated by economic factors, such as securing employment opportunities. Now, after 2020, the number of people fleeing for political reasons has increased; however, in my opinion, it still remains significantly lower than the number of individuals who leave for economic reasons.”

Expert no. 7: “I would say that there were still people who were leaving the country for political reasons, but most migrated for better financial situations. Then obviously after 2020, I think the majority of people who left Belarus did so for political reasons.”

Expert no. 3: “The majority are forced to leave due to the fear of repression and the need to escape possible imprisonment.”

From the knowledge of the experts, we can imply that there have always been two main factors (economic and political) going in parallel but recent years the primarily push factor is political. The presence of political stability in a country creates favourable conditions for economic and social advancement, resulting in improved opportunities for individuals (Ienciu and Ienciu, 2015). Therefore, it becomes clear that there exists a strong interdependence between political and economic push factors.

Main pull factors are better level of education in other countries, better financial prospects (including higher average salary), more and better opportunities or in countries where Belarusian communities have been already established. However, one of the experts argued that the main pull factor for highly skilled Belarusians is business freedom:

Expert no. 1: “Business freedom goes hand in hand with the rule of law. In other words, an entrepreneur must have a space prescribed by law, where his activities and property are protected, so that business can develop and people want to invest, a legislative framework is needed. But in a dictatorial state, where everything goes according to one person's will, entrepreneurs have no such certainty.”

The expert added that entrepreneurship is one of the most important ways of self-expression and private enterprises cannot thrive in dictatorial conditions. From one point of view, business freedom categorises under the economical reasons to leave.

Interviews also proved that push and pull factors cannot be analysed separately as they are intertwined. In the case of Belarus, the lack of democratic values is what drives highly skilled

individuals abroad where those values are present. Furthermore, the experts describe the link between repressions and brain drain.

Expert no. 1: “You are attracted to aspects in another country that are absent in your own country, while at the same time being pushed away from your own country due to factors such as cultural suppression of political diversity, corruption, nepotism, and lack of rule of law.”

Expert no. 2: “The individuals feel helpless and unable to take any action. They are left feeling powerless, compelled to remain silent, and ultimately choose to leave in hopes of finding support in countries such as Poland or Lithuania where they can raise funds for political prisoners or participate in protests.”

The decision to migrate is influenced by intervening obstacles. In the case of highly skilled Belarusian migrants, the obstacles were COVID restrictions in 2020-2021 and now the Russian war in Ukraine. Firstly, from one point of view, the Russian invasion of Ukraine can be considered an intervening obstacle because Belarus' participation in the war has impacted the ability to emigrate due to sanctions. On the other hand, it can also be perceived as a push factor, where the highly skilled Belarusians who oppose the invasion or are afraid of mobilization may be motivated to migrate to distance themselves from it.

Expert no. 2: “After the start of the war, it has become much more difficult to obtain a visa for countries such as Lithuania or Poland, compared to before the conflict.”

Expert no. 7: “A lot of young people, especially young men, left in the very first days of the war because of rumours that the Belarusian army would side with the Russian army and move to Ukraine together. They did not want to go to war, and it was unimaginable for them to fight against Ukraine. Therefore, they left to avoid being part of the war.”

However, other experts argued that sanctions and other intervening obstacles have not decreased the ability to emigrate because there are still countries which issue visas quite easily and at the same time the growing community abroad and diaspora can be helpful in settling abroad:

Expert no. 8: “Sanctions may not have reduced the brain drain, as some member states offer relatively easy access to visas. Consequently, individuals who might have previously applied for visas from the Baltic states now apply elsewhere.”

Expert no. 6: “In general, it is more complicated to leave the country if you do not have a visa. However, at the same time, your community, who left the country before, can provide support by offering familiar connections, accommodation for the initial steps, financial help, and useful information on how to start or where to go. This is because all your friends, relatives, or colleagues may already be there.”

Another intervening obstacle is the lack of transportation out of the country:

Expert no. 2 explains: “After the Belarusian government forced the Ryanair plane to land [in 23.05.2021], the European Union banned Belarusian planes from using its airports and airspace.”

Expert no. 7: “Due to the authoritarian regime Belarus is becoming secluded area and you do not have many opportunities to get out anymore. There are no flights nor trains, except to Russia.”

In conclusion, in this sub-chapter the main push and pull factors were presented and an overview was given of how they have changed over years. While mostly, the experts shared similar ideas and thoughts about the phenomenon, opinions varied regarding the intervening obstacles (such as sanctions and travel restrictions) and their impact.

4.3 Impact of the progressive process of autocratization

The decision to migrate is complex and influenced by many factors. The progressive autocratization has changed the course of brain drain. However, it has also influenced the life in Belarus. The interviewed experts provided an overview of the visible consequences that are currently present and the potential outcomes that may arise in the future. This subsection will introduce the impact of brain drain in Belarus through the observations of the experts.

Firstly, if we analyse the NGO sphere, we can observe that it has been demolished. Experts pointed out that most of the organizations have been closed. Some exceptions still exist, such as pro-governmental organisations or branches of different UN organizations. NGOs usually catered to people who were otherwise neglected by the public or private sectors, such as the disabled, elderly, LGBTQ+, etc. Now, after the collapse of the third sector, it is difficult to understand who is taking care of these people. In other words, nobody is fighting for their rights, and if someone does, it is not safe for them.

Secondly, in terms of culture, Minsk has undergone significant changes since 2018. The capital was once a vibrant and lively city, rich in arts, culture, and social projects. However, now the city only hosts state-sponsored celebrations, where spectators are often paid by the government to attend. Many cafes and restaurants have closed down, and fewer opportunities are available for young people. Independent artists and writers are in hiding, avoiding any form of contact. From one viewpoint, the artists and writers who are forced into hiding are repressed highly skilled who cannot emigrate or who have decided to stay in Belarus due to unknown reasons. The Belarusian language is now considered a symbol of opposition, leading to a poor cultural life, with few festivals happening due to various sanctions. For instance, Western movies are no longer shown as companies selling the rights do not work with the regime anymore.

Another significant effect has been on the economy. The departure of such individuals, who often earn higher wages and pay more in taxes, results in their families no longer contributing to the economy. This decrease in economic contributions ultimately affects the country, leading to a reduction in wealth. In addition, the economic situation in Belarus has deteriorated, exacerbating the situation. As a result of the uncertain market conditions, both domestic and foreign investors have become reluctant to invest in the country's economy.

Expert no. 4: "In 2022 we could see the relocation of all the businesses. All the companies, thousands of people at the same time moving to Vilnius or other places. So, this is already more serious process because we can see that new iron curtain is being built."

Expert no. 5: “It is really about the huge decrease in the quality of life and lack of professionals in almost every field.”

Moreover, the experts noted that the educational sector and health care have been impacted as well. Many of the health professionals have left or are imprisoned and due to that the queues are longer, and the quality has decreased. In addition, almost all private schools have been closed and the state schools follow the curriculum of the regime. This leads to stagnation of education and there is no alternative to what is offered by the state regime now. Also, the society is losing the best professionals, people who could educate the next generation. This is not only stated by the experts but also by available literature. Students are being expelled and arrested, and academics as well as students are being forced to involuntarily emigrate from Belarus (Van Elsuwege, 2021). The highly skilled who were working in management positions and have left the country are replaced with pro-governmental leaders. Academic freedom is limited as almost all the universities now have a “vice-rector on security matters” to control the institution from inside (ibid.). The replacements do not have the necessary education, but they are loyal to the regime.

Expert no. 5: “People in top positions are selected, not based on their expertise, but based on their loyalty.”

Expert no. 9: “The regime is breaking the agreements regarding the mutual recognition of diplomas. For example, despite holding a diploma from Poland, individuals are still required to retake the state exam in Belarus, and therefore the circulation of talent has become more difficult than it was. Furthermore, the involvement of the European Union within Belarus is currently extremely limited.”

All the abovementioned makes the decision to emigrate even more complex as the consequences of protests influence the everyday life in Belarus, due to that they influence the decision and opportunities to emigrate as well. Multiple consequences are not visible yet, but if the brain drain continues and highly skilled do not return, then in 5-10 years the situation worsens for the regime because those who leave are the majority who pay taxes to state’s budget. There are already signs of strained state budget. One proof of economic stagnation is that in March 2023

Belarusian Social Security Fund offered Belarusians deferred pension system which means Belarusians can temporarily postpone their pensions and regime guarantees that later the payments will increase (Zerkalo, 21.03.2023). However, this system has received a lot of criticism because it does not take into account the low life expectancy of Belarusian men, nor the growing inflation and it is transparent this scheme is supposed to help overcome the authoritarian regime's budget deficit.

Considering all the negative ramifications, it would be reasonable to assume that the authoritarian regime recognizes the absence of highly skilled individuals and desires to repatriate them to their country or stop them from emigrating. As discussed in the theoretical part authoritarian regime has multiple options how to address freedom of foreign movement. If regime allows brain drain, the remaining citizens are less likely to protest and challenge the leaders (Barry et al., 2014: 574-576). Another option is to restrict exit through various programmes, such as the mandatory work placement or mandatory military service. On this topic the interviews revealed that the authoritarian regime does not address the issue: it mostly does not restrict highly skilled to emigrate, but in some cases (e.g., the case of Raman Pratasevich) the regime is ready to spend unlimited resources to stop the emigration from the regime or to arrest some individuals. However, the argument emerging from the data is that the regime's objective is not to keep the highly skilled in the Belarusian society, but rather to punish them and to set them as an example for other anti-Lukashenka activists.

Expert no. 7: "In terms of the government, I don't think they care a lot because they don't need these people. As far as I understand, this is the basis of the current regime. They do not require talented and smart people because such people tend to be more mature than the government officials and tend to oppose the government and want to have a say in shaping their own lives."

Expert no. 2: "The government does not prevent people from leaving. If someone does not have a criminal record, they can leave. However, if individuals were actively involved in anti-government activities and their names are on a watchlist, they may be detained and arrested at the border upon their return."

Expert no. 3: “It's twofold. An authoritarian regime certainly wants to catch and prevent some individuals from leaving. We know the Ryanair case very well. On the other hand, there are activists like Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya who were against the regime and were forced to leave.”

Nevertheless, there are indications that the authoritarian regime has acknowledged the adverse effects of brain drain and is attempting to entice highly educated individuals to come back. The regime has made a programme for citizens who would like to return to Belarus. The pro-regime news portal announced in February 2023 that Lukashenka signed a decree “to set up a commission to work with citizens who wish to return to their homeland” (Belta, 06.02.2023). However, this programme has received criticism from democratic forces because citizens who have tried to return were arrested.

Expert no. 4: “I would say that the regime does not know how to act. From one point of view, it is good that rebels are leaving. However, the absence of educated people causes problems, and the regime has started to make propaganda for them to return. If one expresses regret for some penalties, they can return to Belarus.”

Expert no. 5: “There are some signs that they might realize something is wrong. For example, they have established a system for people to apply for permission to return home. If highly skilled Belarusian wants to go back to his country, he needs to apply and apologize for whatever reason, and then they will review his application. If approved, he will receive a response allowing him, as a citizen of Belarus, to return home. The response might also include a fine or prison sentence.”

Making the difficult decision to emigrate may sometimes be the only sustainable option. According to experts, one of the main factors driving emigration is the desire for security and safety. In this context, the safety of skilled professionals abroad is beneficial for the future of Belarus as they may otherwise face the risk of incarceration or worse if they choose to stay in the country. The diaspora, human rights organisations, charities and NGOs are raising awareness of the situation of the political prisoners and sharing stories of highly skilled who were forced to leave. For example, one report by Amnesty International summarised the harassment of medics.

The report included an overview of how health professionals who participated in the protests or provided medical care to released detainees, are beaten, arrested and threatened (Amnesty International, 2021). Multiple of them were forced to leave their position at the hospitals and despite lack of medical staff in hospitals, it was impossible for them to find a new job inside the regime (ibid.). The diaspora is already focusing on reforms that need to be made in the future and increasing awareness of the political situation in Belarus. On the importance of diaspora the experts said:

Expert no. 5: “Most of the diaspora consists of these highly educated, skilled professionals. These people can accumulate this huge potential that might be useful for the future of the country.”

Expert no. 6: “The active members of the diaspora are creating some projects already now to install them in Belarus. Even though the revolution didn't have the results it hoped, but it was still a step forward that people were willing to express their opinion.”

Expert no. 3: “The role of those who have escaped to the West is extremely important, particularly those who are active. It is uncertain if those who remain in Belarus are capable of managing this transition period.”

Expert no. 1: “Belarusian exiled politicians are faced with a conceptual task of defining their vision for a reformed Belarus and demonstrating to the public that their leadership would differ significantly from that of the current regime.”

Expert no. 10: “The Belarusian diaspora and ministries of foreign and internal affairs all over the world must work together to develop a strategical plan for the future of the highly skilled who have emigrated.”

The progressive autocratization has most certainly changed the course brain drain in Belarus. The phenomenon of brain drain is expected to have a lasting impact on the economy and society of Belarus. Another concern is the artificially created division that has emerged in Belarusian society since 2020, with fundamentally different understandings of core values leading to polarization. Predicting the return of highly educated individuals to Belarus remains challenging. It is important to note that the longer the authoritarian regime remains in place, the less likely these individuals will return as they become more integrated into their new environments (e.g.,

having children, finding jobs, etc.). Ultimately, the future of Belarus is also intertwined with the outcome of the ongoing Russian war in Ukraine.

Expert no. 5: “There is also this danger that people would blend in more into the local environment and they would be less committed to the Belarusian cause in the future.”

Expert no. 3: “The brain drain will definitely continue as long as this regime continues in its current form. I cannot see any significant easing of tensions, and these political repressions will continue, which also means the brain drain will continue, so to speak. I think that the economic environment will become even worse, especially under the influence of sanctions.”

Expert no. 9: “One important measure to consider is providing young students who are compelled to flee with the opportunity to pursue their studies in the European Union, allowing them to complete their education in other universities. An even more pressing issue is the academic staff, including lecturers and other employees of higher education institutions, who encounter greater challenges in finding suitable positions abroad. Western countries, including the European Union, can play a crucial role in offering a haven where these highly educated individuals can be retained until more favorable circumstances arise.”

Expert no. 10: “[Regarding future democratic regime in Belarus.] We cannot prohibit pro-regime people to live in Belarus. However, we can show them that the democratic Belarus is more wonderful than a dictatorship through reforms.”

Expert no. 2: “The future also depends on the end of the Russian war. Initially, we thought that if Ukraine wins and Russia loses, then everything will be fine in Belarus. However, particularly now, as this war continues, people are considering what will happen after it. It is already clear that the victory of Ukraine does not automatically guarantee democracy in Belarus.”

In conclusion, Belarusians who have remained in the country now have fewer opportunities, are becoming poorer, and are experiencing a significant decrease in their quality of life due to the brain drain and the lack of skilled professionals. Nevertheless, daily life persists, and many of the regime's actions may go unnoticed to those who live within the country. Brain drain will

continue as long as the authoritarian regime continues its repressive policies and as long as there is a migration corridor available to facilitate emigration. The interviews conducted in this study have yielded valuable insights, establishing a clear link between the fraudulent election in 2020 and the change in emigration patterns.

4.4 Discussion and recommendations

The author of the thesis believes that this issue will remain relevant in the near future. Even though the latest wave of emigration started due to the events of 2020, the solution is now closely impacted with the outcome of the Russian war in Ukraine. The emigration of hundreds of thousands of Belarusians has far-reaching negative consequences for the sending country, while the receiving country stands to benefit. The causal mechanism identified in this thesis has the potential to be applied to other time periods in Belarusian history or in the context of other authoritarian regimes. For example, the protests after the fraudulent presidential elections in 2006 and 2010 in Belarus were also received with violence and brutality (Bedford, 2021, 813).

Interviewed experts have noted there is no single solution to brain drain in Belarus. The longer the regime is in power, the more difficult it will be to reverse the negative impact of brain drain. On the other hand, it is better that the educated pro-democratic brains remain in a safe environment abroad than in an insecure and unstable situation under the authoritarian regime. There are multiple parallel courses that can help to overcome brain drain: regime's actions against brain drain, diaspora's actions and the EU's support. Firstly, there are actions that Belarus could take to improve the situation. The main cause of brain drain, and its negative impact is the authoritarian regime, so the best solution would be to improve the political situation in Belarus. In other words, dealing with the push factors that influence the decision to migrate is crucial. The other main push factor was economic stagnation. Therefore, increasing economic opportunities by creating new industries, attracting foreign investors to return, and creating new jobs with high salaries would motivate highly skilled individuals to stay. Investing in education and reforming the educational system is also necessary. The regime could encourage entrepreneurship as the Hi-Tech Park was extremely successful for both the economy and brain

circulation. However, interviews confirm that further isolation from democracy is currently happening, and the reality is that the regime is not interested in democratization. This means that the standard solutions for brain drain are not effective in the authoritarian environment.

Secondly, the Belarusian diaspora plays an important and crucial role in preserving highly skilled individuals in a safe environment. In addition to waiting for a window of opportunity to launch a democratic government in Belarus, there are other activities that highly skilled diaspora members can undertake. A survey on Belarusian diaspora (Koroshunau, 2023) revealed that the main focuses for Belarusian diaspora in the future are following:

- *Investigating their own knowledge, skills, and abilities into projects that benefit Belarus (including ones on Belarusian territory).*
- *Crowdfunding for civil society in Belarus.*
- *Contributing financially to education and cultural projects in Belarus.*

It is important that the diaspora tries to keep connections inside the regime to offer an alternative source of information to the propaganda and to help reduce the polarization within Belarusians. In addition, the diaspora can offer remittances to families back in Belarus to assist them in obtaining higher education. This type of aid can reduce the economic struggles that often push highly skilled individuals to migrate from their homeland. Furthermore, the diaspora can raise awareness about the situation in Belarus abroad and keep Belarus as an active topic in the EU political arena. This is done for example by the Office of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya who is in close contact with ministries of foreign affairs around the world.

Thirdly, the EU as an institution can apply pressure on the Belarusian government to reform and improve the political and economic situation in the country. This can mean additional sanctions and other measures to hold the regime accountable for human rights abuses and to promote democratic values and principles. However, it is important to emphasise that authoritarian regimes in Belarus and Russia need separate sanctions to increase their effectiveness. Furthermore, the European Union could work with Belarusian civil society and the diaspora to create networks and platforms that promote dialogue, exchange of ideas, and collaboration. This

is partly already happening as the People's Embassies of Belarus (who represent the interests of democratic Belarusians) have already in total 22 embassies and consulates around the world (People's Embassies of Belarus, 13.04.2023). The main objectives of this establishment are to inform about the situation in Belarus, to establish and maintain contacts with other government bodies and to protect the rights and interests of Belarusians.

Regarding the limitations of this thesis, the author aimed to analyse the impact of brain drain in Belarus on a small scale, focusing on the current situation in the country after the departure of highly educated individuals. However, as the process of brain drain is still ongoing because repressions are still happening, it is too early to investigate the impact of brain drain itself. Additionally, the study relied on expert interviews for data collection. While some of the experts were Belarusians who had emigrated themselves, conducting similar research with focus groups would provide valuable insights from the primary source. Furthermore, the focus groups could include highly educated people who have decided not to emigrate or who have been forced to stay to evaluate their decision-making process. The disadvantage of focus groups is that it is difficult to guarantee the confidentiality of the participants because of that their security could be at risk. Due to this reason, the author of this thesis decided to proceed with expert interviews and not focus groups.

Furthermore, it would be beneficial to conduct similar studies in the top countries where Belarusians have emigrated. This would include countries outside of the EU and provide a better overview of the phenomenon. For example, this thesis did not focus on brain drain to Russia, but a substantial number of highly skilled Belarusians also emigrate there, even though the political system is similar to that in Belarus. This indicates that their main reason for emigrating from Belarus is due to economic pull factors. Another interesting topic would be to investigate successful examples of the integration of highly skilled Belarusians. In this case, it would be beneficial, for example, to study the long-term strategy that Poland has for highly skilled Belarusians.

The chosen push-pull theoretical framework was the most suitable one for this thesis. The theoretical model helped to discover and analyse push and pull factors and intervening obstacles.

Similar studies (e.g., Leonardo Prudencio wrote about highly skilled migration in Estonia) have used the same model. However, the author of this thesis feels that the framework did not capture the complex dynamics of brain drain in an authoritarian regime. It could be interesting to analyse brain drain in Belarus through the migration systems approach as Julia Petrakova has done in her article “Belarus in the Eurasian Migration System: The Challenges of the Last Decade and Their Consequences”.

It is hard to predict what the regime will do next and at the same time it is not the objective of this thesis to predict the future. Firstly, it all depends on how the Russian war in Ukraine ends and Russia’s actions influence Belarus due to its dependence. Unless Belarus wants to move to the direction of North Korea, the regime has “to take some kind of action to try to restore the democratic façade” (Bedford, 2021: 814-816). However, even small amounts of openness is dangerous for the regime’s survival because it causes civil activism and hope for a change (ibid.). There are some challenges for highly skilled migrants to emigrate, such as obtaining visas and finding jobs that match their qualifications. However, as long as the regime does not take active steps to restrict foreign movement, brain drain will continue.

Conclusion

The objective of this study was to identify the determinants that influence the decision of highly skilled individuals to emigrate from an authoritarian regime, using Belarus as an example. The main research question addressed was: What are the primary push factors contributing to brain drain in Belarus, and how have they been affected by the progressive process of autocratization and repression in the country? The hypothesis was that the decision-making process of highly skilled individuals to emigrate from an authoritarian country such as Belarus is complex and influenced by a combination of push and pull factors.

This study employed the push-pull theoretical framework to investigate brain drain. The chosen theoretical model has its limitations, as it overlooks the ability to migrate and focuses more on the desire to migrate, and as the model was established in 1966 it does not consider the latest developments in technology and society. Despite the criticism, push-pull model remained the best international migration theory for explaining emigration due to its consideration of push and pull factors, intervening obstacles, and personal factors.

Process-tracing was used to identify the causal mechanism between fraudulent presidential election results in 2020 and the impact of the progressive process of autocratization on the primary push factors. The objective here was to trace the process and to gather evidence that supports the hypothesis. For data gathering, ten in-depth interviews were conducted with Estonian and Belarusian experts. The qualitative analysis revealed the main push factors for talents to emigrate from Belarus are insecurity, lack of opportunities, repressions, feelings of hopelessness and uselessness, economic stagnation, sanctions, financial reasons, and fear. Furthermore, prior to 2020, the primary reasons for leaving were economic and after the massive repressions, the push factors shifted from economic to political. Main pull factors are better level of education in other countries, better financial prospects (including higher average salary), more and better opportunities or countries where Belarusian communities have been already established. Interviews also proved that push and pull factors cannot be analysed separately as they are intertwined. In the case of Belarus, the lack of democratic values is what drives highly skilled individuals abroad where those values are present. The decision to migrate is influenced

by intervening obstacles and personal matters. In the case of highly skilled Belarusian migrants, the obstacles were COVID-19 restrictions in 2020-2021 and now the Russian war in Ukraine. The interviewed experts had different opinions on how much the intervening obstacles impact the ability to emigrate. The results concluded that the decision to emigrate is complex and influenced by a combination of push and pull factors.

An additional outcome of this study was to provide policy recommendations for addressing brain drain. The most effective way to tackle brain drain is by addressing the push factors that drive highly skilled individuals to leave their home country. The first step would be to promote brain circulation, which includes facilitating two-way mobility between the sending and other countries, promoting capital flow, cooperating with the diaspora, and reforming the educational sector. However, as Belarus is an authoritarian regime, standard solutions for transitioning from brain drain to brain circulation may not be compatible. In the current situation, the number one priority is to preserve and retain highly skilled individuals in a safe environment until a window of opportunity arises. Other policy suggestions include engaging the Belarusian diaspora in activities such as investing their own knowledge/skills to projects that benefit Belarus, crowdfunding for civil society, remittances, and providing an alternative source of information. There are also steps that the EU and other Western allies can take, such as supporting the diaspora, implementing targeted sanctions against Belarus, and providing more flexibility in terms of integration restrictions for highly skilled individuals in receiving countries (e.g., facilitating access to higher education and to job market).

This thesis represents a modest contribution toward providing more empirical evidence about brain drain in Belarus, as there are only limited studies about migration from Belarus and additionally, trustworthy data from the authoritarian regime itself is insufficient. The results of this analysis are in compliance with previous findings on the topic of brain drain in an authoritarian regime. As multiple consequences of brain drain in Belarus are not yet visible and the ongoing Russian war in Ukraine influences the outcome, it is important to start developing a long-term development strategy. This is a difficult task because the current regime in Belarus is not ready for democratization, so the solutions should centre around the diaspora and the Western partners (such as the EU).

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I confirm that I want to write a master's thesis in the amount of 15 credits.

Appendix

Annex 1 – Information sheet for interviewees

INFORMATION SHEET

Master’s thesis on the causes and impact of brain drain in an authoritarian regime on the example of Belarus.

WHO IS DOING THE RESEARCH?

My name is Mariana Tulf, and I am a master's student at the Johan Skytte Institute of Political Studies at the University of Tartu. My supervisor is Stefano Braghiroli, PhD, and my co-supervisor is Sandra Charlotta Hagelin.

WHAT IS THIS RESEARCH ABOUT?

This research aims to investigate the emigration of talented and skilled Belarusians and to identify the key factors that contribute to brain drain in an authoritarian regime, using Belarus as an example. The study seeks to answer the following research questions: What are the push factors that prompt Belarusian talents to move out of their country? How has the authoritarian regime impacted talent mobility in Belarus? Why is it crucial to shift from brain drain to brain circulation, and what initiatives could facilitate this transition?

IF I SAY YES, WHAT WILL IT INVOLVE?

If you say yes to participating in the research, I will ask you to participate in an in-depth interview. This should not take longer than 50 minutes to complete and with your consent will be audio-recorded.

WHY HAVE I BEEN ASKED?

The chosen methodology in this research concentrates on expert in-depth interviews. Considering the topic of this master’s thesis and your expertise in this field, I believe your opinion and knowledge is helpful and critical for this research.

DO I HAVE TO SAY YES? WHAT WILL HAPPEN IF I SAY NO?

You do not have to say yes to participating, and if you say no there are no consequences, and you will not be contacted again about this research.

WHAT IF I HAVE CONCERNS OR A COMPLAINT?

If you have concerns about the research that you think I can help you with, please feel free to contact me via email: mariana.tulf@mfa.ee

If you have a complaint, you may contact my supervisor from the Johan Skytte Institute of Political Studies at the University of Tartu via email: stefano.braghioli@ut.ee.

Annex 2 – Consent form

CONSENT FORM

I _____ agree to participate in the research part of master’s thesis “Brain drain in an authoritarian regime on the example of Belarus” being conducted by Mariana Tulf, student at the University of Tartu.

I understand that the purpose of this master’s thesis is to identify the push factors and key reasons for brain drain in an authoritarian regime on the example of Belarus and to give policy recommendations on how to overcome brain drain.

I understand that I have been asked to participate in this research because I qualify as an expert of this field and that my participation in this research will involve participation in an in-depth interview that should not take longer than 50 minutes to complete and I can withdraw from the research at any time and without giving a reason. All the information I provide will remain totally confidential.

I am aware that I can contact Mariana Tulf if I have any concerns about the research. I also understand that I may refuse to answer any questions at any time I wish and without giving a reason.

I agree that the research data gathered from this project may be published in a form that identifies me/does not identify me in any way.

Signature (participant)

___/___/___

Signature (researcher)

___/___/___

NOTE: This study has been approved by the Johan Skytte Institute of Political Studies at the University of Tartu.

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Brain drain in an authoritarian regime on the example of Belarus

Supervised by Stefano Braghioli (PhD) and Sandra Charlotta Hagelin.

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Done in Tallinn on 15.05.2023 (date)

Mariana Tulf
(signature)