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**“Each time you take a tram in Vilnius, you hear people speaking about migration.” An interview with Daiva Tereshchenko, a Lithuanian researcher focusing on the Lithuanian diaspora.**

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**Abstract:**

Lithuania is a country with a great historical Diaspora and large-scale recent economic migration. This interview with Daiva Tereshchenko focuses on the current migration situation in the country, on the attitude of the Lithuanian state and society, and on the Lithuanian communities abroad and their relationship with their country of origin.

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**What is the current situation in Lithuania concerning migration?**

Lithuania is now mostly a transit and emigration country. New immigrant communities are very small; they are more like families than communities. Most of them, such as Afghans, came to the country as refugees. There is a Russian minority, a historical community of ethnic Poles and a small<sup>1</sup> Muslim minority settled in Lithuania since the fifteenth century.

Lithuanians represent the majority and, as a percentage, their numbers have been rising in the past twenty years. The proportion of Russians has decreased by a third. The percentage of Poles is also slightly lower than in 1989<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> 2009 0,1 % of the total population. Population by ethnicity, statistical indicator and year, The department of Statistics by the Lithuanian Government, <http://dbl.stat.gov.lt/statbank>

<sup>2</sup> In 1989 Lithuanians: 79,6% Russian: 8,9%, Polish: 7,3%; in 2009 Lithuanians: 84,0%, Russian: 4,9%, Polish: 6,1% Population by ethnicity, statistical indicator and year, The department of Statistics by the Lithuanian Government, <http://dbl.stat.gov.lt/statbank>

### **Does Lithuania, therefore, not face the issue of migrant integration?**

The integration policy is focused only on refugees. The state supports language courses and helps to find accommodation and work. Based on my research experience refugees are quite well integrated, they speak the language, respect laws and traditions - and they want to stay. But some asylum seekers of course want to go to the West.

The number of migrants other than asylum-seekers or -holders is insignificant. During the economic peak the issue of inviting economic immigrants, such as Ukrainians, Belarusians, Moldovans, and people from the Caucasus republics, began to be discussed<sup>3</sup>. They were chosen with the goal of contributing to the democratic development of their country of origin and because of their geographic, social and cultural proximity and historical ties with Lithuania. However because of the economic downturn, these discussions were suspended.

The other aspect of integration concerns Lithuanian nationals, mostly labour migrants coming back to Lithuania.

### **What is the attitude of Lithuanian society to immigration?**

Lithuanian society is not used to immigrants. This is connected also with the media and the image of immigrants they create.

### **But Lithuania has a long emigration tradition...**

Lithuania has 3.5 million inhabitants – another one million is estimated to live abroad, although the exact number is not known.

In the past, there were three big emigration waves - at the end of the nineteenth century, in the 1920s and 1930s and then after the Soviet occupation in 1940.

The Diaspora started to become organized and connected to the Lithuanian state in the 1930s. In 1949 the Lithuanian World Community was established in exile to unite worldwide Lithuanian communities. Lietuvių Charta (Lithuanian Charter) was introduced to support and unite all Lithuanians outside Lithuania's borders and promote Lithuanian culture and language abroad. Their statute also included loyalty and respect for the law of the country of residence.

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<sup>3</sup> Užsienio Reikalų Ministerijos Siūlomi Lietuvos Imigracijos Politikos Principai, <http://www.urm.lt/index.php?401152843>

**A new wave of emigration started after the independence of Lithuania in 1990. How would you characterize this recent wave?**

It is mostly economically motivated. There is some skilled, “brain drain” migration, but most migrants work in unskilled jobs, women in services and cleaning, men in construction. And there is the trend among young people to go to study abroad - with the intention of staying there. The main destination countries are Spain, United Kingdom and Ireland.

Before Lithuania entered the EU, many emigrants went abroad illegally. Many people left for other EU states after 2004 using the new possibility of working there legally. During the economic boom in 2006, even Lithuania had a shortage of workers and some people returned home – there were good work opportunities with high salaries. Now, with the economic crisis emigration is growing again.

In general it is difficult to characterise this migration. Lithuania experiences large-scale economic migration – but relatively little attention is paid to the research and analysis of the situation; most of all we lack a general, centralised approach.

**Why is there so little research?**

Most people believed that these migrants would return, so there is no need to worry, no need to understand the character, destination and future of this emigration. With this attitude, there was naturally no funding for research.

Also the economic situation influences state policy towards nationals abroad. It was only in 2006, with the economic peak, that the discussion about the Lithuanian emigrant communities started to appear in the media, and the question of the economic impact of recent emigration was raised. Emigrants also started to be seen as voters, and politicians became more interested. Slowly the issue gained more interest – but then the crisis came and most of these question disappeared from public discourse.

So there is still a lack of knowledge. We lack information about what migrants do abroad, about their intentions to stay or to return to their home country. We do not know if they need government support in order to avoid illegal status, low salaries, and slave labour.

Most of the research is done in destination countries, but research is very important for evidence-based policy making in Lithuania. Now the policy is on an “Ad hoc” level.

### **So the state is not very interested in Lithuanian emigration?**

Not really. As I have said emigration issues started to be discussed during the economic boom; however since the beginning of the economic crisis no government position has been presented.

During the economic peak there was a campaign supporting the return of emigrants. In 2007 the Ministry of Social Affairs published a handbook for those wishing to return, which provided information on how to restart life back in Lithuania.

In 2005-2009 new programmes for integration of returning economic migrants were introduced, such as language courses. A special interest was given to educational programmes for children who started schools abroad. But the attention to returned migrants was still rather small and ineffective, as the most important issues - economic integration and employment services facilitation - were not introduced.

In 2008 research about migration and the family was conducted. The absence of parents is an important example of the negative impact of economic emigration. When parents stay and work abroad and children are left in another country, it unavoidably has an impact on their relationship. Children, especially teenagers, that are left without their parents for several years can have psychological problems and problems at school<sup>4</sup>. The state should contribute to decreasing the social segregation of these children.

An example of good practice on the state level could be the Philippine's government which gives their migrants basic information to prevent them from falling into illegality<sup>5</sup>. The Lithuanian government still lacks such an attitude.

### **Do recent emigrants vote in national elections?**

Some of them do, but the percentage is very low. Some of them have not declared that they have emigrated. Also the procedure to vote abroad is complicated and for many people it is difficult and expensive to travel to Consulates to vote.

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<sup>4</sup> Tomas Butvilas, Jūratė Terepaitė, Tėvų Emigraciją Patyrusių Vaikų Asmenybiniai Bruožai Ir Jų Emocinų Ugdymą Sąlygojantys Socialiniai Mitai  
[http://www.su.lt/filemanager/download/6522/09\\_Butvilas%20terepekaite.pdf](http://www.su.lt/filemanager/download/6522/09_Butvilas%20terepekaite.pdf).

<sup>5</sup> To see more on the approach of the Philippine government see Robyn Rodriguez' article here:  
<http://www.migrationonline.cz/e-library/?x=2182704>

### **But they communicate with their home country and associate with each other?**

Thanks to technological developments and free access to information, it is easier for the new Lithuanian communities to keep in touch with their country. If they have the will to do so, they can remain informed about everything that is happening. This is a big difference compared to the Soviet occupation period when emigration was not allowed and communication was difficult.

The new wave of post-Soviet migration is establishing new communities. I see that recent migrants begin to understand that it is necessary to have knowledge about the history of Lithuanian emigration. The cooperation is not perfect; there is a different experience and different understanding of the Diaspora's purposes. But there are efforts to understand each other. Previous waves of émigrés have invested a lot of energy and money so that the Diaspora and independent Lithuania could exist and it is important to learn from their experience about the organisational issues and Diaspora politics in general.

I think that the period when people could make really good money abroad, to build a house or buy a good car back in Lithuania, is gone. Migrants start to invest in the place where they are stay abroad - it is more advantageous. Migration is changing from temporary to permanent.

What I think is quite new is the change in the behaviour of recent migrants - they are more keen to mobilise and organise themselves. They also want to participate in the cultural and political life of the destination country. For example in the UK, there is an effort to introduce the Lithuanian language in schools and to have a TV programme in Lithuanian.

### **Does the Lithuanian state support such efforts?**

There is a governmental decision<sup>6</sup> to promote the idea of Global Lithuania, to keep ties with nationals abroad. However the idea has not been presented officially yet and it is not clear on what basis it will be developed.

An important issue in the relationship between Lithuanian Diaspora organisations and the government is the problem of double citizenship. The tendency has been changing in the course of time, so some people have two citizenship dual citizenship and some do not. Now it is forbidden, although many migrant communities try to change it. Dual citizenship is allowed only in special cases – but 1 million people are not special cases!

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<sup>6</sup> <http://www.urm.lt/index.php?1138065238>

### **How is emigration perceived in Lithuania?**

I think that the general attitude is positive, it is considered normal. It is a small country, in every family there are migrants. Each time you take a tram in Vilnius, you hear people speaking about migration.

It is not a coincidence that after the proclamation of independence in 1990 all the Baltic countries had presidents who came back from emigration. This has contributed to the connection with Diaspora and softened the negative attitude towards emigrants. Their knowledge and experience is seen as a contribution. Everybody understands it. Also we appreciate the positive impact of the remittances that are invested in Lithuania.

### **So migration is a big topic for Lithuanians?**

When I started to give courses about migration, many students had experience of seasonal work abroad, so they thought they knew everything about migration. But then after the course they realized that Lithuanian emigration has a rich history, and they gained a new perspective.

There are academic texts written on this topic, but in the school curriculum only a small place is given to the issue. It is a big mistake not to pay attention to the people who emigrated. If you are not interested in them, you are losing their experience – and that is a big mistake in a country of our size.

### **About the author:**

*Lucie Trlifajová studied Anthropology at the Faculty of Arts of the Charles University; her diploma thesis was focused on the current Ukrainian migration to the Czech Republic. She is currently a PhD student in sociology at the Faculty of Social Studies at Masaryk University in Brno. Within the migrationonline.cz project she focuses on the visa issues.*