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Migration and democracy in Lithuania

IMMIGRATION IS AN OPPORTUNITY TO CREATE A MORE INCLUSIVE SOCIETY

Vainius Bartasevičius regrets that liberal academics have less influence in Lithuania than in other countries. And the mass media generally only reflect the political debate and people's thinking. They should go further.

*The interview was conducted by Dirk Bornschein**

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Bornschein: From a historical perspective, normally countries share belief systems or collective traumas or experiences in general. What do you consider to be the most important for Lithuania, maybe related to the issue of migration, maybe not?

Vainius Bartasevičius: Our specific trauma, which I think has really influenced the migration discourse in Lithuania, is first and foremost the occupation and oppression. As you know very well, Lithuania was part of the Soviet Union for 50 years. Before 1918, it was part of the Russian Empire, and these experiences obviously made a big difference and still affect how we think about migration and how we see ourselves in relation to migration.

During the Second World War we had mass deportations carried out by the Soviet authorities, people fleeing from the communist regime. This is still very much in people's memories. If we look back to the 19th century, there was a huge wave of economic emigration from Lithuania.

Lithuania sees itself as a country of emigration.

Bartasevičius: Of course, and then at the beginning of this century, possibly a second trauma, we could call it a demographic trauma. Today, Lithuania has a population of around 2.9 million, compared with the 3.7 million at the beginning of the 1990s. An enormous change, mainly due to the post-communist adjustment. Emigration was very much the key topic in public debates around migration in Lithuania, which may explain to some extent why there hasn't been so much debate about immigration.

But the situation is now beginning to change, and the demographic landscape is also changing. If we look at the figures for the last few years, more people are coming to Lithuania than are leaving. Immigration will become more and more important in the debate.

What are the concerns or hopes people have related to immigration?

Bartasevičius: In general, I would say that public opinion in Lithuania is rather negative when it comes to immigration. There might be some reasons for that. Of course, people have some cultural concerns about immigration, and this is not specific to Lithuania, because if we look at other countries in Europe, we will see a similar phenomenon. But there is one thing that always comes to my mind when I remember the data from the survey on values. Ten years ago, people were asked whether criteria such as ethnicity or language should be important in the selection of immigrants. And in Lithuania, the majority of people said that these criteria are and should be important when selecting immigrants. Compared to other countries, we somehow stood out in this particular survey.

Bartasevičius: I do quite extensive research on this topic. This relationship between how we perceive nationality and how we define national identity and how we think about immigration. In Lithuania, the cultural understanding of national identity is still dominant, and things like perceived ancestry, or whether the person was born in the country or not, or religion. Those issues are perceived as important for the definition of ethnicity or national identity, I think this is also reflected in attitudes towards immigration.

This is the complex relationship between national identity and immigration.

Bartasevičius: Yes, and there is another contextual factor: national security. And again, a little context is needed. As I mentioned earlier, the main issue in the post-communist period was emigration rather than immigration. The situation began to change radically in mid-2021, when this episode of instrumentalised migration from Belarus occurred. It was then that the debate on immigration began. Immigration was presented as a threat. Under these conditions, it is very difficult for the population to develop a positive attitude towards migration.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine also adds to this emphasis on national security in the migration discourse in Lithuania. Those arguments are constantly being made in the public sphere.

Finally, at the same time we have an increasing immigration from Central Asian countries, and that is considered labour migration, and there we probably have more cultural concerns. They are Russian speakers and this creates certain tensions.

You already talked about the different groups of migrants in Lithuania, how successful have the public measures been to integrate migrants until now?

Bartasevičius: This is an important question, but as I said, integration policy is relatively new, it is just beginning to develop. What we have and what has happened in the last 10 years is a kind of strategic framework that aims to set certain directions for integration policies, and that is already important. At least we have a ministry responsible for dealing with integration issues. And if we look at some of the integration outcomes, especially for Ukrainian refugees, they are quite good: the employment outcomes, access to education, access to health and things like that. If we compare these results with those of some other countries, it seems that Lithuania is coping quite well with the challenge of integrating these people.

In some countries, immigration is seen as a threat to the social welfare system. Does Lithuania have a developed social system and how do people view the relationship with immigration?

Bartasevičius: Yes, it would be interesting to look at the survey data to see if there are any particular concerns. I don't think that this is an argument that's at the forefront. But when it comes to the underdevelopment of the Lithuanian welfare system, I would probably agree with that, certainly compared to all the Nordic countries. There is a debate about the need to raise more revenue from the budget and redistribute more generally.

We talked about people's perceptions. What is the position of the main political parties on immigration?

Bartasevičius: Again, we have to go on the basis of recent fears or events, and there has actually been a recent change in the law that essentially tries to limit labour immigration from Central Asia or simply set quotas. This amendment includes new requirements for companies that want to recruit foreign labour and for the whole process of managing that labour force. It is a restrictive change in migration policy that was adopted only a few months ago. It reflects the general mood, including the political mood. But of course it would be a gross oversimplification to say that every single politician or MP is against immigration and wants to limit it by all means.

Here, too, the focus is on national security and, of course, cultural arguments. It's quite difficult for politicians to take a pro-immigration position in this environment. Others express that we need immigration to make up for labour shortages and to ensure that we can cope with the demographic situation we have. At the moment we have an ageing population. If there had never been a war in Ukraine, the discussion might have been somewhat different.

What is going well and what is going wrong in this culture of debate right now around the topic of migration?

Bartasevičius: Yes, once again this is a fascinating question that is difficult to answer. Partly because I feel that this debate is just beginning to develop. I would prefer to wait another five years or so to see what it really looks like. But in general, my impression is that the debate is still quite narrow, in more ways than one. I must also say that the debate is really only about migration from a Lithuanian perspective. We don't see it as a European issue, how migration should be approached in a broader sense and how it should be dealt with on a European level, and what kind of solutions should be chosen.

Bartasevičius: As far as the EU Asylum and Migration Pact is concerned, two elements have emerged as the most important in Lithuania and have been widely debated: the instrumentalisation of immigration. The final result was presented as a victory for Lithuanian politicians because they were very active in introducing this concept and ensuring that it was included in the actual Asylum and Migration Pact. And there is another aspect, which is the solidarity mechanism and what it would mean for our country. So basically it's about how many migrants we would have to take in or how much money we would have to pay. We don't see it as an opportunity to take in young migrants who could help us deal with the demographic challenges that the continent is facing.

Vainius, you have already told me that the issues surrounding immigration have only recently been debated. Nevertheless, I must mention one point here, if only to make the answers in the interviews comparable. What role does science play in this migration process? Do you think that science provides the research that the country needs?

Bartasevičius: I will probably take a self-critical approach and be quite hard on myself when answering the questions because I feel that academia is not doing enough when it comes to immigration. This is partly because the topic of immigration is still relatively new and we don't have that many researchers in the field. And it seems that the voice of academics is not being heard as much as it should be, and it's not easy to pinpoint exactly why. I know that in many countries you would expect academics to broaden the debate and to widen its contours. But I don't necessarily feel that this is happening in Lithuania at the moment.

Bartasevičius: I feel like in universities, we usually have professors who tend to be rather pro-immigrant, and once again, I don't really feel that in Lithuania, academics bring in these liberal or pro-immigration perspectives quite as much as in some other countries academics do.

Does the issue of racism play a role in the country's academic debate in general?

Bartasevičius: I think the question of language plays a role because a lot of migrants speak Russian, right? People come from Central Asia, for example, and they mostly speak Russian. Maybe they don't speak English at all. And of course they don't speak Lithuanian. We also have a lot of immigrants from Belarus and of course from Ukraine. And some of them also speak Russian. Suddenly people seem to hear a lot of Russian language on the street. And this certainly worries some people.

Bartasevičius: You will find that people's answers vary greatly depending on how you phrase the question, whether you ask them their opinion about immigrants from countries outside the European Union or about immigrants from Muslim countries and so on. People tend to be more negative when it comes to certain types of migrants.

We have talked about academia, but there is another player in the political system, namely the media. Could you tell me something about how the media acts in relation to the issue of immigration? And why do you think this is the case?

Bartasevičius: I was thinking about this today as well. To be honest, I wouldn't say that the media in Lithuania brings a new perspective or a different view on immigration. I believe that the prevailing climate in the media really reflects the general opinion and also the political discourse. I have the feeling that everything that is debated in parliament is picked up by the media, essentially in the appropriate terminology. The focus on national security would of course also be perpetuated by the media, they wouldn't really change the discourse, they would just push it forward and continue to work with it.

I can also tell you about a personal experience. I was interviewed a couple of times by the Lithuanian media and I was asked about the integration of immigrants. And I think both times it was said that some countries in Western Europe have this problem with the integration of migrants. I might have mentioned something like that, but that was not my message.

One of the main changes and challenges in European party systems in recent years has been the rise of so-called right-wing populist parties, which are often less global and more national in their values and policies. What do you personally see as the cause of this?

Bartasevičius: There is not yet a very successful far-right anti-immigrant party in Lithuania. I mean, there is perhaps one particular party that is trying to fill this gap in the political spectrum, but it hasn't been very successful so far. And again, that has to do with the fact that immigration is still a relatively new issue. And everyone is against it. At the same time, anti-immigration views often go hand in hand with a certain Euroscepticism. But that is something that is not very popular, because the European Union is very important to us. There is not much room for Euroscepticism in our country.

When it comes to immigration, we always have to think about the relationship with the concept of democracy. How do you see the relationship between immigration and democracy?

Bartasevičius: I mean, a democratic decision can be quite toxic, well, that's probably not the best word, but it can be quite negative. If a discourse prevails, then it is likely that a new space will open up for certain political forces to participate and also gain political advantage from it. At the moment, this is not yet the case in terms of a particular political party riding and capitalising on the wave of anti-immigration views. But it could possibly happen in the future.

Bartasevičius: We've talked a lot about the cultural and security concerns around immigration. These are legitimate concerns if you think about it, but at the same time there is certainly a big challenge of integration. What I miss is that immigration also offers a great opportunity for life and the possibility of becoming a more inclusive and open country. So I would approach this question from that point of view, because immigration can help us to become a country that is open to all. We definitely need to think about immigration and its impact in a broader sense and see it as an opportunity to create a more open and inclusive society. In this respect, I also see it as an opportunity for democracy.

Do you think it would be worthwhile to organise a dialogue process and what should be the aim of this dialogue process in your country?

Bartasevičius: The answer is yes, of course it is important to organise this dialogue and really broaden the debate and bring in new perspectives to make sure that we think about immigration in a broader framework and possibly not just from the Lithuanian national perspective. Migration is a global phenomenon and a challenge or an opportunity for Europe, depending on how you look at it.

Bartasevičius: And there is something else I feel about the integration debate in Europe. There is this assumption that Europe is somehow at the epicentre of migration movements, that large numbers of people are coming to Europe and that Europe is the centre of migration, so to speak. I don't want to deny that the numbers are really high and perhaps even increasing, but I think that if you look at the numbers of population movements in Africa and Latin America, and if you look at the number of immigrants in countries like Lebanon, Jordan and Colombia, then you also have to understand migration as a global phenomenon.

Vainius Bartasevičius, I really thank you for this interesting talk.

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