



English summary  
of Fafo-rapport 2021:14

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## Working and living conditions among resident immigrants from Poland og Lithuania

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According to figures from Statistics Norway, almost 200 000 immigrants, family members and children from EU member states in Central and Eastern Europe were resident in Norway in 2020. This project is a survey of the working and living conditions among the two largest immigrant populations in Norway, namely those from Poland and Lithuania. These populations total almost 145 000, including children and family members.

Migrant workers from these two countries have settled throughout Norway. The geographical spread has helped to ensure access to labour in shipbuilding, the fishing industry and agriculture. However, construction is the industry with the highest proportion of migrant workers.

This survey encompasses 1000 people of working age - 500 from Poland and 500 from Lithuania. Of these, 69 per cent are men and 31 per cent are women. The majority are between 30 and 50 years old, and around 70 per cent have lived in Norway for at least ten years.

## Why Norway – and will they stay?

Higher earnings than in their native country was, the main motivation for moving to Norway. A large number also reported being recruited to work in Norway by family and friends.

Poland has topped the statistics on family reunifications for many years. In our sample, a large proportion are living with their family, and about half live in rented accommodation.

Experience has shown that migrant workers' temporary stays often become permanent. More than 60 per cent of the resident Polish and Lithuanian migrant workers will remain in Norway as long as they have a job. When asked to look five years ahead, 24 per cent of Lithuanians and 18 per cent of Poles would consider returning, and a further 10 per cent are unsure. Being well treated at work and having satisfactory living conditions are the two main reasons for remaining in Norway.

## Pay and working conditions

Migrant workers are often regarded as a flexible buffer, with fewer contractual attachments to the workplace, and are widely employed in industries with large fluctuations in the demand for labour. According to our figures, however, the picture is different for those who are resident: eight out of ten Poles and almost nine

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out of ten Lithuanians have full-time permanent jobs, and most have written employment contracts.

One interesting issue is whether the migrant workers are paid in line with generally applicable collective wage agreements. In our sample, it is possible to take a closer look at the construction workers. Generally applicable minimum wage agreements are in place in the construction industry, and there are clear indications that the majority in our sample earn more than this minimum wage.

Despite this, 37 per cent of the workers from Poland and 24 per cent of the Lithuanians in construction believe that they earn less than their Norwegian counterparts in the same job. Those with an annual income of less than NOK 300 000 also feel more discriminated in terms of pay than others do.

The vast majority (nine out of ten) have never been subjected to ‘wage theft’, which is defined as not being paid for work or being paid less than what was agreed. Construction workers, in addition to the lowest paid, have been particularly exposed to this practice. For example, 18 per cent of Lithuanians earning less than NOK 300 000 have experienced not being paid for their work, and in a small number of cases, workers have had to repay part of their wages. Almost one in ten have had to perform dangerous work against their will.

The employer is the main source of information for pay and working conditions for migrant workers. The results also show that social media plays a major role in how knowledge is spread. The migrant workers themselves believe that they have a good understanding of the main labour regulations, in relation to working hours, HSE and wage setting.

## **Trade union membership**

The surveyed migrant workers have a lower unionisation rate than the general labour force in Norway. Country background does not seem to be connected to whether a worker is a member of a trade union, and women have a higher unionisation rate than men. The proportion who reported that there is no trade union representation at their workplace was particularly high for the Poles, with 33 per cent.

However, there is no doubt that the trade union movement could benefit from contacting migrant workers, since as many as 37 per cent of the Poles and 34 per cent of the Lithuanians said that no one had asked if they wanted to join a union. The corresponding proportion with a shop steward in the workplace is 28 per cent.

## **Tax and welfare benefits**

Twelve per cent of the Polish workers indicated that they do not pay tax, either in Norway or in Poland. In the age group 31–40 years, 17 per cent reported that they do not pay tax. The proportion of Polish migrant workers who do not declare

their earnings is therefore significantly higher than indicated in the total population surveys conducted by the Norwegian Tax Administration. Only 1 per cent of the Lithuanians reported not paying tax.

The proportions that receive unemployment benefit are quite high – 10 and 11 per cent – which is probably related to layoffs and unemployment as a result of the ongoing pandemic.

The migrant workers were also asked about their attitude towards tax evasion and abuse of the welfare benefits system. In general, there was little acceptance for such practices. However, 17 per cent of the Lithuanians believed that receiving benefits whilst in employment and not entitled to them could be acceptable in certain circumstances.

Eight per cent of the Poles and 7 per cent of the Lithuanians believe there is widespread non-compliance with the rules on layoffs and unemployment benefit in connection with the pandemic.

### **Proficiency in Norwegian**

Proficiency in the Norwegian language often depends on length of residence, access to language courses, requirements imposed by the employer, personal motivation, etc. Norwegian is the working language of less than half of the migrant workers. In general, 30 per cent indicated that they seldom speak Norwegian and 8 per cent said that they do not speak any Norwegian. The Lithuanians are more eager to take Norwegian courses than the Poles. Women who had received maternity allowance were also more likely to have attended a Norwegian language course.

### **Ramifications of the pandemic**

The migrant workers in our survey have mostly stayed in Norway during the pandemic, and have not therefore been affected by the travel restrictions for arrivals to Norway. A total of 26 per cent of the Polish workers in our sample have either been laid off or had their working hours reduced, and a further 5 per cent have been made redundant. Among Lithuanians, the corresponding figures are 20 per cent and 2 per cent respectively.

According to the Labour Force Survey (LFS), unemployment was 4.8 per cent in Norway in the fourth quarter of 2020, and 9.2 per cent among migrant workers from EU countries in Eastern Europe. Unemployment in this group saw a sharp increase between November 2019 and November 2020, from 7458 to 13 438. According to Statistics Norway, the fall in employment and rise in unemployment is due to the fact that the industries hardest hit by the pandemic are those employing a large proportion of migrant workers.