

Schrödinger's Cats: On the Origins of Uncertainty and its Impact on Belarusian Immigrant Families in Lithuania

 ERNESTA PLATŪKYTĖ,  NATALLIA SHCHERBINA,
 ALEXANDER CHUBRIK

Institute of Sociology at the Lithuanian Centre for Social Sciences, 9 A. Gostauto Street, 01108 Vilnius, Lithuania
Email: ernesta.platukyte@lcss.lt; natallia.shcherbina@lcss.lt; alexander.chubrik@case-research.eu

This article examines how uncertainty shapes the lives of migrant families and the strategies they employ to navigate it, focusing on Belarusian families in Lithuania. In Lithuania, rapidly shifting legal frameworks and politicised migration debates have produced heightened instability. Particular attention is paid to the legal dimension of uncertainty, which constrains planning horizons and reverberates across households through the principle of linked lives. The study draws mainly on the qualitative data collected in 2025 through semi-structured interviews and focus-group discussions with Belarusian families. Research participants often described living in a ‘suspended state’, reminiscent of Schrödinger’s cat, where shifting rules curtailed long-term planning and outcomes remained unknown until the last moment. Families relied on multiple information channels to compensate for fragmented official signals, yet informational complexity itself often deepened uncertainty, producing ‘swings’ in decision making and prompting suboptimal choices such as repeated relocation. The article contributes to migration sociology by conceptualising uncertainty not only as an external condition but also as a cognitive state generated within volatile information environments. Introducing the notion of cognitive uncertainty, borrowed from behavioural economics, we show how subjective doubt about the optimal decision helps explain migrants’ strategies under unstable institutional and discursive contexts. Policy implications include the need for clearer procedures and stronger integration measures. Balanced media coverage is essential to avoid amplifying distrust. Although limited by its qualitative scope and national focus, the study opens avenues for comparative and quantitative research on the long-term consequences of uncertainty for migrant adaptation and wellbeing.

Keywords: uncertainty, Belarusian family migration in Lithuania, liminal legality, linked lives, information and discursive environment, cognitive uncertainty

INTRODUCTION

Uncertainty is a defining condition of migrant life in receiving societies. Migrants encounter overlapping forms of unpredictability: legal statuses that are temporary and revisable, economic

opportunities that remain precarious, social belonging is fragile, and psychological strains are linked to health and well-being. Everyday life unfolds in a state of 'in-betweenness', reminiscent of Schrödinger's cat state: migrants live between statuses and scenarios, where outcomes remain undecided until the very last moment.

This article asks how uncertainty manifests in the everyday lives of migrant families and what strategies they employ to navigate it. We focus on Belarusian families in Lithuania, a case where legal frameworks and political debates have shifted rapidly since 2020, producing heightened instability. Particular attention is paid to the legal dimension of uncertainty, which not only constrains individual planning horizons but also reverberates across households through the principle of linked lives (Elder 1998): uncertainty for one member extends to the entire family.

Our analysis builds on migration scholarship that conceptualises uncertainty through liminal legality (Menjívar 2006), deportability and everyday insecurity (De Genova 2002; 2007), the role of transitory spaces and fragile networks in shaping belonging (Drotbohm, Winters 2024), and the documented effects of prolonged waiting on health and well-being (Phillimore, Cheung 2021). Bringing these strands together, we examine how legal uncertainty intersects with economic, social and psychological dimensions, reshaping family strategies in contexts of migration.

The article draws on the qualitative evidence collected in 2025 through focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews with Belarusian migrant families in Lithuania, complemented by expert interviews with government and NGO representatives. The contribution of this article is twofold: it highlights the centrality of legal status uncertainty in structuring family adaptation, and it shows how informational environments and politicised discourse amplify this uncertainty. The article is structured as follows: the next section outlines the concept of uncertainty in migration studies; the following section presents the Lithuanian context and sources of uncertainty for Belarusian migrants; subsequent sections analyse the empirical evidence on liminal legality and information strategies; and the final section discusses the implications of these findings and concludes.

THE CONCEPT OF UNCERTAINTY IN THE CONTEXT OF MIGRATION

In this article, uncertainty is understood not as an individual sense of 'not knowing', but as a social condition and an institutionally produced regime in which immigrants and their families are affected by the intersection of temporal, legal and social relations. Migration studies show that law and administrative practices structure waiting, while the threat of deportability (the potential for expulsion) shapes everyday insecurity even when individuals hold valid documents (De Genova 2002; 2007; Griffiths 2013; 2014; Jacobsen et al. 2020). This perspective allows uncertainty to be analysed as a process in which time, law, and social belonging are inseparable.

The Classical Sociological Approach: Uncertainty as a Condition of Modernity

In classical modernity theory, uncertainty is interpreted as a systemic feature of late modernity. In U. Beck's concept of the 'risk society', uncertainty arises from manufactured risks and reflexive modernisation: institutions, in their attempts to manage risks, continuously reproduce them, making the future structurally unpredictable (Beck 1992; 1999). Z. Bauman notes the constant 'melting' of forms and relationships, where the frameworks of work, belonging

and identity lose stability, and life strategies turn into short-term, opportunistic combinations of 'life projects' (Bauman 2000; 2005). R. Inglehart links cycles of existential security/insecurity with value shifts: during insecure periods, materialist priorities emphasising order and control become stronger, whereas in secure periods, post-materialist aspirations prevail (Inglehart 1997; Inglehart, Welzel 2005). These approaches open an analytical space to understand how structural insecurities shape migration experiences and societal attitudes toward migration.

Liminal Legality, Deportability, and the Temporality of Waiting

Returning to the migration context, several significant aspects are closely tied to the experience of uncertainty. In migration research, uncertainty is conceptualised through the notions of *liminal legality* (Menjívar 2006) and *deportability* (De Genova 2002; 2007). 'Liminal legality' refers to the 'grey zone' of legality, where individuals are neither fully 'legal' nor entirely 'illegal'. Their presence depends on temporary, conditional statuses subject to changing rules and deadlines. Such conditions shorten planning horizons and compel families to make interim decisions (e.g. temporary rent, fixed-term jobs, postponed investments in children's education). De Genova (2002; 2007) emphasises that even when individuals possess residence permits, the potential for expulsion looms as a constant threat, disciplining everyday relationships in the labour market, housing, and institutional encounters (with employers, schools, health facilities).

Griffiths (2014) further develops the temporal logic of uncertainty by analysing 'double unknowing', in which time within migration procedures is simultaneously slow (stagnant waiting) and suddenly fast (unexpected decisions, deadlines). This temporal uncertainty particularly affects families that must coordinate children's education, health, and care decisions with unpredictable legal timelines. Meanwhile, Jacobsen, Karlsen and Khosravi (2020) propose viewing such waiting not only as a consequence but also as an analytical perspective. 'Waiting' is produced by legal, bureaucratic, material and cultural orders, while migrants both internalise and resist these orders. Thus, uncertainty appears as a relational, socially mediated condition whose intensity depends on political rhythms and local infrastructures – from border control to municipal practices.

Dimensions of Uncertainty in Families

Uncertainty influences migrant families in four dimensions:

Legal – lack of status stability and procedural predictability. Liminal statuses (temporary permits, revisable grounds, ad hoc exceptions) create 'in-betweenness', which for families means a constant regime of renewing documents, providing proof, and meeting deadlines (Menjívar 2006). The shorter the duration of permits and the more frequent the rule changes, the narrower the family planning horizons and the greater the dependence on intermediaries (employers, landlords, lawyers);

Economic – precarious income and employment and limited access to resources. The fragility of legal status restricts access to formal employment, credit, and home ownership, leading to greater income volatility and temporary contracts. The risk of deportability transfers power to employers and landlords, while the family budget becomes especially sensitive to the documentation status of a single member (De Genova 2002);

Social – fragility of belonging, networks, and institutional integration. The sense of uncertainty affects social integration and the construction of community belonging. It fosters

short-term, weak ties with institutions and increases reliance on diasporas, NGOs, and informal intermediaries. Intermediate, transitory spaces where people are forced to stay become significant, as they mediate both support and control, shaping everyday life scenarios for families with children (Drotbohm, Winters 2024);

Psychological – changes in health, well-being, and future planning. Prolonged waiting and procedural indeterminacy affect health. Empirical research shows a clear link between longer asylum waiting times and poorer physical and emotional health, including lingering effects even after legal status is granted (Phillimore, Cheung 2021). This pattern also aligns with the public health framing of uncertainty as a form of violence that undermines trust, deters careseeking, and harms health when policy signals are inconsistent or punitive (Grace et al. 2018). The qualitative evidence from Belarusian migrant women in Lithuania demonstrates how health becomes both a psychological and economic resource: in the absence of stable social ties and institutional support, women facing health problems are placed in particularly vulnerable positions, while mothers emphasise that their own physical and emotional condition directly affects the well-being of children (Shcherbina 2026). Global health reports likewise underline that uncertainty in access to services and fragmented information environments contribute to heightened risks of anxiety, sleep problems, and family stress among migrants and refugees (WHO 2018; Vearey et al. 2020).

In this paper, we analyse how the legal dimension of uncertainty intersects with political and informational environments and reshapes migrant families' lives. We treat legality not as a static framework but as a dynamic process whose shifting intensity reconfigures family planning horizons and everyday strategies. Focusing on the family as the unit of analysis allows us to consider how uncertainty for one member extends to the entire household, following the concept of *linked lives* in life course theory (Elder 1998), and how emigration disrupts the natural progression of the family life course.

CONTEXT: IMMIGRATION AND UNCERTAINTY SOURCES

Migration From Belarus to Lithuania After 2020

Prior to 2020, immigration from Belarus to Lithuania was not a central focus for researchers or policymakers, though it expanded rapidly. According to Eurostat data, the number of Belarusian citizens with valid residence permits tripled in four years, reaching 18,700 by the end-2019, driven almost entirely by employment-related permits. The widening wage gap was a 'classical' pull factor: in 2014, the average gross wage in Belarus was 65.9% of the Lithuanian level, but by 2019 it had fallen to 36%.¹

The situation shifted dramatically in 2020. Mass repression following the presidential elections, and later Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, forced many Belarusians to leave their country. As a result, the number of Belarusian citizens with valid residence permits in Lithuania rose 3.4 times in four years, reaching 63,200 by the end of 2023 (Eurostat data).

Available data provide a limited insight into the composition of Belarusian immigrants. According to Eurostat, by the end-2024, 80% of them obtained their legal status for employment reasons. Yet Kazakevich (2023) estimated that one-half to two-thirds had left due to direct political persecution, stressing dual motives of repression and economic factors.

¹ Data sources: gross wage in Belarus – Belstat, EUR/BYN weighed average exchange rate – National Bank of Belarus, average monthly earnings in Lithuania – Official Statistics Portal of Lithuania.

Dambrauskaitė (2022), based on surveys of 335 respondents and 11 interviews with Belarusians who arrived in Lithuania in 2020 or later, identified repression, fear of persecution, and lack of prospects as key drivers. Overall, 86% cited political reasons, compared to 31% mentioning economic ones (overlapping categories).

Eurostat also reported 6.1 thousand Belarusians with residence permits for family reasons (10.4% of the total by end-2024). This figure understates actual family migration. Dambrauskaitė (2022) found that 65% of respondents arrived with families, while recent estimates based on the Eurostat data, Belarus Census-2019 benchmarks, and derived calculations suggest that family immigrants comprised about 40% of Belarusian citizens – actual residents of Lithuania at the end-2024 (Chubrik, Maslauskaitė 2025).

LEGISLATION CHANGE AND INFORMATION ENVIRONMENT

Between 2020 and 2025, Belarusian migration to Lithuania was shaped by pandemic restrictions,² political repression in Belarus, the instrumentalisation of migration in 2021 that triggered a state-level emergency (EMN 2022), and Belarus's proxy role in Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

In response to repression, Lithuania introduced exemptions in 2020: consular fee waivers, humanitarian entry permits, and visa benefits for regime victims.³ In 2021, Lithuania created a humanitarian residence permit and facilitated relocation of Belarusian companies, offering simplified procedures for transferring employees and their families.

Country-specific restrictions for Belarusians were introduced after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, when Lithuania declared a state of emergency (LRS 2022). The resolution suspended acceptance of visa applications from citizens of Belarus and Russia, unless mediated by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA). Migration control was not the primary aim of the emergency regime, which mainly established restrictions for Lithuania's own population and enabled a more flexible use of public funds, but restrictions deepened with the Law on restrictive measures in view of military aggression against Ukraine (LRS 2023). Applied annually and extended three times, the law tightened immigration rules, affected family reunification, and introduced additional security checks.

Uncertainty was compounded by Belarusian Presidential Decree No. 278 of September 2023 (PRB 2023), which denied Belarusians abroad access to a range of consular services, leaving many at risk of statelessness and creating 'serious obstacles for Belarusians abroad to exercise their fundamental rights' (OHCHR 2023). Lithuanian 'foreigner's passports' offered partial solutions but reinforced dependence on Lithuanian institutions.

Political debates further securitised migration. In 2024–2025, proposals to revoke residence permits for frequent travel to Belarus, restrict family reunification, and limit the spread of Russian language gained visibility, alongside sporadic discussions of *litvinism*.⁴ Border closures added to this trajectory: two checkpoints were shut in 2023, two more in 2024, and in November 2025 the remaining crossings were temporarily closed.

² During the COVID-19 pandemic, Lithuania declared a state of emergency (February 2020). Entry bans for non-EU and non-EEA nationals remained until May 2022.

³ Between 2020 and 2022, 59,306 D-type visas were issued, but this practice was nearly halted in subsequent years (2,562 in 2023; 266 in 2024), see *Migracijos metraščiai*, <https://migracija.lrv.lt/lt/statistika/migracijos-metrasciai/>.

⁴ A Lithuanian narrative that frames Belarusians as denying the Grand Duchy's Lithuanian heritage and seeking to reclaim Vilnius and 'former Belarusian' territories.

Taken together, legislative shifts, the withdrawal of consular support, and intensifying debates reshaped both the legal and discursive environment. What began as humanitarian support evolved into restrictions and securitisation, amplifying uncertainty for Belarusian families whose everyday adaptation and long-term planning became entangled with shifting laws and volatile narratives.

DYNAMIC LEGAL UNCERTAINTY AND INFORMATION STRATEGIES IN BELARUSIAN MIGRANT FAMILIES

Further analysis draws on the empirical evidence collected between May and September 2025 through a series of semi-structured in-depth interviews (IDIs) with adults from Belarusian immigrant families in Lithuania representing different types of families, professional areas, and legalisation grounds (9 men, 12 women, aged 20–72), and focus group discussions (FGDs) with the same target group (3 FGDs: 7 men, 11 women, aged 32–50).⁵ The in-depth interviews were designed to collect personal migration stories and capture individual and family-level experiences.⁶ FGDs enabled the identification of common strategies, and recurring concerns that complemented the individual narratives collected through interviews.⁷

All FGDs and IDIs with Belarusian migrants were transcribed and coded in MaxQDA. We identified three broad codes ('uncertainty', 'legal status' and 'information'), according to which relevant segments of interview and focus group discussions' transcripts were coded. After extracting data for each code, a contextual analysis was conducted to identify structural types of uncertainty and their manifestations in various spheres of migrant families' lives. Although the interview and FGD guides did not include uncertainty as a separate topic, the theme emerged clearly during data analysis, becoming one of the most analytically significant dimensions of immigrant family experiences.

Liminal Legality, Deportability, and Temporal Uncertainties

Legal status is the central source of uncertainty, constraining family life by reducing the predictability of the future. Research participants often described their legal situation as a 'suspended state', emphasising that the changing legal environment undermines their ability to plan ahead.

This [legal status renewal] is the most important question in the current situation, because I don't have a clear path to follow. What happens next depends on this. I realized I needed to see if Lithuania would issue permanent residence permits, whether we would receive humanitarian residence permits. Because what I do next depends on this (Valiancina, middle age woman, IDI).

⁵ In addition, during the study, we conducted non-structured interviews with experts from two government agencies, IOM Lithuania, and three NGOs involved in migrant adaptation and integration (six interviews). All of them were focused on the area of experts' competences, and were used mainly for policy analysis beyond this article. Here we refer to only one interview (with the expert from IOM Lithuania) whose experience was relevant to the topic of this article.

⁶ Covered topics are immigration story, primary adaptation, obtaining a legal status, children's adaptation, life after relocation (work, income, welfare, everyday routines), acculturation (general issues, children, interaction with local community and institutions), ties with Belarus, and the vision of the family's future.

⁷ Covered topics are family adaptation (process, definition, outcomes), family acculturation (definition, incentives, process, obstacles, support), acculturation and identity (self-identification and positioning, perception of/by the host society), the vision of the future life in Lithuania, and children's adaptation and acculturation (specifics, support, outcomes).

Even government decisions on legal status are not always implemented, especially in matters of naturalisation and citizenship:

My wife applied for citizenship, the commission approved it, but nothing has moved forward since then. <...> Formally, her name is on the waiting list for the President's signature, but he doesn't sign it for Belarusians (Aliaksandr, young man, IDI).

Prolonged processing periods for residence permits and cases of revoking legal status 'for national security reasons' exacerbate uncertainty and directly affect families' long-term strategies.

A month after submitting my application, I received a notice that my application had been put on hold, and the State Security Department needed to verify certain information about me (for national security reasons) (Janina, young woman, IDI).

We had a couple of people at work who were simply denied permanent residency. They had jobs, an employer was interested in them, but the Lithuanian government decided they couldn't stay in the country, and they were forced to leave. Yes, they left, some went to Poland, and they were accepted there (Zmicier, middle age man, IDI).

These empirical accounts closely echo Menjívar's concept of *liminal legality*, as research participants describe living in a legally 'in-between' condition where rights are temporary, revocable, and dependent on shifting procedures. Such suspended legal states embed uncertainty into the everyday life of entire families, precisely as theorised in studies on liminal legal status and deportability.

Evidence of the impact of legal status uncertainty of one family member on the whole family in line with Elder's concept of linked lives is widespread in our sample. Research participants mentioned the impact of their legal status precarity on the planning horizons of families:

I wasn't entirely sure if my residence permit would be extended. Moreover, even now: today I'm doing well, but tomorrow the situation could change, including for me and my family. For example, my residence permit could be revoked. There are no guarantees. This is a problem for long-term planning, for making long-term plans, and for family, this is important (Michaś, young man, IDI).

Children, especially in a single-parent households, are particularly vulnerable:

This [uncertainty of legal status] is the most important issue in the current situation, because there is no clear legalization path for me right now. <...> Because what I do next depends on it – I am the only adult who can ensure the safety of my child until adulthood (Valiancina, middle age woman, IDI).

In addition to their straightforward economic dependence on adults, children cannot count on the reasonable predictability of trajectories of their study and smooth transition to adulthood:

We can't convey this certainty, this serenity about the future, to our children. We can't convey it because we don't have it ourselves. We don't have serenity today (Darja, middle age woman, FGD).

Furthermore, for families with children, the issue of obtaining a legal status by their children upon reaching adulthood is especially acute. In some cases, such as refugee status, children can 'inherit' their parents' legal status upon reaching adulthood, otherwise, they

must obtain their legal status for 'their own' reasons, such as study or employment. Parents are uncertain whether their children will be able to continue their education in Lithuania or find work, and therefore, they are uncertain whether their children – and their family – will be able to remain in Lithuania:

To what extent will my humanitarian residence permit cover an adult child? There are no problems with minors, but after they reach adulthood, I don't know, and that's why I feel insecure (Safija, middle age woman, IDI).

The absence of functioning Belarusian consular services is a specific source of liminal legality for Belarusian migrants. Research participants expressed particular anxiety about passport renewal:

I don't even know at what age the passport must be changed. If by then nothing changes, it will be a real tragedy (Aliaksandr, young man, IDI).

For many, the only alternative is to apply for a Lithuanian 'foreigner's passport', which provides a partial solution for travel:

Here the main topic is passports. Most cannot return to Belarus to renew them. Everyone relies on Lithuania to provide temporary documents (Raman, young man, IDI).

We already applied for the foreigner's passport. It is not an ideal solution, but at least there is some legal way to resolve the issue (Palina, young woman, IDI).

However, this solution leaves a legal status precarious:

Colleagues are now trying to get a travel document without refugee status or a humanitarian visa. It is very important, because many are not formally refugees but also cannot go back to Belarus. For them and their employers it would be much clearer if such a mechanism existed (Raman, young man, IDI).

Shifting political debates further compound the uncertainties surrounding the legal status. Research participants emphasised that ongoing political and public debates about the status of Belarusians in Lithuania create a negative atmosphere and heighten uncertainty:

And then there is this degree of uncertainty with the laws which, on the one hand, the Lithuanian government does not actually adopt, but they are constantly being discussed. Sometimes Belarusians are linked to Russians, sometimes not. 'Belarusians are like Russians', then 'not like Russians'. One day they talk about restricting travel to Belarus, then not restricting it (Michaś, young man, IDI).

To a large extent, this is happening because the legal framework had not been prepared for the large immigration wave of 2020–2023 and is still adjusting to the increased share of immigrants in the domestic population.

The volatility of attitudes toward Belarusians is simply astounding. When we moved in 2021, everyone here invited us, saying, 'Move your business here', and we were all very happy to see you, processing the paperwork quickly. But then people applied for extensions again, they were deemed a threat to national security, and then you can leave (Alieś, young man, FGD).

The ongoing changes make uncertainty a systemic condition of migrant life – destabilising long-term planning, compelling families to adopt suboptimal or reactive decisions, and continuously reconfiguring their orientations toward residence, mobility and integration.

Legal status uncertainty is particularly acute among Belarusian migrants whose residence status is tied to employment. In general, this makes such immigrants – and their families – more dependent on employers compared to local employees, which may result in discrimination in terms of salary and working conditions. For highly qualified professionals holding EU Blue Cards, the legal status of the entire family is contingent upon the continued employment of a single individual (LRS 2025, Art. 44¹). By contrast, holders of work-based residence permits remain structurally dependent on their employer, as the permit is tied to both the employer and even a specific position within the company (LRS 2025, Art. 44).

From the employer's point of view, it's very beneficial that I'm tied to him in this way (Kazimir, young man, IDI).

For me, the 'legalisation' issue is also a deterrent. As soon as I leave the company, the clock starts ticking. Six months now [to find work]. I'm not 100% sure that I'll find something I like and that will allow me to earn the same level of income (Michaś, young man, IDI).

For asylum seekers, the path to legalisation directly affects employment opportunities and family welfare: it is not permitted to work while awaiting a decision (LRS 2025, Art. 71).

You can't work, and for six months you have to either live on the savings you brought with you, or on help from others, or earn extra money doing all sorts of 'odd' jobs (Michal, middle age man, IDI).

The loss of a job or the relocation of an employer to another country can result in the termination of residence rights for both the worker and their dependents, especially children. This creates a precarious legal environment, where the threat of status loss is systemic rather than exceptional:

If I want to change jobs, or if my company, for example, goes bankrupt, or is sold, or somehow can't pay me, I'll have a very serious question about how I'll even live on (Kazimir, young man, IDI).

This aligns with the economic dimension of uncertainty discussed earlier: insecure legal status not only limits access to stable employment but also amplifies employers' leverage, producing precisely the income volatility and dependency (De Genova 2002). In this context, job loss or employer relocation becomes more than an economic risk – it directly threatens the family's right to remain in the country.

Liminal legality and employment-related uncertainties limit migrant families' ability to plan for the future through housing purchases.

To do that [to purchase an apartment], I have to say: 'Yes, I'll be able to find a job (in Lithuania) and pay off this loan for 25 years.' And I seriously doubt that (Kazimir, young man, IDI).

We definitely want to buy our own apartment – a good investment – and as of today we already feel that we would need this, and we want to live in Lithuania. And then we talked and realized that we would buy it, but we would still be here in this 'suspended' status (Kastuś, young man, IDI).

However, such a purchase would signal to the host society that an immigrant family is seriously intended to integrate, and in this sense the liminal legality of migrants increases uncertainty about their incentives for the host society.

Cognitive Uncertainty: The Role of Information

Pervasive uncertainty compel families to cross-verify through multiple channels, increasing time and cognitive load. The lack of input from official channels (official sources, specialised institutions, media) pushes them toward alternative sources. Migrants draw on three overlapping methods of knowledge production and exchange (Haller, Yanašmayan 2024):

Individual perception – the personal experience of interacting with institutions. Personal contact is typically used to verify information, clarify procedural steps, and identify responsible authorities.

There are many questions about residence permits. Either about the whole process of submitting documents, or like, 'which documents do I need, do they have to be apostilled, do they need to be translated?' Because many people come on the basis of employment, there are also a lot of questions about labour law and the procedure for changing employers. People ask about it because they want to do everything according to the law, not to violate anything (IOM Lithuania expert).

It turns out that you can simply write to any email address, say, vilnius.lt, and people will respond and give you the right contact information (Maryja, middle age woman, IDI).

Direct interpersonal exchange – advice from friends, colleagues, or relatives offers practical guidance and reassurance in navigating uncertainty.

The Lithuanians themselves were very helpful. That is, not even public service representatives, but simply some acquaintances who introduced me to someone. They explained how the system actually works. (Hlieb, young man, FGD)

Such exchange helps migrants access everyday information and facilitates initial settlement: 'In fact, it's the people who live here who help anyway – the Belarusians who've settled in here. You can't go anywhere without them' (Maryja, middle age woman, IDI).

Extended networks – digital communities, NGO platforms, and diasporic forums generate collective resources that migrants actively use to validate or substitute official information.

Chats support us here, and you can ask a question and get an answer. People are willing to share their experiences, and that's invaluable. People are creating guides, and they're a treasure trove of information that we'd like to learn even earlier (Janina, young woman, IDI).

A mom's chat – this is what really helped me out at first, and it still helps me out now, because everything is right there, and they always give advice, always support, share some reviews, contacts (Palina, young woman, IDI).

These methods operate simultaneously and in combination, compensating for fragmented or contradictory signals from official channels. Yet the complexity of these channels may itself deepen uncertainty.

At the document stage, the main problems with documents are related to the fact that different sources provide you with different information. They 'swear by their mothers' that this is exactly what happens, but you can end up in force majeure situations where you have to resolve them (Kacia, middle age woman, FGD).

For migrant families, this landscape is even more challenging, as they must cope with multiple uncertainties stemming from the social and institutional interactions of each family member. Effective decision-making depends on how 'digestible' institutional information is – that is, its clarity, consistency and responsiveness.

We submitted a written request, called, and even asked the immigration clerk about the required amount [to prove sufficient means of subsistence for a child's residence permit]. They told us one thing, but I'm supposed to go to a visit tomorrow, and the clerk calls and says the amount should be two times higher. So, you've supposedly received an official response, and you've prepared for one scenario, but they tell you it's different (Kacia, middle age woman, FGD).

Where institutions provide structured and accessible information, uncertainty is reduced; where they fail, fragmented and inconsistent signals intensify it. This may happen even within one state institution:

I ran to Constitution Street [Vilnius City Council] myself, and everyone kept telling me no, no, no, bring your residence registration certificate first. I brought my registration certificate – no, the visa wasn't appropriate. Miraculously, they accepted my documents on the third or fourth try. I tried to explain them that we've been living here for a while now, so where am I supposed to put the kids? Take us to some school here! (Nadzieja, young woman, FGD).

Such cases can reduce migrants' trust in government institutions, especially for those (like Belarusians) coming from countries with low trust in the state:

There's the issue of accessibility of information, and maybe, for people from some countries who've had 'certain experiences', a lack of trust in government institutions. <...> Trust in public institutions is very important, because they are the first contact point (IOM Lithuania expert).

Trust in the state emerges not only from the direct experience of interactions with institutions, but also from the broader information environment. News flows can influence uncertainty both ways, sometimes creating anxiety, a psychological effect widely documented in migration health research (Vearey et al. 2020) and catalysing a feeling of 'suspended state'. For Belarusian migrants, political discourse itself can amplify uncertainty, as some politicians are associated with anti-migrant initiatives:

We are tired of such 'swings', when you live for like a month and you say: 'Great, I really like it', and then some news comes out that [name of Lithuanian conservative politician known for his anti-migrant rhetoric] wants to push some rather terrible bill, and you start thinking: 'Oh no, what to do, what if it passes by chance?' Then again you live like 'great, I like everything', and then something happens again (Nina, young woman, IDI).

These 'swings' may trigger suboptimal decisions, such as repeated relocation. The cited couple mentions this effect explicitly – at the time of the interview, they planned relocation to Poland, and later relocated. The 'rationale' of their decision can be traced through the interview:

We had these thoughts: since we're in Lithuania, we should know Lithuanian because we live here. <...> At that point, we were already starting to like Lithuania; we even felt like we didn't want to move anywhere, but when [wife's name] also approached the issue of her documents, we realized there was no certainty and we needed to go to Poland to get them for sure. <...> From the side of the ordinary people, not from the side of [name of Lithuanian conservative politician mentioned above] or Migris, everything has always been

good. But in Poland, I think the situation is the opposite. On the government's side, they're probably making things easier for Belarusians, but on the people's side, there will probably be all sorts of unpleasant situations – our friends told us about that. <...> Poland feels so foreign, incomprehensible. But, of course, that's simply because we haven't integrated into it yet. But in Lithuania, we definitely already feel like a piece of the puzzle, like a cog in a clock (Kastuš, young man, IDI).

It was suboptimal choice, as the research participants stressed that they feel integrated, but decided to move due to legal uncertainty and context-driven emotional 'swings'.

This example shows that migrants' decisions are shaped not only by institutional rules but also by how they perceive the complexity and instability of the information environment. In everyday life, fragmented and shifting signals from institutions, media, and interpersonal networks create informational turbulence that complicates decision-making. To the baseline uncertainty about the future is added a second layer: uncertainty about which choice will actually secure stability and well-being for the family. In behavioural economics, this mechanism is conceptualised as *cognitive uncertainty* – 'people's subjective uncertainty over which decision maximizes their expected utility' (Enke, Graeber 2023: 2021–2022), that is, whether their decision is indeed the optimal one. Enke and Graeber experimentally demonstrate that *perceived* complexity amplifies this uncertainty. In the migration context, the complexity and volatility of information environments become a structural source of subjective (or cognitive) uncertainty, shaping adaptation trajectories and sometimes prompting decisions that appear inconsistent with migrants' own sense of belonging.

CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of empirical material confirms the relevance of the theoretical framework of liminal legality, deportability, and temporal aspects of uncertainty, while highlighting the central role of legal uncertainty. Research participants consistently emphasised the interdependence of family members and the amplification of uncertainty at the household level compared to the individual. Families appear more vulnerable to uncertainty than individuals, as long-term planning is of primary importance for them – particularly for households with children, where decisions about education, health and integration are inseparable from the stability of legal status.

A key mechanism identified in our analysis is the role of informational complexity and contradiction. When signals from institutions, media and networks are fragmented or inconsistent, families face not only baseline uncertainty about the future but also a second layer: subjective doubt about whether their decisions are the 'right' ones. This mechanism helps explain why migrants may make suboptimal choices, such as leaving a context where they already feel integrated, in response to sudden shifts in discourse or procedure.

Theoretically, we propose that uncertainty should be understood not only as an external condition – legal, economic, or social – but also as a cognitive state generated within complex information environments. By introducing the concept of cognitive uncertainty, borrowed from behavioural economics, we open a bridge to migration sociology: subjective doubt about the optimal decision becomes a useful lens for analysing how volatile institutional and discursive contexts influence migrant families' decision-making.

The practical implications are straightforward. For public institutions, reducing informational complexity and ensuring consistency across agencies/official sources are essential. Stable procedures, transparent communication, and a stronger focus on integration – rather than control alone – can lower uncertainty and strengthen trust, ultimately contributing to

both economic benefit and civic cohesion. Specialised organisations could consider promoting official information through information channels used by migrant communities (social networks and diaspora media). For media actors, the balanced coverage of migration is crucial: avoiding one-sided or alarmist narratives helps prevent the vicious circle of mutual distrust between migrants and host societies.

This study has limitations. It is based on qualitative data and focuses on Belarusian families in Lithuania, which constrains generalisation. Future research should compare different national contexts, develop quantitative measures of uncertainty, and examine the long-term consequences of informational volatility for adaptation, health and trust.

In sum, uncertainty emerges as both a structural condition and a cognitive state. By situating Belarusian families' experiences within this dual perspective, we highlight how liminal legality and informational turbulence reshape adaptation trajectories, and why clarity, stability, and integration-oriented policies – alongside balanced media narratives – are indispensable for reducing the everyday violence of uncertainty.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors are grateful to Aušra Maslauskaitė for inspiring the topic and valuable comments during the research process, to Živilė Dambrauskaitė for her contribution to the fieldwork, methodological and policy discussions, and primary analysis of legislation, and to Vytis Jurkonis for critical insights at the stage of methodological design. We also thank all focus group participants and interview respondents for their time and openness.

FUNDING INFORMATION

This paper was prepared within the Project 'Making Migration Policy More Family-oriented: The Case of Belarusian Migration to Lithuania' co-funded by the European Union (NDICI-GEO-NEAR/2022/434-092-0067) and implemented by the Institute of Sociology at the Lithuanian Centre for Social Sciences. Its contents are the sole responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the European Union or any organisation that the authors can be associated with.

Received 1 December 2025

Accepted 23 April 2026

References

1. Bauman, Z. 2000. *Liquid Modernity*. Cambridge: Polity.
2. Bauman, Z. 2005. *Liquid Life*. Cambridge: Polity.
3. Beck, U. 1992. *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*. London: Sage.
4. Beck, U. 1999. *World Risk Society*. Cambridge: Polity.
5. Chubrik, A.; Maslauskaitė, A. 2025. 'Belarusian Migration to Lithuania: Estimating the Family Dimension', *Lietuvos socialinė raida* 14: 69–81. Available at: <https://lsta.lt/10-63588-lsr-2025-14-4/>
6. Chulitskaya, T.; Homel, K.; Jaroszewicz, M.; Lesińska, M. 2022. *Belarusian Migrants in Poland and Lithuania: General Trends and Comparative Analysis*. Vilnius: Eastern Europe Studies Centre.
7. De Genova, N. P. 2002. 'Migrant "Illegality" and Deportability in Everyday Life', *Annual Review of Anthropology* 31: 419–447. Available at: <https://www.annualreviews.org/content/journals/10.1146/annurev.anthro.31.040402.085432>
8. De Genova, N. 2007. 'The Production of Culprits: From Deportability to Detainability in the Aftermath of "Homeland Security"', *Citizenship Studies* 11(5): 421–448. Available at: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13621020701605735>
9. Drotbohm, H.; Winters, N. 2024. '(Un)settling Place Along- and Out-of-the-way', *Ethnos* 89(4): 691–711. DOI: 10.1080/00141844.2022.2145678

10. Dambrauskaitė, Ž. 2022. *Migration from Belarus and Economic, Social and Political Integration of Immigrants in Lithuania*. Vilnius: Eastern Europe Studies Centre.
11. Elder, G. H., Jr. 1998. 'The Life Course as Developmental Theory', *Child Development* 69(1): 1–12. Available at: <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/9499552/>
12. EMN. 2022. *Lithuania 2021: Main Developments in Migration and INTERNATIONAL Protection, Including Latest Statistics*. Brussels: European Migration Network.
13. Enke, B.; Graeber, T. 2023. 'Cognitive Uncertainty', *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 184(4): 2021–2067. Available at: <https://academic.oup.com/qje/article-abstract/138/4/2021/7181327>
14. Grace, B. L.; Bais, R.; Roth, B. 2018. 'The Violence of Uncertainty – Undermining Immigrant and Refugee Health', *New England Journal of Medicine* 379(10): 904–905. Available at: <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/30184446/>
15. Griffiths, M. 2013. 'Living with Uncertainty: Indefinite Immigration Detention', *Journal of Legal Anthropology* 1(3): 263–286. Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/329004594_Living_with_Uncertainty
16. Griffiths, M. 2014. 'Out of Time: The Temporal Uncertainties of Refused Asylum Seekers and Immigration Detainees', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 40(12): 1991–2009. Available at: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/1369183X.2014.907737>
17. Inglehart, R. 1997. *Modernization and Postmodernization*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
18. Inglehart, R.; Welzel, C. 2005. *Modernization, Cultural Change, and Democracy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
19. Jacobsen, C. M.; Karlsen, M.-A.; Khosravi, S. (eds.) 2020. *Waiting and the Temporalities of Irregular Migration*. London: Routledge.
20. Haller, L.; Yanaşmayan, Z. 2024. 'Escaping Uncertainty: Overlapping Methods of Knowledge Production and Exchange in the Naturalization Journey', *Comparative Migration Studies* 12: 41. Available at: <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1186/s40878-024-00397-w>
21. Kazakevich, A. 2023. *Migration from Belarus to Estonia, Germany, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland: Before and After 2020*. Vilnius: European Network for Belarus.
22. LRS. 2022. *Lietuvos Respublikos Seimo nutarimas dėl nepapraštosios padėties įvedimo*, 2022 m. birželio 28 d., Nr. XIV-1244.
23. LRS. 2023. *Lietuvos Respublikos ribojamųjų priemonių dėl karinės agresijos prieš Ukrainą nustatymo įstatymas*, 2023 m. balandžio 20 d., Nr. XIV-1888.
24. LRS. 2025. *Lietuvos Respublikos įstatymas dėl užsieniečių teisinės padėties*, 2004 m. balandžio 29 d., Nr. IX-2206 (suvestinė redakcija nuo 2025-01-01 iki 2025-12-31).
25. Menjívar, C. 2006. 'Liminal Legality: Salvadoran and Guatemalan Immigrants' Lives in the United States', *American Journal of Sociology* 111(4): 999–1037. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/499509?seq=1>
26. OHCHR. 2023. *Belarus: Presidential Decree Denying Consular Services Puts Belarusians Abroad at Risk*. Press Release. Geneva: UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights.
27. Phillimore, J.; Cheung, S. Y. 2021. 'The Violence of Uncertainty: Empirical Evidence on how Asylum Waiting Time Undermines Refugee Health', *Social Science & Medicine* 282: 114154. Available at: <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/34192621/>
28. PRB. 2023. *The Decree of the President of the Republic of Belarus 'On the Procedure of Issuing Documents and Performing Actions'*, 4 September 2023, No. 278.
29. Shcherbina, N. 2026. 'Not at (a) Home: Social and Economic Deprivations of Belarusian Women Migrants in Lithuania', *Topos*, 56(1): 40–66. Available at: <https://www.journals.ehu.lt/index.php/topos/article/view/1558>
30. Vearey, J.; Hui, C.; Wickramage, K. 2020. 'Migration and Health: Current Issues, Governance and Knowledge Gaps', in *World Migration Report 2020*. Geneva: International Organization for Migration (IOM).
31. WHO. 2018. *Report on the Health of Refugees and Migrants in the WHO European Region: No Public Health Without Refugee and Migrant Health*. Copenhagen: World Health Organisation Regional Office for Europe.

ERNESTA PLATŪKYTĖ, NATALLIA SHCHERBINA, ALEXANDER CHUBRIK

Šriodingerio katės: neapibrėžtumo ištakos ir poveikis baltarusių imigrantų šeimoms Lietuvoje

Santrauka

Šiame straipsnyje nagrinėjama, kaip neapibrėžtumas formuoja migrantų šeimų gyvenimą ir kokias strategijas jos taiko siekdamos su juo susidoroti, daugiausia dėmesio skiriant baltarusių šeimoms Lietuvoje. Lietuvoje sparčiai kintanti teisinė sistema ir politizuotos migracijos diskusijos sukūrė padidėjusio nestabilumo situaciją. Ypatingas dėmesys skiriamas teisinei neapibrėžtumo dimensijai, kuri riboja planavimo galimybes ir „susietų gyvenimų“ principu atsispindi visuose namų ūkiuose. Tyrimas daugiausia paremtas kokybiniais duomenimis, surinktais 2025 m. organizuojant pusiau struktūruotus interviu ir grupines diskusijas su baltarusių šeimomis. Tyrimo dalyviai dažnai apibūdindavo savo būseną kaip „pakibusią tarp dviejų būsenų“, primenančią Šriodingerio katės metaforą: nuolat besikeičiančios taisyklės riboja ilgalaikį planavimą, o sprendimų pasekmės išlikdavo neaiškios iki pat paskutinės akimirkos. Šeimos rėmėsi įvairiais informacijos šaltiniais, siekdamos kompensuoti fragmentiškus oficialius signalus, tačiau pati informacijos gausa ir sudėtingumas dažnai dar labiau didino neapibrėžtumą. Tai sukeldavo svyravimus priimant sprendimus ir kartais paskatindavo ne pačius optimaliausius pasirinkimus, pavyzdžiui, pakartotinį persikėlimą. Straipsnis prisideda prie migracijos sociologijos, konceptualizuodamas neapibrėžtumą ne tik kaip išorinę sąlygą, bet ir kaip kognityvinę būseną, atsirandančią nestabilioje informacinėje aplinkoje. Įvedant kognityvinio neapibrėžtumo sąvoką, pasiskolintą iš elgesio ekonomikos, parodoma, kaip subjektyvios abejonės dėl optimalaus sprendimo padeda paaiškinti migrantų strategijas nestabilių institucinių ir diskursinių kontekstų sąlygomis. Politikos požiūriu tai rodo aiškesnių procedūrų ir stipresnių integracijos priemonių poreikį. Taip pat svarbu užtikrinti subalansuotą žiniasklaidos informavimą, kad nebūtų stiprinamas ar didinamas nepasitikėjimas. Nors tyrimą riboja jo kokybinė apimtis ir orientacija į vieną šalį, jis atveria galimybes lyginamiesiems ir kiekybiniais tyrimams apie ilgalaikes neapibrėžtumo pasekmes migrantų adaptacijai ir gerovei.

Reikšminiai žodžiai: neapibrėžtumas, baltarusių šeimų migracija Lietuvoje, liminali teisinė padėtis, susieti gyvenimai, informacinė ir diskursinė aplinka, kognityvinis neapibrėžtumas