



NAVIGATING BETWEEN PERIPHERY AND METROPOLIS: THE SHIFTING DYNAMICS OF REGIONAL CENTRES IN LITHUANIA

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Abstract. Lithuania's medium-sized cities, historically shaped by deindustrialization and population decline, have experienced a new demographic shift since 2020. Events such as Brexit, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the war in Ukraine have reversed long-term shrinkage, with immigration driving growth and reshaping urban dynamics. The purpose of this study is to examine transformations in Lithuania's medium-sized cities since 1990, with a focus on population dynamics, emphasizing the turbulent period after 2020 marked by intensified immigration. This study examines 11 regional centres, combining demographic analysis with an assessment of refugee settlement and integration. Results indicate that Lithuania's urban population increased by 3.5% between early 2022 and 2025, with immigrants addressing labour shortages, particularly in services, and in some cases contributing high-skilled expertise. At the same time, challenges have emerged, including housing pressures, rising rents, and linguistic barriers. The article also reviews key support initiatives for Ukrainian war refugees. Findings suggest that contemporary regional centres embody both the vulnerabilities of long-term decline and the regenerative potential of migration, illustrating how medium-sized cities can leverage incoming skills to strengthen local economies and communities.

Keywords: medium-sized cities, regional centres, deindustrialization, immigration and interaction, population dynamics, post-industrial cities, Lithuania.

Introduction

In 2025, Lithuania marks 35 years since the restoration of its independence – three decades marked by profound socio-economic transformation. While economic liberalization, EU integration, and globalization have reshaped the country, demographic trends have followed a contrasting path: Lithuania has experienced one of the most severe population declines in both the post-socialist region and globally (Ubarevičienė et al., 2016; Deimantas et al., 2024). Between 1992 and 2020, the national population decreased by 25.3%, reflecting long-term structural change driven by recurring economic disruptions and industrial restructuring (Kiyak & Reichenbachas, 2014).

This transformation has profoundly impacted Lithuania's urban landscape, especially in medium-sized cities. Historically central to the country's polycentric settlement structure, these cities have become increasingly marginalized. With the collapse of Soviet-era industries and the shift to a market-oriented economy (Jakubauskas, 2000; Bivainis, 2001), many regional centres have

faced economic decline, population loss, and deteriorating infrastructure. This mirrors broader trends across post-socialist Europe, where deindustrialization has disproportionately affected medium-sized urban areas (Mykhnenko & Turok, 2008; Sýkora & Bouzarovski, 2012; Haase et al., 2013; Popescu, 2014; Lang et al., 2022; Szymczyk et al., 2024).

The inherited Soviet model of urban development, once praised for its hierarchical and relatively balanced city network (Vanagas & Staniūnas, 2000; Cinis et al., 2008; Vanagas et al., 2022), has unravelled in the decades following independence. Lithuania's 103 cities, ranging in size from over 600 thousand residents in Vilnius to fewer than 250 in Panemunė, were once supported by centrally planned investments. However, post-1990 liberalization and population mobility led to growing spatial polarization (Pociūtė-Sereikienė, 2019; Baranauskienė & Burneika, 2021; Baranauskienė et al., 2024). Metropolitan centres – especially Vilnius, Kaunas, and Klaipėda – emerged as dominant growth poles, while smaller and medium-sized cities struggled to retain population and attract investment (Burneika et al., 2017; Pociūtė-Sereikienė et al., 2019; Pociūtė-Sereikienė & Burneika, 2022; Teleišė, 2023; Kriauciūnas et al., 2025).

The 1990s deindustrialization hit mono-functional towns hardest, triggering waves of emigration and accelerating urban shrinkage (Berzins & Zvidrins, 2011; Kriauciūnas et al., 2024). Some cities lost more than 30% of their inhabitants, and public discourse increasingly framed regional centres as economically stagnant and socially vulnerable (Sipavičienė & Stankūnienė, 2011; Pociūtė Sereikienė, 2021; Teleišė, 2023). This process of marginalization intensified in the 2000s as market-led spatial development further reinforced the primacy of capital regions and widened regional disparities (Daugirdas et al., 2019; Ubarevičienė et al., 2024).

Yet since 2020, Lithuania – like much of other countries around Europe and the Globe in general – has entered a new phase shaped by overlapping and compounding crises (Juncker, 2018, February 22; Zeitlin et al., 2019; Lawrence et al., 2024). The COVID-19 pandemic, Brexit, tensions along the Belarusian border, Russia's war on Ukraine, rising immigration, and economic instability have all altered the trajectory of cities across the CEE (Central and Eastern Europe) countries (Kasnauskienė & Kavalnis, 2021; Duszczek & Kaczmarczyk, 2022; Gerlach & Ryndzak, 2022; Jayasuriya, 2023; Tammaru et al., 2023; Wiśniewski et al., 2023; Wolff & Mykhnenko, 2023). While these crises revealed structural vulnerabilities, they also created unexpected opportunities – especially for small and medium-sized cities (Vaccaro et al., 2017; Beer et al., 2023).

Recent data suggest a modest demographic reversal. Between 2020 and 2025, Lithuania's population grew by approximately 2.9%, largely driven by immigration, including returning nationals and refugees from Ukraine (EMN, 2024, October 10; Eurostat, 2024; State Data Agency, 2025, August 5; Statistics Lithuania, 2025). Urban areas saw a 3.5% increase, while rural areas grew by 1.4%. This shift marks a significant moment: the population growth of more than 80 thousand people is roughly equivalent to the size of medium-sized city Panevėžys, Lithuania's fifth-largest city. Medium-sized cities – once associated with decline – became attractive alternatives during the pandemic era due to their relative affordability, safety, and accessibility (Tammaru et al., 2023; Kriauciūnas et al., 2024).

These trends signal a potential turning point in Lithuania's urban dynamics. While shrinkage and deindustrialization remain dominant legacies, a phase of demographic stabilization – or even regrowth – may be underway. However, the ability of medium-sized cities to capitalize on these new conditions depends on their capacity to adapt to long-term structural change.

This article examines demographic transformations in Lithuania's 11 regional centres – defined here as medium-sized cities – between 1989 and 2025, with particular attention to developments since 2020. These cities, identified as regional centres according to the 'Comprehensive

Plan of the Territory of the Republic of Lithuania' (CPTRL) (Lietuva 2030, 2021), range in size from approximately 110 thousand residents (Šiauliai) to 10 thousand residents (Biržai). Drawing on the theoretical lens of deindustrialization that led to shrinkage, we explore how historical legacies and structural vulnerabilities have shaped these cities' trajectories and capacity for renewal – particularly in light of recent immigration flows and crisis-induced mobility.

The central research question guiding this study is: What does it mean to be a regional centre in a country marked by long-term demographic and economic decline, but now entering a possible phase of regeneration? The purpose of this study is to examine the transformations of medium-sized cities in Lithuania since the restoration of independence in 1990, with a particular focus on population dynamics, paying special attention to the turbulent period after 2020 characterized by intense immigration.

The article is structured as follows: it begins with the theoretical framework, outlines the research methodology, presents empirical findings, and concludes with a discussion of implications for future urban and regional development.

Deindustrialization and regional urban decline: a theoretical framework

Urban shrinkage and deindustrialization are closely interlinked processes with far-reaching consequences for urban sustainability. Deindustrialization – understood as the decline of manufacturing industries – is frequently cited as a primary driver of urban shrinkage (Martinez-Fernandez et al., 2012; Haase et al., 2013; Popescu, 2014; Strykiewicz & Jaroszewska, 2022; Vargas-Hernández & Zdunek-Wielgołaska, 2022). These phenomena, however, are shaped by their historical and geographical contexts and cannot be understood in isolation from local trajectories of change (Grossmann et al., 2013; Audirac, 2014; Vaccaro et al., 2017; Hartt, 2018; Blažek & Květoň, 2023).

In Lithuania, the transition from a centrally planned to a market economy in the early 1990s marked a turning point. This period – described in international literature as 'shock therapy' (Bontje, 2004; Hamm et al., 2012) or a 'systemic shock' (Rainys, 1997) – brought deep structural changes, particularly in industry, resulting in long-term and widespread shrinkage (Rainys, 1997; Šimėnas, 2020; Pociūtė-Sereikienė, 2021; Teleišė, 2023).

The consequences of deindustrialization in Lithuania, as elsewhere, are evident in demographic trends. Economic restructuring leads to declining employment opportunities, outmigration, and ageing populations, all of which reinforce urban decline (Slach et al., 2019; Toura, 2019; Dzenovska, 2020). The collapse of industrial sectors triggers a chain reaction: economic base erosion leads to population loss, infrastructure underutilization, and further disinvestment (Rieniets, 2009; Martinez-Fernandez et al., 2012; Rumpel & Slach, 2022).

Economically, deindustrialization and shrinkage reduce tax revenues, limit public investment, and drive unemployment (Pallagst et al., 2013). These processes contribute to deteriorating living conditions, growing poverty, social exclusion, and the weakening of community cohesion (Bernt, 2009; Vaccaro et al., 2017; Dzenovska, 2020). As younger, more mobile populations migrate in search of better opportunities, those who remain are often left with declining access to education, healthcare, and public services (Mallach, 2018).

Spatially, deindustrialization reshapes the urban landscape. Abandoned industrial zones and vacant housing create visible urban decay, environmental degradation, and declining property values (Haase et al., 2017b). Infrastructure originally built for larger populations becomes inefficient and expensive to maintain (Grossmann et al., 2013).

The complexity of urban shrinkage, particularly in post-industrial and post-socialist contexts, underscores the need for comprehensive urban policies. These must address not only economic decline but also social vulnerability and spatial fragmentation (Wiechmann & Bontje, 2015; Mallach et al., 2017; Nelle et al., 2017; Pociūtė-Sereikienė & Burneika, 2022; Bontje et al., 2024). No single policy offers a definitive solution, but scholars emphasize the value of multi-scalar, flexible, and place-based approaches (Stryjakiewicz & Jaroszevska, 2016; Haase et al., 2017a; Runge et al., 2020).

One prominent response is economic diversification – attracting foreign investment and supporting the growth of new industries such as technology, services, and green energy (Cortese et al., 2013; Hospers, 2013; Pallagst et al., 2017; Ondoš et al., 2024). Urban planning plays a critical role here: repurposing vacant land into green spaces, cultural venues, innovation districts, or mixed-use developments enhances quality of life and can attract new residents (Leetmaa et al., 2015; Bosák et al., 2020). Participatory and adaptive planning approaches – grounded in community engagement – are also essential for building resilience (Hospers, 2013; Haase et al., 2017a; Kërçuku, 2024).

A related concept is the ‘rightsizing’ of cities, which involves aligning infrastructure and services with reduced population levels to enhance efficiency and sustainability (Mallach, 2018). Scholars also emphasize the importance of regional collaboration and strategic alliances among small and medium-sized cities to navigate decline (Vandecasteele et al., 2019).

While numerous studies outline successful strategies, their practical implementation remains challenging. Nonetheless, positive examples exist. Certain cities have embraced shrinkage as an opportunity for sustainable transformation – adopting new development models, emphasizing local agency, and reimagining regional futures (Vitale, 2015; Janicki, 2017; Toura, 2019; Beer et al., 2023; Grillitsch et al., 2023).

This article situates Lithuania’s medium-sized cities – functioning as regional centres – within this broader discourse. In line with international patterns, the collapse of industrial sectors in these cities initiated a downward spiral of demographic and economic shrinkage (Martinez-Fernandez et al., 2012; Rumpel & Slach, 2022). However, to understand these dynamics, it is crucial to recognize the unique post-socialist context in which deindustrialization occurred: the abrupt transition in the 1990s from a centrally planned to a market-driven economy. As such, Lithuanian urban shrinkage aligns closely with patterns observed across CEE (Mykhnenko & Turok, 2008; Stryjakiewicz et al., 2012; Sýkora & Bouzarovski, 2012; Eva et al., 2021; Ondoš et al., 2024).

Not all Lithuanian medium-sized cities have followed the same path. Especially, in the turbulent post-2020 period – marked by overlapping crises – some of these cities have begun to diverge from prolonged decline and instead exhibit signs of demographic and economic regrowth. In certain cases, strategic governance, investment attraction, and a renewed regional vision have enabled local leaders to reverse negative trends and reposition their cities within the national urban hierarchy.

Methodology

Medium-sized cities in the context of Lithuania's urban hierarchy and territorial classification

According to the 'Law on the Territorial Administrative Units and Their Boundaries of the Republic of Lithuania' (LR Seimas, 1994), the country's residential areas are classified into urban and rural categories. Urban residential areas include cities (of different categories), while rural residential areas comprise small towns, villages, and single-farm settlements. Legally, a city is defined as a 'compactly built-up residential area with a population exceeding 3000, where more than two-thirds of the workforce is employed in industry, business, manufacturing, or the social infrastructure sector' (LR Seimas, 1994, Article 3).

Lithuania's settlement structure follows a hierarchical pattern based primarily on population size. As of January 2025, official records from the Centre of Registers (2025) indicate that Lithuania had 103 cities and 20,812 rural living areas. Meanwhile, the urban category consists of four large cities (populations over 100,000), 29 medium-sized cities (10,000-100,000 residents), and 70 towns (3,000-10,000 residents). Rural areas include 254 small towns with populations between 500 and 3,000, 18,993 villages with fewer than 500 residents, 1,551 so-called single-farm settlements – the most dispersed form of habitation, and 14 other types of settlements. The number of rural settlements, particularly villages and single-farm areas, is subject to annual review, as many become deserted (Kriaučiūnas, 2013; Kriaučiūnas & Ščerbinskaitė, 2019; Ščerbinskaitė & Baranauskienė, 2023) or sparsely populated over time (Kriaučiūnas & Daugirdas, 2013; Baranauskienė, 2021; Kriaučiūnas et al., 2023). However, Lithuania's administrative-territorial classification is not without inconsistencies. Over half of the settlements officially designated as cities do not meet the legal population threshold of 3000 residents. Conversely, some villages exceed this benchmark. In addition, a group of settlements (e.g., Nida, Juodkrantė, Preila, Pervalka) are understood as one territorial unit – Neringa town, as well as Šventoji and other smaller settlements incorporated into Palanga – are not individually represented in statistical records due to administrative ambiguities (Dringelis, 2013; Dringelis et al., 2015).

In this article, we focus specifically on medium-sized cities with populations between 10 thousand and 100 thousand. However, the selection of cities was based not solely on population size but also on functional classifications. As a result, only 11 of the 29 officially designated medium-sized cities were selected for analysis.

Classification and selection of regional centres in Lithuania

Over the past three decades, depopulation and the redistribution of inhabitants have significantly affected Lithuania's settlement structure and urban density. In selecting the medium-sized cities – defined here as regional centres – for this study, we considered not only statistical indicators of city size but also the 'Comprehensive Plan of the Territory of the Republic of Lithuania' (Lietuva 2030, 2021), which also provides a functional classification of urban centres.

According to the CPTRL, Lithuania's urban system follows a hierarchical polycentric model and distinguishes three categories of urban centres in Lithuania: metropolitan, regional, and local (Lietuva 2030, 2021). This article focuses on regional centres, which are further classified into three categories: (1) developmental-type cities – key urban nodes with international functions, high service capacity, diverse employment opportunities, and substantial economic output, serving both essential and intermediate local needs (Šiauliai and Panevėžys); (2) supportive-type cities – region-

al centres that sustain quality of life by providing moderately demanded services and reinforcing functional territorial cohesion (Alytus, Utena, Marijampolė, Tauragė, Telšiai, Mažeikiai); (3) supplementary-type cities – smaller centres that complement regional hubs by offering basic services and employment for local populations (Ukmergė, Rokiškis, Biržai). The mentioned and categorized 11 regional centres – medium-sized cities – are geographically dispersed across Lithuania and vary considerably in population size. These cities function as regional hubs for economic activity, education, and culture, playing a key role in the development of their surrounding regions.

Data and methods

This research is based on both quantitative and qualitative data sources. Quantitative analysis draws on official statistics and census data provided by the State Data Agency ([Statistics Lithuania, 2025](#)), with the aim of identifying general development trends in Lithuanian medium-sized cities. The analysis employs statistical and cartographic methods, with visualizations generated using ArcGIS software. Particular attention is given to the post-2020 period, marked by overlapping global and regional disruptions, commonly referred to as the ‘polycrisis’ period ([Zeitlin et al., 2019](#); [Lawrence et al., 2024](#)).

This study focuses on secondary statistical data sources, which were used to create Figure 2 (cartoscheme), showing changes in the number of foreigners living in municipalities in Lithuania, as well as changes in population in the 11 medium-sized cities analysed. Data on the number of foreigners was obtained from the annual Migration Yearbook published by the Migration Department of the Ministry of the Interior ([Ministry of the Interior, 2020, 2021, 2022, 2023a, 2023b, 2025](#)). The period from 2020 to 2025 was chosen for analysis of changes in the number of foreigners because it was marked by significant global disruptions. This period observed a positive change in Lithuania’s population after regaining independence for the first time, notably influenced by Russia’s military action in Ukraine in 2022. The same period (2020–2025) was chosen to analyse population change in 11 medium-sized cities, and reveal which former industrial cities began to recover following the aforementioned global events.

Meanwhile, for the overall analysis of population change in 11 medium-sized cities, the period 1989–2025 was chosen (illustrated in coloured circles in Figure 2) for the analysis of overall population change in 11 medium-sized cities in order to reveal the changes that were experienced by cities after regaining independence during deindustrialization. The first general census of the population of independent Lithuania was conducted only in 2001, 12 years after the restoration of independence. The long delay in conducting a general census can be explained by the fact that a census was conducted on the eve of the declaration of independence (1989), and the data from this census could be used as a reliable basis for annual population accounting ([Vaitekūnas, 2006, p. 152](#)). Data from the State Data Agency ([Statistics Lithuania, 2025](#)) and the Population and Housing Census ([Statistikos Departamentas, 2004](#); [Statistics Lithuania, 2025](#)) were used to analyse population change.

The statistical findings provide a foundation for the interpretation of qualitative data and for addressing the study’s central research question and objective. The qualitative analysis is based on secondary sources and focuses primarily on the post-2020 period – especially after 2022, when Lithuania, long affected by demographic decline, experienced an unexpected inflow of immigrants and began to show signs of population regrowth. This part of the study examines the reception capacity of medium-sized cities in the context of this recent migration wave, with special attention to arrivals from Ukraine. The Ukrainian migration represented one of the largest influxes affecting demographic trends and prompting institutional adaptation in these cities. The analysis highlights

how national and local authorities have had to rapidly develop strategies to integrate newcomers effectively, balancing the needs of both local residents and immigrants. The analysis is grounded in previous scholarly research and programme evaluations conducted by international organisations – the European Migration Network, the European Commission, UNHCR, and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) – as well as national institutions, including the Department of National Minorities and the Diversity Development Group. The study also draws on national and local policy documents and evaluations of support mechanisms designed to facilitate the integration of immigrants into Lithuanian cities. The legal and strategic framework was examined through documents issued by national governmental institutions – the Government of Lithuania, the *Seimas* (Lithuanian Parliament), the Migration Department, the Ministry of Social Security and Labour, the Lithuanian Public Employment Service, and the National Audit Office of Lithuania – as well as by local authorities, including the municipalities of Panevėžys, Šiauliai, and Alytus. In addition, media content from major national news portals – 15min, Delfi, ELTA, LRT, LNK, TV3, ‘Žinių radijas’ [News Radio] – as well as local portals, including ‘Šiaulių naujienos’ [Šiauliai news], ‘Alytaus naujienos’ [Alytus news], ‘Ukmergės žinios’ [Ukmergė news], was analysed. This material was used to identify the opportunities and constraints encountered by medium-sized urban centres in responding to migration flows associated with the war in Ukraine.

In addition to the broader analysis of integration and migration-related challenges in Lithuania, a case study of the medium-sized city of Šiauliai was included. Šiauliai was selected for several reasons. First, it is the fourth-largest city in Lithuania and the principal regional centre of the northern part of the country, making it the largest among the cities examined in this study. Second, the city has historically experienced sharp population decline and has previously served as a central case for research on urban shrinkage (Pociūtė-Sereikienė & Burneika, 2022). However, since 2020, Šiauliai has undergone a remarkable demographic turnaround, shifting from a declining city to one experiencing population growth. This trend mirrors patterns observed in previously shrinking cities in Western and Central Europe, where immigration has become a key driver of urban regeneration (Haase et al., 2013). Between 2020 and 2025, Šiauliai’s population increased by approximately 12 thousand residents (around 11%), largely due to both labour and war-related immigration, particularly from Ukraine. Managing this influx required addressing housing, employment, and social support challenges. The city thus provides an illustrative example of how medium-sized urban centres can respond effectively to sudden migration pressures and facilitate the integration of newcomers.

Although this research provides valuable insights into immigration trends in Lithuania and the associated challenges and opportunities, it has certain limitations that should be acknowledged. First, a more detailed understanding could be gained through in-depth interviews, which were not included in this study. Second, while the statistical data used are official, they have inherent constraints. For example, although a registration system exists for war refugees, there is no reliable mechanism to track how many remain in the country. Consequently, analyses rely on Migration Department statistics, such as the number of residence permits issued, which may not fully reflect the actual population. Despite these limitations, the study offers a sufficiently comprehensive overview of medium-sized cities in Lithuania and their recent experiences with immigration, providing a solid foundation for further research.

Results

Analysis of population change in medium-sized Lithuanian cities after the 1990 transformation

Following the restoration of independence, negative natural population change was recorded in the country for the first time in 1994 (Vaitekūnas, 2006), and this trend has continued to the present day. However, recent events such as Brexit in 2020 and the COVID-19 pandemic that affected Europe in early 2020 have led to population growth in Lithuania since 2020 (the lowest population in the country was recorded in early 2020; Table 1). Due to negative economic consequences, emigrants began returning to their home country. Following the pandemic, as the economy recovered, the number of foreigners in Lithuania increased (Figs. 1 and 2), especially labor immigrants from the third countries (Ministry of the Interior, 2025). The war in Ukraine, which began in 2022, further increased the population growth. According to data from the State Data Agency, approximately 66.7 thousand foreigners immigrated to Lithuania in 2022, accounting for 76.3% of all immigrants, which was three times more (or 45.5 thousand) than in 2021 (Valstybės duomenų agentūra, 2023). The largest share of foreigners who immigrated in 2022 were Ukrainian citizens (war refugees), who accounted for 65.8% (approximately 43.9 thousand) of all immigrants, followed by citizens of Belarus (22.3% or approximately 14.9 thousand) and Russia (3.3% or approximately 2,2 thousand) fleeing their regimes (Valstybės duomenų agentūra, 2023). These individuals most often choose large and medium-sized cities as their place of residence. Population growth is also noticeable in rural areas, but it is not as significant (Table 1¹).

Table 1. Resident population at the beginning of the year between 2020 and 2025

Territory	Year					
	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025
Lithuania	2 809 977	2 810 761	2 805 998	2 857 279	2 885 891	2 890 664
City	1 911 813	1 916 751	1 913 385	1 955 758	1 977 699	1 980 443
Rural	898 164	894 010	892 613	901 521	908 192	910 221
Alytus	53 066	52 727	51 793	51 948	51 340	50 749
Biržai	10 861	10 734	10 501	10 418	10 241	10 089
Marijampolė	36 816	36 727	36 255	36 647	36 687	36 248
Mažeikiai	33 327	33 101	32 730	33 210	33 372	33 307
Panevėžys	89 453	89 100	87 590	87 395	86 595	85 802
Rokiškis	11 958	11 770	11 587	11 514	11 393	11 294
Šiauliai	100 610	100 653	101 756	106 087	110 331	11 2018
Tauragė	21 450	21 203	20 956	21 168	21 198	21 406
Telšiai	22 723	22 642	22 264	22 212	22 014	21 841
Ukmergė	21 453	21 258	20 915	20 976	20 917	21 966
Utena	25468	25343	25204	25668	27632	25568

* Bolded numbers indicate population growth (a positive change compared to the previous year)

Source: [Statistics Lithuania \(2025\)](#).

The population of Lithuania began to grow in 2020 (during the analysed period of 2020–2025, the population increased by approximately 2.9%), not only due to returning emigrants,

¹ It should be noted that when presenting statistics on the rural population in Lithuania, suburban areas are also included in the rural population, so the actual number of people living in rural areas is lower.

but also due to arriving foreigners, whose share increased threefold (Fig. 1) (Statistics Lithuania, 2025). Spatial statistical analysis of changes in the proportion of foreigners in municipalities revealed that these changes are closely linked to changes in the population of medium-sized cities. This suggests that urban development is significantly influenced not only by natural population change, but also by immigration, particularly that of foreign nationals (Fig. 2). This suggests that medium-sized regional centres are more attractive to foreigners, which means that such medium-sized regional centres are also attractive to new investors who can assist cities in their recovery from deindustrialisation.

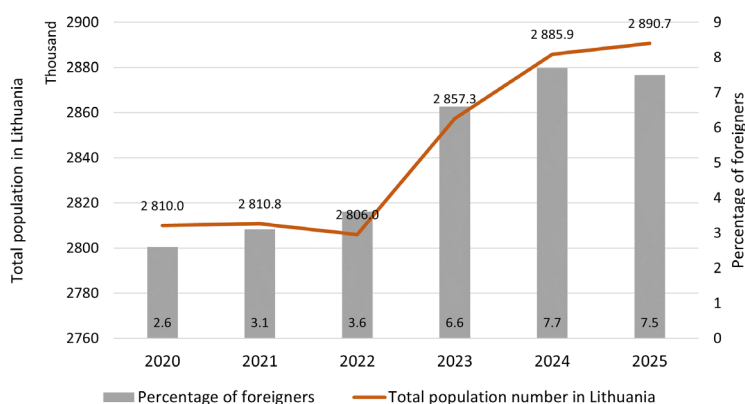


Figure 1. Changes in the number of permanent residents in Lithuania between 2020 and 2025
 Source: authors' own work based on data from Ministry of the Interior (2020, 2021, 2022, 2023a, 2023b, 2025) and Statistics Lithuania (2025).

As demonstrated in the cartoscheme (Fig. 2) and table (Table 1), of the 11 medium-sized cities, those that have experienced the greatest decline since the restoration of independence (during the period analysed, 1989–2025) and currently have a population of between 10 thousand and 30 thousand inhabitants are the least attractive to foreigners. For example, Rokiškis, Biržai, and Telšiai cities. Cities such as Biržai and Rokiškis have mainly shrunk significantly because they are located in the peripheral territory of the country and in the border zone, and border zones in Lithuania are not attractive to either residents or investors (Baranauskienė, 2021). A notable example is the town of Rokiškis, which was known for its food industry factories during the Soviet era. However, following independence, some of these factories were privatised, while others were closed. The railway line built through Rokiškis, which used to connect Radviliškis and Daugpilis, also had a significant impact on the development of the regional centre and industry in the socialistic period (Miškinis, 1999). At present, the city is home to the largest group of milk processing companies in the Baltic States, namely AB 'Rokiškio sūris' [Rokiškis cheese], which has numerous subsidiaries throughout the country (for example, in Ukmergė and Utena) and abroad (in Latvia). However, due to automation and the integration of advanced high-tech systems, the number of employees in these factories has decreased significantly (AB "Rokiškio sūris", 2025). For the aforementioned reasons, the city continues to experience intense depopulation processes, which are primarily influenced by negative natural population change and population ageing processes that are characteristic of the entire northeastern part of southern Lithuania (Burneika et al., 2013; Daugirdas et al., 2013; Baranauskienė, 2021; Baranauskienė & Burneika, 2021; Baranauskienė et al., 2024; Kriaučiūnas et al., 2024).

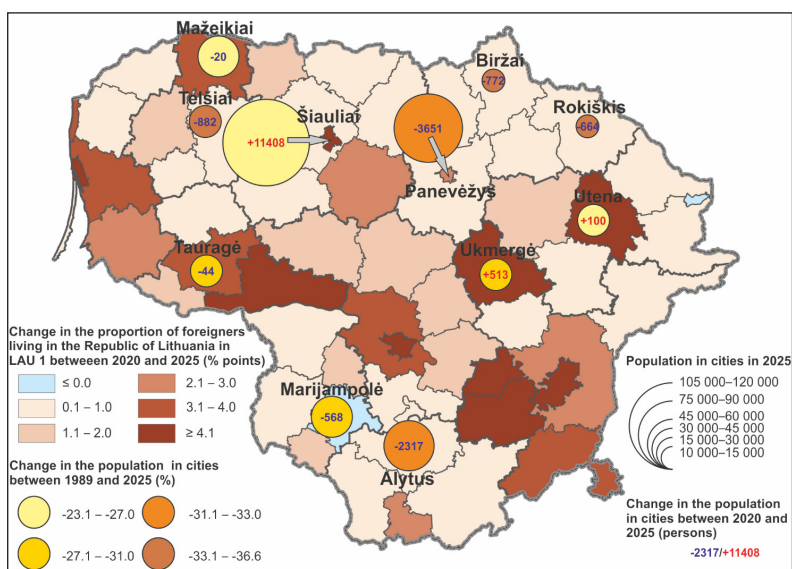


Figure 2. Changes in the number of foreign residents in Lithuanian municipalities, and changes in the number of residents in 11 medium-sized cities

Source: authors' own work based on data from [Statistikos departamentas \(2004\)](#), [Ministry of Interior \(2020, 2025\)](#) and [Statistics Lithuania \(2025\)](#).

Significant population decline has also been observed in major cities such as Alytus and Panevėžys. These cities have not experienced any recovery in recent years and continue to decline rapidly. Of the 11 medium-sized cities analysed, these are the two cities that lost the most population in the period 2020–2025. The city of Alytus, which functioned as the industrial centre of southern Lithuania during the Soviet era, experienced a significant loss of residents due to the process of deindustrialisation ([Jurčikonytė, 2016](#); [Teleišė, 2023](#)). Panevėžys was developed as an industrial city after the war. There were not only many different factories before the restoration of independence, but the city is also located in a region favourable for agriculture, so it is also associated with the large-scale industrialization of agriculture during the Soviet era, when a large number of Soviet farms and collective farms operated there ([Ramonaitė & Vijeikis, 2023](#)). After 1990, many factories in Panevėžys were closed, but 'Ekranas' remained, and significant investments were made in the factory, turning it into one of the largest manufacturers of cathode ray tubes in Europe. However, during the unstable economic period of 2006, it went bankrupt, and the unemployment rate in the city rose rapidly, making the city unattractive to residents ([Ramonaitė & Vijeikis, 2023](#)). Between 2005 and 2006, the population of Panevėžys declined rapidly by approximately 2.4% (from 112.5 thousand to 109.9 thousand inhabitants) ([Statistics Lithuania, 2025](#)).

Figure 2 illustrates that in the period 2020–2025, the proportion of foreigners increased not only in the three metropolitan regions but also in the majority of Lithuanian municipalities. Three larger regional centres of attraction, such as Utena, Ukmergė, and Šiauliai, contracted the least during the entire period analysed (1989–2025) and were the only medium-sized cities to experience population growth during the turbulent period of 2020–2025. There has been no in-depth research conducted on this issue; therefore, we can only extrapolate the reasons why these three cities stand out compared to other regional centres. It may be assumed that the success of Šiauliai

lies in its size and relatively strong economic base. In addition, Šiauliai is distinguished by the presence of a university and an airport (albeit primarily serving military and cargo purposes). Approximately a decade ago, a change in local government brought about substantial reforms in city administration, with particular emphasis on attracting new residents and enhancing the city's economic potential (Pociūtė-Sereikienė & Burneika, 2022).

The observed positive change in the population of Ukmergė could be explained by the fact that Ukmergė belongs to the Vilnius County and has convenient connections to Vilnius and Kaunas (distance up to 100 km), so a large part of the population commutes to work in the country's largest cities and only lives in Ukmergė (Burneika et al., 2017). This favourable geographical location is also attractive to business investors. The 2023–2027 local development strategy for the city of Ukmergė (Vidaus reikalų ministerija, 2025) states that both the entire district of Ukmergė and the city itself are becoming younger, with new working-age residents moving in, which suggests that young families want to build their lives here. It is evident that as the population of working age increases, so does the birth rate. The modernizing city of Ukmergė is also attractive for business. In 2023, 93 new companies were established in the Ukmergė district municipality, 55 of which were located in Ukmergė city itself (Ukmergės žinios, 2024).

The population in Utena also increased slightly during the period 2020–2025. The observed increase can be attributed not only to returning emigrants, but also to arriving foreigners – mainly work migrants (Baranauskienė et al., 2024; Kriaučiūnas et al., 2024). Mažeikiai and Tauragė also stood out for their stability in the context of all 11 medium-sized industrial cities. Both cities have long been known as regional industrial centres, home to food and construction companies, while the Mažeikiai district municipality is notable for being the location of the 'Orlen Lietuva' oil refinery; meanwhile, Tauragė is positioning itself as a city of the future for green energy, which is becoming an important factor for young people who promote a clean lifestyle when choosing where to live.

Instrumental background for the support and integration of refugees from Ukraine in Lithuania

War refugees constituted a major factor contributing to population growth in Lithuania's medium-sized cities. The legal framework governing the reception and integration of foreigners in Lithuania is primarily defined by the 'Law on the Legal Status of Aliens' (LR Seimas, 2004). This legislation regulates entry, departure, residence, asylum, temporary protection, and integration procedures, and serves as the key legal basis for all foreigners, including asylum seekers and war refugees from Ukraine. It is supplemented by the 'Government Decision on the Procedure for the Provision of National Support for Integration of Foreigners' (LR Vyriausybė, 2016). Currently, Lithuania, coordinated by the Reception and Integration Agency, is preparing a new strategic plan on the integration of foreigners, scheduled to come into force in 2026. This strategy will prioritise people displaced from Ukraine but remain open to other foreign nationals.

By 2024, more than 77 thousand temporary residence permits were issued or renewed for Ukrainians, of which over two-thirds were granted under the EU's temporary protection mechanism (Ministry of Interior, 2025). Approximately 62% of working-age Ukrainians in Lithuania are employed, while 83% of their children attend school (ELTA, 2024; Ministry of Social Security and Labour, 2025b). Several factors contributed to this comparatively high level of integration: widespread communication in Russian, comprehensive services provided by registration centres (including placement in kindergartens), and family-based settlement support, which facilitated access to employment and healthcare (ELTA, 2024). These measures played a crucial role

in the early stages of integration. Language training, social services, and psychological support continue to be actively provided across many municipalities. Importantly, between 2022 and mid-2025, Ukrainians working in Lithuania contributed 326 million euros in taxes.

Public opinion is also broadly supportive of integration policies. According to the [Ministry of Social Security and Labour \(2025b\)](#), 57% of Lithuanian residents believe that greater attention should be devoted to migrant integration. Furthermore, 78% support education for migrant children, 73% support Lithuanian language courses, and 59% endorse the provision of psychological services. Institutional responsibility for integration is shared among multiple actors. The Ministry of Social Security and Labour oversees labour policy, social integration, and administration of the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF). Other ministries – the Ministry of the Interior (Migration Department), Ministry of Education, Science and Sport, Ministry of the Economy and Innovation, and Ministry of Health – implement sector-specific measures. The Reception and Integration Agency acts as a key implementing body. Since 2022, Lithuania has also strengthened the role of municipalities, five of which (including our researched regional centres Šiauliai and Panevėžys cities) adopted local integration strategies through the project ‘Enhancing Competence of Municipalities in Providing Services to Third-Country Nationals’ ([Diversity Development Group, 2025](#)). In practice, municipalities and cities serve as the main reception hubs, where integration takes place in daily life ([Diversity Development Group, 2017](#)).

Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) also play a central role in the integration support programs for war refugees. Caritas Lithuania, the Lithuanian Red Cross, Food Bank, Maltese Order Aid Service, and Save the Children were among the first to provide food, clothing, hygiene products, and psychological support. A wider network of actors – including international organizations² (e.g., IOM Lithuania, UNHCR Lithuania), national non-profit organizations (e.g., Diversity Development Group, Refugee Council of Lithuania), and community initiatives (e.g., ‘Stiprūs kartu’ [Strong Together]) – contributed to integration at both national and city levels. Also, city-level organizations offered additional support (e.g., ‘Ukrainian Centre’, ‘Ukreate Hub’ – more Vilnius based initiatives. Medium-sized cities: Šiauliai: Ukrainians integration centre ‘Malva’, community centre ‘Karpatai’; ‘Panevėžys: Septynios akimirkos’ [Seven moments] versatile support to children and their parents, charity and support fund ‘Naujoji viltis’ [New hope]).

There is a number of bigger or smaller funds and programs, initiatives, instruments that were temporary running or still running in Lithuania as a support mechanism to facilitate the integration of newcomers into Lithuania in general, and in cities particular (Fig. 3). However, some of them were temporary and short-running, issued only for the beginning, in 2022 in response to the increase in arrivals from Ukraine following the outbreak of war in Ukraine. While others, especially directed towards social and educational support, are still running.

Registration as a refugee was essential, as it granted access to residence permits and national visas, enabling beneficiaries to work legally. Refugees were immediately entitled to social benefits, healthcare services, and access to education ([Ministry of Social Security and Labour, 2022, 2025a](#)). Schools implemented rapid integration measures, such as recruiting Ukrainian teachers, developing language programmes, and tailoring education plans to individual needs ([Jakavonytė-Staškuvienė, 2023](#)). Additionally, free legal aid, psychological counselling, cultural activities, and language courses were made available, although awareness of such opportunities among refugees remained, in some cases, limited ([Tkachuk et al., 2023](#)). Moreover, in order to make the integration process smoother, the Ministry of Social Security and Labor initiated a project (named ‘Reception

² The organizations presented here illustrate a wide range of institutional actors. The sources for this list include the European Commission ([EC, 2025a](#)), the [Ministry of Social Security and Labor \(2025a\)](#), [Šiauliai City Municipality \(2025c\)](#), and [Panevėžys City Municipality \(2023\)](#).

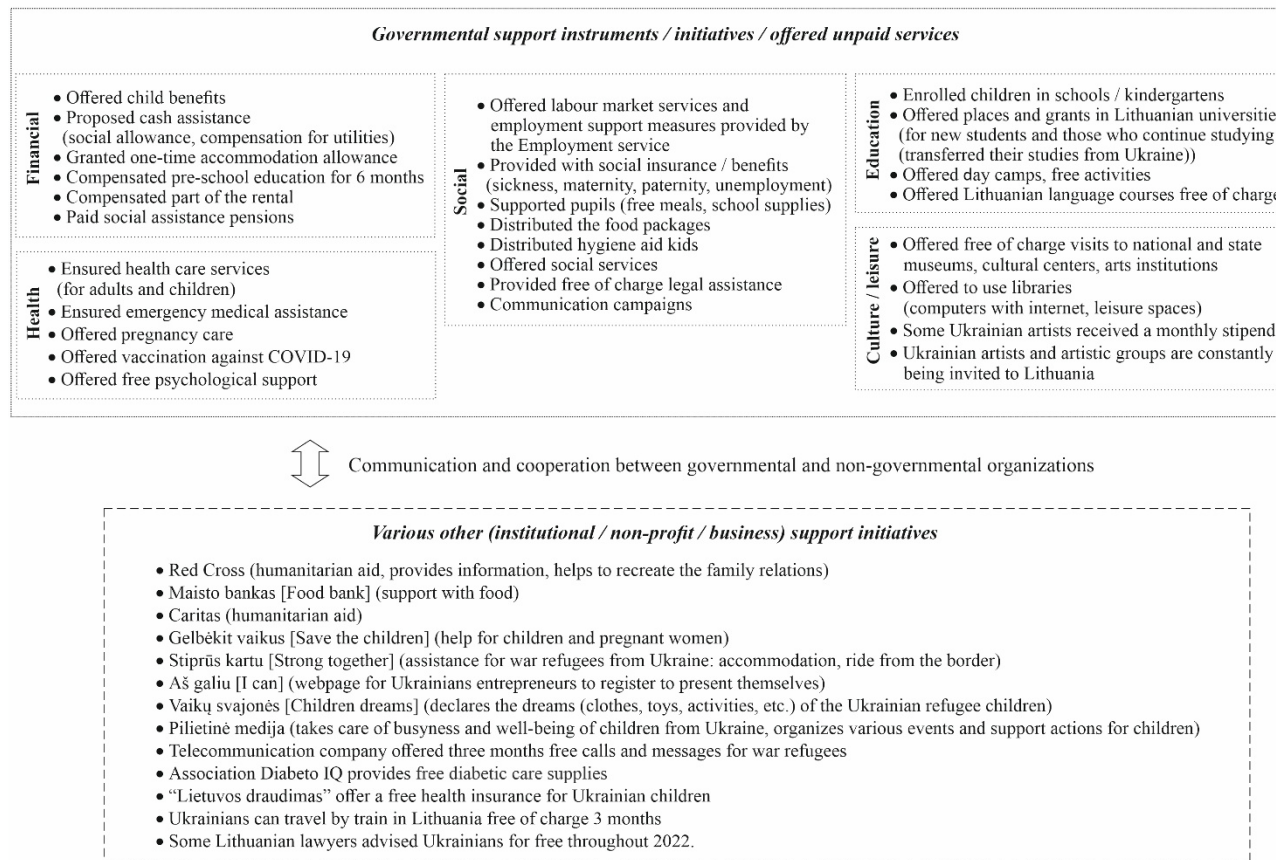


Figure 3. The main support initiatives and instruments for the war refugees from Ukraine (national level)

Note: These are the general instruments; however, the support for Ukrainian war refugees differs according to the group of personal status.

Source: own elaboration based on the analysis of various information sources.

and early integration of refugees from Ukraine' more information about the project is further assigned to an example of Šiauliai paragraph) for the early integration of refugees from Ukraine. The Government had issued the communication campaigns to promote the integration of foreigners, by allocating 700 thousand³ euros.

Civil society initiatives further complemented state support. Many refugees were hosted by Lithuanian families, which facilitated early integration, particularly through the initiative 'Stiprūs Kartu' [Strong Together] ([Strong together, 2025](#)). However, studies indicate that within six months many Ukrainians sought independent housing, while about 20% of those initially hosted experienced conflicts that led to premature relocation ([LNK, 2023](#)). Specific programmes were also developed for children, such as the 2022 'Friends Day' organised by 'Pilietinė medija' [Civic media], which provided donated bicycles and other leisure equipment ([Ukrainian kids, 2022](#)). Refugees were also offered opportunities to register small businesses ([Aš galiu \[I can\], 2022](#)). Businesses contributed by providing free insurance, legal services, medical supplies, phones, and SIM cards, while Lithuanian railway company provided free train travel for three months after arrival ([LRT, 2022](#)). IOM Lithuania supported housing through rent subsidies, reaching 200 families in 2023 and 774 individuals in 2024, with a total of 152 thousand euros allocated ([IOM Lithuania, 2024](#)).

The most recent state-led initiatives emphasise long-term integration. In 2025, the Reception and Integration Agency launched new programmes focused on socio-cultural training and mental health ([EC, 2025b](#)). These programmes are accessible to all municipalities and coordinated nationally to ensure consistency and quality. The Ministry of Social Security and Labour allocated 12 million euros of EU funds to support their implementation, alongside other integration services until 2028. Furthermore, Lithuania is expected to receive an additional 9.6 million euros under the UNHCR 2025 'Regional Refugee Response Plan for People Displaced from Ukraine', which aims to support approximately 55 thousand refugees residing in the country ([UNHCR Europe, 2025](#)).

The financial support mechanisms that underpinned (and in some cases still underpin) the instruments and programmes described in this section are diverse ([EC, 2025a; Ministry of Social Security and Labour, 2025a](#)). Funding has come from multiple sources, beginning with the European Union (e.g., the European Social Fund, the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund, ERASMUS+, the Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived, among others), as well as international grant programmes provided by the Nordic Council of Ministers Office in Lithuania, the Education Exchange Support Foundation, the EEA and Norway Grants, the International Organization for Migration (IOM), and additional international funds. National resources have also played a significant role: allocations from the Lithuanian state budget have primarily targeted education, healthcare infrastructure, and the social support system. At the local level, municipalities have actively contributed to the support of war refugees. Moreover, various non-governmental organizations, foundations, companies, associations, public institutions, private entrepreneurs, and individuals also provided – and in some cases continue to provide – financial and practical assistance. Given the scale and variety of actors, it would be nearly impossible to identify all entities that contributed to supporting and integrating war refugees from Ukraine in Lithuania.

At the same time, recent audits have highlighted problematic aspects of funding allocation. For instance, it was found that resources from the European Social Fund had been distributed not only to Ukrainians but also to refugees from Belarus and Russia. Such a funding practice violated established financing rules, and Lithuania was consequently instructed to return part of the misallocated funds to the EU ([Jokūbaitis, 2025](#)).

³ Development Program 2021–2030 – Mobilization Development Program of the Ministry of Social Security and Labour, the promoter of the development program. Activity 'Organization of a communication campaign to promote the integration of foreigners, focusing on different objectives (e.g., risk of illegal work, changing public opinion)' ([National Audit Office of Lithuania, 2023](#)).

Example of a medium-sized city: support programs in Šiauliai

Šiauliai, a medium-sized city and regional centre in northern Lithuania, provides a revealing case of how post-industrial urban shrinkage interacts with new migration flows. Following the collapse of the Soviet system, Šiauliai experienced severe deindustrialization and long-term population decline, losing more than 30% of its residents (Pociūtė-Sereikienė, 2021). For decades, municipal measures aimed at countering shrinkage proved largely ineffective (Pociūtė-Sereikienė & Burneika, 2022). However, the situation shifted dramatically in 2022 with the arrival of war refugees from Ukraine, when the city once again became an attractive settlement location for newcomers.

As in all Lithuanian municipalities, Šiauliai implemented nationally introduced instruments, including social benefits, allowances, food cards, access to education and healthcare, relocation, and housing support (Blažytė & Stoma, 2022). Yet, municipalities, as local actors, also developed additional initiatives. In Šiauliai, the local government, in partnership with NGOs, entrepreneurs, educational institutions, and citizens, actively expanded these measures.

Several local-level programs stand out. According to the municipal report (Šiauliai City Municipality, 2023a), the city established a dedicated support fund to: (1) provide one-time payments of 300 euros to residents who housed refugees free of charge, and (2) distribute shopping cards (30 euros) to socially vulnerable refugees (pensioners, disabled persons, large families). Legal acts were adjusted to facilitate more flexible aid distribution. In parallel, an information campaign targeted both refugees and residents, including leaflets (in Ukrainian and Lithuanian) and a digital platform, 'Help to Ukraine', that centralizes information on registration, housing, healthcare, employment, education, social support, and leisure.

Integration measures were also strongly focused on education and employment. Refugee children were provided with places in schools, kindergartens, and extracurricular activities, with options to study online with Ukrainian schools, in a hybrid form, or fully in Šiauliai institutions in the Lithuanian language. Parents were supported with employment counselling, and job fairs ('contact fairs') were organized. In 2023, Šiauliai became one of the locations hosting the International Ukrainian School, alongside Vilnius, Kaunas, Klaipėda, and Panevėžys, an initiative highly valued by the Ukrainian community (School UA, 2025).

Cultural and community-building initiatives were also visible. The Ukrainian community organization 'Malva' was established with municipal support (Malva, 2025). Refugees were granted free use of municipal public transport for three months, summer camps for children were organized, and newborn families received 'newborn kits' worth approximately 200 euros. The municipality further implemented projects specifically targeting refugee integration, such as Reception and Early Integration of Refugees from Ukraine (Šiauliai City Municipality, 2023b) and the SIEK model project (Šiauliai City Municipality, 2025a), focusing on long-term integration and the empowerment of female refugees.

The city's 2024 annual report highlights continued municipal allocations to refugee support, including allowances for settling in, compensation for education costs, social and child benefits, and free school meals (Šiauliai City Municipality, 2025b). Beyond the local scale, Šiauliai maintained close ties with its partner city Khmelnytskyi in Ukraine, providing regular humanitarian aid.

Local initiatives were reinforced by contributions from non-profit organizations, state institutions, and businesses. For instance, Vilnius University Šiauliai Academy provided housing in its dormitories and material support (Vilniaus universiteto Šiaulių akademija, 2022), while Šiauliai Drama Theatre organized cultural activities for refugee children (Valstybinis Šiaulių dramos teatras, 2022). Libraries, museums, galleries, and tourism institutions also launched programs to facilitate integration.

In sum, the case of Šiauliai demonstrates how a medium-sized city, historically shaped by deindustrialization and shrinkage, mobilized multi-level instruments and community resources to transform into an active reception and integration hub. This example highlights the potential of regional centres in Lithuania not only to accommodate newcomers but also to reframe their development trajectories in the post-shrinkage era.

On the other hand, it should be acknowledged – as indicated by the demographic statistics discussed in the previous section – that Šiauliai represents a rather exceptional case, demonstrating positive demographic trends. In contrast, other regional centres examined in this article continue to follow a path of shrinkage, with only limited inflows of war refugees. This divergence highlights a research gap that requires further investigation to better understand the underlying reasons for these differences.

Immigration as a driver of demographic and economic transformation in post-industrial medium-sized cities

Previous studies (Tkachuk et al., 2023; Diversity Development Group, 2024; TMDE, 2023) indicate that most Ukrainians in Lithuania feel safe and satisfied with their lives, while local city communities have generally responded with understanding and solidarity. Nevertheless, despite the wide range of instruments and initiatives introduced to support war refugees, several challenges remain visible at the urban scale. These challenges are shaped by both the perceptions of Lithuanian city residents and the experiences of refugees themselves. Since the vast majority of newcomers have settled in cities, it is relevant to examine the implications for urban development, where immigration may create both new opportunities and potential tensions.

Statistical data confirm a significant increase in the urban population since 2022. As noted earlier, such growth is uncommon in Lithuania's medium-sized cities that serve as regional centres, where shrinkage has long prevailed. Although these cities lost much of their industrial base during the post-Soviet deindustrialization period, they continue to function as important economic and administrative hubs. Their remaining industrial infrastructure, service sector, and institutional capacities make them capable of absorbing newcomers and thus partially reversing long-term population decline. Overall, in Lithuania, the number of permanent city residents rose by 67 thousand (3.5%) between early 2022 and 2025, while rural areas grew by only 17.6 thousand inhabitants (Statistics Lithuania, 2025). The concentration of newcomers from Ukraine in major cities is explained by better opportunities for employment, housing, and access to social infrastructure such as hospitals, schools, and kindergartens. According to the Lithuanian Public Employment Service (LPES, 2024), 33.9 thousand Ukrainians were employed in 2024, nearly one-third of them in Vilnius (10.5 thousand), followed by other metropolitan cities Klaipėda (4.8 thousand) and Kaunas (4.2 thousand). Regional centres also attracted immigrants as new labour force, with 2.3 thousand Ukrainians employed in Šiauliai, 1.3 thousand in Panevėžys, and around 700 in Marijampolė. Most are employed in transport and storage, manufacturing, construction, accommodation and food services, sectors where language skills are less essential and lower-skilled labour is in demand.

The increase in population, especially in smaller regional centres, has also generated tensions. A key issue widely discussed in public debates is the rising use of the Russian language in the streets of the cities. This trend is particularly visible in traditionally monolingual cities such as Šiauliai, Tauragė, Panevėžys, and has caused dissatisfaction among some Lithuanians (Leščiauskaitė, 2024, April 7). Additionally, language is among the main barriers to integration: limited Lithuanian proficiency for immigrants restricts access to services, housing, and fair employment, while

immigrant children often struggle academically and socially in a new linguistic environment (Diversity Development Group, 2024).

There are examples from regional centres where the absence of Russian-language schools has created additional challenges for teachers integrating pupils from Ukraine. For instance, in Alytus, teachers reported difficulties managing classrooms where lessons had to be conducted simultaneously in Lithuanian and Russian (Kudziene, 2023). Similar issues arise in healthcare institutions, where the lack of a shared language complicates communication (National Audit Office of Lithuania, 2023). Younger Lithuanian doctors, who generally uphold the principle of prioritizing the state language and most often do not speak Russian (or use it only minimally and informally), often face difficulties assisting patients who rely exclusively on Russian (Turčinavičiūtė, 2025).

Another important challenge in the cities is housing. Although rising real estate prices cannot be attributed solely to immigration – broader inflationary pressures are crucial – the arrival of refugees has increased demand, particularly in medium-sized cities such as Šiauliai. Between autumn 2021 and autumn 2022, apartment sales prices grew by around 20%, while rental costs rose by approximately 30%, with the steepest increases in cities where refugee settlement was more concentrated (Inreal, 2022). For newcomers, finding housing was further complicated by linguistic barriers, exaggerated rental prices, and insufficient municipal social housing (National Audit Office of Lithuania, 2023). Complaints about rising housing prices came from both sides: refugees and Lithuanians, who likewise struggled to find affordable accommodation.

Further, local authorities in the cities were also confronted with additional fiscal and organizational responsibilities: accommodating children in schools and kindergartens, adapting public transport (e.g., temporary free rides in Šiauliai), expanding healthcare services, and administering social benefits and housing subsidies (Šiauliai City Municipality, 2023a, 2025b, 2025c). While these measures were largely supported by national government funding, municipalities nevertheless faced considerable financial strain.

Despite these pressures, the arrival of war refugees partially alleviated Lithuania's long-standing labour shortages. Years of emigration, combined with economic restructuring and low wages, left many companies struggling to find workers, particularly for low-skilled and less desirable positions (Mačiulskytė, 2022). By 2022, Ukrainians accounted for 2% of the national workforce (ELTA, 2023). As the majority of war immigrants settled in the cities, they looked for jobs in the closest surroundings in the city. The great majority of war immigrants are working in shopping malls or factories, usually in less-skilled work where speaking Lithuanian is not required. In the first year of emigration, the Lithuanian public employment service analysis showed that 1.9 thousand (or 8%) Ukrainians worked highly qualified jobs (specialists in IT, health, education, engineering, etc. sectors), 15.4 thousand (or 68%) immigrants worked average qualified jobs in various sectors, meanwhile, 5.7 thousand (or 24% of employed Ukrainians) worked un-skilled jobs (ELTA, 2023). In 2024, the distribution of employed Ukrainians across the three categories of employment remained similar: approximately 3 thousand Ukrainians (8.4%) worked in highly qualified positions, 24.9 thousand (73.5%) were employed in medium-skilled jobs, and 6.1 thousand (18.1%) in unskilled occupations (LPES, 2024). The majority of unskilled workers were employed as cleaners in offices and hotels, kitchen assistants and packers, agricultural and forestry workers, as well as food preparation and auxiliary staff. The integration of Ukrainian refugees into the labour markets of Lithuanian cities – particularly medium-sized, post-industrial centres – has been widely discussed since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 (Lithuania Co-create, 2022, December 12). In this regard, the labour market role of medium-sized, post-industrial cities is particularly important: although they no longer operate as strong industrial centres, they still provide employment

opportunities in manufacturing, logistics, and services, making them attractive to newcomers seeking stability.

Success stories from regional centres across Lithuania illustrate how medium-sized cities can leverage the skills of incoming migrants to address critical labour shortages. A striking example is Mažeikiai, where four Ukrainian doctors joined the regional hospital staff, helping to fill long-standing gaps in medical expertise and demonstrating how the integration of newcomers can strengthen local services and support urban development (Mizgirdė, 2023).

While these success stories demonstrate the potential benefits of immigration for the development of medium-sized cities, the influx of foreign residents also generates tensions within local communities (Leščiauskaitė, 2024, April 7). Some local residents perceive that war refugees, willing to accept lower-skilled and lower-paid jobs, compete with Lithuanians who are reluctant to take such positions. This dynamic has raised concerns about local unemployment and, in certain cases, may contribute to further emigration of local residents from these smaller cities. While refugees have helped mitigate labour shortages, this is often seen as a short-term solution, raising broader questions about the sustainability of immigration as a development strategy for shrinking cities.

In sum, immigration has created both opportunities and challenges for Lithuania's medium-sized cities – regional centres. On the one hand, newcomers have contributed to population growth, filled gaps in the labour market, and revitalized urban life. On the other, linguistic, social, and housing-related tensions remain unresolved. These dynamics underline the need for further in-depth research to fully assess the long-term implications of immigration for urban development in shrinking, post-industrial cities. Although marked by decades of deindustrialization and demographic decline, these cities continue to function as regional economic and social centres with the potential to benefit from immigration. The influx of newcomers not only challenges existing integration policies but also opens new avenues for urban revitalization and rethinking the development role of medium-sized, post-industrial cities.

Discussion and conclusion

After decades of shrinkage associated with the collapse of Soviet-era industries and the long-lasting effects of deindustrialization, Lithuania's medium-sized cities are again playing a significant role in the country's demographic and spatial development. The turbulent 'polycrisis' period after 2020 has highlighted their relevance in new ways. The COVID-19 pandemic redirected internal migration flows, as residents sought alternatives to congested and highly regulated metropolitan areas, turning instead toward medium-sized and smaller cities that offered more space, affordability, and a perception of safety. A second turning point was the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, which placed Lithuanian regional centres in the spotlight as destinations for incoming refugees. For thousands of Ukrainians fleeing war, these cities became accessible and affordable places to settle, thus reshaping local demographic and social structures. The exceptional scale of immigration – Lithuania ranks among the leading countries in Europe in per capita refugee reception (15min.lt, 2025) – was unprecedented in the country's history and further underlines the importance of medium-sized cities as sites of resilience and adaptation (Wolff & Mykhnenko, 2023).

However, Lithuania should be understood not as an exceptional case but as part of broader regional transformations observed across CEE since 2020. During the COVID-19 crisis, some CEE countries – for example, Estonia and Bulgaria – experienced patterns similar to Lithuania, characterised by a temporary redistribution of population from metropolitan centres to medium-sized towns

and rural areas, often associated with second-home ownership and increased residential flexibility (Pileva & Markov, 2021; Raagmaa, 2023; Tammaru et al., 2023). In terms of return migration, Lithuania's post-Brexit inflows from the United Kingdom parallel developments in Hungary, where re-emigration partially compensated for pandemic-related demographic losses (Zöldi et al., 2024), suggesting a shared responsiveness of migration systems to geopolitical and economic shocks.

Following the outbreak of the war in Ukraine in 2022, most CEE countries, including Lithuania, have become significant recipients of forced migrants. The scale of inflows has been pronounced in countries such as Czechia and Poland, which hosted approximately 396,820 and 979,980 Ukrainian refugees respectively during the period 2022–2025 (Statista, 2026). Across the region, the immigration has contributed to notable shifts in both demographic composition and spatial population distribution (Wiśniewski et al., 2023; Gonzáles-Leonardo et al., 2024; Postępska & Voloshyna, 2025). Both forced migrants and economic (labour) migrants – particularly younger cohorts – tend to concentrate in major cities and their suburban zones, where labour market opportunities, infrastructure, and social networks are more developed (Wiśniewski et al., 2023). Consequently, migration contributes to the reinforcement of existing centre-periphery disparities, intensifying demographic and economic imbalances between growing urban regions and shrinking peripheral areas (Duszczek & Kaczmarczyk, 2022). These dynamics closely mirror the Lithuanian case, where immigration-driven population growth is concentrated in the largest and some medium-sized cities, whereas peripheral areas continue to face ongoing demographic decline.

The eleven analysed medium-sized cities, which during the Soviet era were developed as strong regional centres serving as administrative and economic hubs for their hinterlands, experienced similar patterns of depopulation and decline throughout the deindustrialization period. This thirty-year trajectory of demographic loss and stagnation could be described as a 'struggle for survival.' Yet, their continuing designation as regional centres in Lithuania's Comprehensive Plan (Lietuva 2030, 2021) confirms their long-term strategic importance. Within this framework, Šiauliai and Panevėžys are expected to play especially significant roles, both for their surrounding territories and for national development more broadly.

In summary, following the re-establishment of independence, population decline affected the entire country, including the eleven medium-sized cities that continue to function as regional centres. While all were shaped by their Soviet-era role as industrial hubs, only a few have managed to stabilize or reverse shrinkage. Currently, three medium-sized cities of the eleven analysed – Utena, Ukmergė, and Šiauliai – are experiencing population growth, while Mažeikiai and Tauragė show signs of stabilization. These positive dynamics are closely linked to immigration inflows, more favourable economic conditions, and advantageous geographical locations, underscoring the differentiated trajectories of regional centres.

Against this backdrop, the trajectories of adaptation have been uneven. Šiauliai illustrates how certain structural, historical, and locational factors may foster resilience. Its larger size and wide hinterland have supported population inflows, including both internal migrants and newcomers from Ukraine. The city's educational institutions and international airport have created site-specific advantages, while its earlier historical role as a regional hub has provided a legacy of economic diversity less dependent on Soviet industrialization than in other major medium-sized cities Panevėžys or Alytus. Moreover, municipal governance has pursued comparatively successful development strategies, further stabilizing the city's trajectory (Pociūtė-Sereikienė & Burneika, 2022). Such examples highlight that post-industrial decline does not necessarily lead to irreversible stagnation: under certain conditions, medium-sized cities can transform immigration and external shocks into opportunities for renewal.

The influx of Ukrainians has been a defining element of this transformation. In quantitative terms, it has partially offset long-term depopulation, while in qualitative terms, it has introduced new challenges and opportunities. On the one hand, refugees have filled critical labour market gaps, especially in service sectors, and in some cases have brought high-skilled expertise to smaller cities. These success stories illustrate how immigration can directly address structural deficits left by deindustrialization, revitalizing cities that were otherwise losing economic and social vitality. On the other hand, tensions have emerged. Complaints about housing shortages and rising rents have been voiced by both refugees and locals, while linguistic barriers in schools and healthcare institutions have complicated integration. Media reports and audits by national institutions further underline the lack of effective coordination between state authorities and municipalities, many of which had little previous experience with refugee integration ([National Audit Office of Lithuania, 2023](#)).

Despite these challenges, immigration represents not only a demographic supplement but also a potential driver of long-term renewal for medium-sized, shrinking cities. Survey data indicate that although many Ukrainians still express uncertainty about their long-term plans, the share of those considering permanent settlement in Lithuania has increased between 2022 and 2023 ([Žinių radijas, 2023](#)). If even a portion of these newcomers remain, their presence could help stabilize or even reverse depopulation trends, as seen in some East German cities where immigration became a factor of urban re-growth ([Haase et al., 2013](#)). In this sense, Lithuanian medium-sized cities could transform from symbols of post-industrial decline into laboratories of demographic and economic revitalization in the European context.

In conclusion, the current 'age of migration' ([Žibas et al., 2018](#)) has revealed both the vulnerabilities and capacities of medium-sized cities in Lithuania. Once marked primarily by the scars of deindustrialization and population loss, these cities now stand at the intersection of national and international migration flows, crisis management, and local integration practices. Immigration has created opportunities to strengthen their roles as regional economic and social centres, but it has also exposed policy gaps, particularly in municipal-level integration mechanisms ([15min.lt, 2024](#)). Successful adaptation requires coordinated action involving state institutions, local governments, civil society, and immigrant communities. The Lithuanian experience thus highlights a broader lesson for post-industrial regions: even after decades of shrinkage, medium-sized cities can reassert themselves as dynamic centres of resilience, provided they transform migration challenges into opportunities for inclusive urban development.

The findings of this study suggest that to be a regional centre in contemporary Lithuania means to embody both the vulnerabilities of long-term demographic and economic decline and the potential for regeneration triggered by external shocks such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine. Medium-sized cities, once weakened by deindustrialization and shrinkage, continue to function as crucial hubs for their hinterlands by providing services, employment, and education. At the same time, their capacity to attract and integrate newcomers – particularly refugees and immigrants – demonstrates that regional centres are not static remnants of a declining past but evolving spaces that can absorb new populations, sustain local economies, and contribute to national resilience. In this sense, being a regional centre in today's Lithuania means balancing historical legacies of decline with emerging opportunities for renewal through immigration and adaptive governance.

Looking ahead, the Lithuanian case provides valuable insights for comparative research on medium-sized cities across Europe. While the structural legacies of deindustrialization and demographic shrinkage remain pressing, the recent migration wave demonstrates that external shocks can reconfigure urban trajectories in unexpected ways. Future research should explore the long-

term settlement patterns of immigrants, their integration into labour markets and local communities, and their role in reshaping urban governance in shrinking regional centres. In this regard, our project will analyse both quantitative and qualitative data on immigration from third countries to medium-sized Lithuanian cities. This will provide empirical evidence on how newcomers influence demographic stability, labour markets, and local development dynamics, and thus contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of whether immigration-driven revitalization represents a temporary response to crisis or a sustainable pathway for post-industrial medium-sized cities.

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