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A comparative risk-governance analysis of policies toward belarusians in Lithuania, Latvia, and Poland, 2022–2025

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BELARUS YOUNG
RESEARCH AWARD

WINNER

2025

SUMMARY

Since 2022, Lithuania, Latvia, and Poland have increasingly treated Belarus-related travel and stay not as a routine migration/consular issue, but as an issue managed primarily through a security lens. This shift is shaped by several events and trends: Belarus's post-2020 repression, the 2021 Ryanair FR4978 incident, the use of migration flows as a political tool on the EU–Belarus borders, and Belarus's enabling role in Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. As a result, special restrictions became easier to justify. Security institutions also gained a bigger role in mobility governance.

The memo groups policies using two criteria: (1) where the main control is applied: border/territorial space vs administrative/document procedures, and (2) how targeting works by default, broad access restriction vs case-by-case screening. In this scheme, Poland is border + broad restriction, Latvia is administrative + broad restriction, and Lithuania is administrative + case-by-case screening.

Across all three cases, policy is designed to work even when information is incomplete. However, this often reduces proportionality and transparency. It also increases the risk of “over-securitising” Belarusians, including pro-democratic exiles.

To better balance security and support, the memo proposes a Differentiated, Evidence-Based Risk Governance (DERG) model: targeted risk indicators (not blanket nationality-based assumptions), step-by-step screening with clear thresholds, protected “trusted corridors” for low-risk but important mobility (students, skilled workers, humanitarian cases), stronger safeguards and oversight, time limits and measurable metrics that force regular review, and regional coordination to prevent shifting flows to neighbouring countries.

WHY THE “BELARUS FACTOR” BECAME A SECURITY RISK (2020–2022)

After the August 2020 presidential election in Belarus, mass protests were met with unprecedented repression: detentions, criminalisation of dissent, and long-term use of coercion as a stable governance tool. This produced a large wave of politically motivated emigration, with Lithuania and Poland becoming key destinations for Belarusian exiles seeking safety and legalisation pathways. In the early phase, host-state responses were relatively supportive, but the scale of inflows and the presence of individuals with prior ties to state structures later strengthened debates about screening capacity and security vulnerabilities.

In 2021, two escalations reshaped threat perceptions on the EU’s eastern border. First, the forced landing of Ryanair Flight FR4978 in Minsk and the arrest of Raman Pratasievič showed the Belarusian regime’s willingness to conduct coercive actions affecting other countries. This reinforced the view of Belarus as an active security actor rather than a conventional neighbour.

Second, the regime’s facilitation of irregular migration toward Lithuania, Latvia, and Poland was widely framed as “instrumentalised migration” and a form of hybrid pressure. This securitised the Belarus corridor, even though most migrants were third-country nationals.

The final turning point came in 2022. Belarus enabled Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine by providing territory, infrastructure, and operational support. This aligned Belarus with Russian aggression and turned it into a potential base for military operations near NATO borders. As a result, mobility from/through Belarus was increasingly treated as security-relevant by default.

Together, these developments created a structural dilemma for Lithuania, Latvia, and Poland: the Belarusian state is treated as supporting hostile actions, while Belarusian society simultaneously generates a large community of political exiles. This duality underpins why “the Belarus factor” became a risk issue and why policy moved from ordinary migration governance toward restrictive, security-conditioned measures.

WHAT THE COUNTRIES DID: THREE RISK-MANAGEMENT MODELS

A) Entry / border mobility

Lithuania. Border governance was tightened by reducing available “gates” and concentrating flows into fewer, more controllable checkpoints. In August 2023, Lithuania temporarily suspended the Šumskas and Tverečius crossings, explicitly linking the step to security risks after Wagner fighters relocated to Belarus.[1] In February 2024, Lithuania terminated operations at Lavoriškės and Raigardas (from 1 March 2024) and simultaneously introduced additional movement limits (e.g., restricting pedestrian/cyclist crossings), framing the move through security, anti-smuggling, and counter-intelligence considerations.[2]

Latvia. Latvia also used crossing-point constriction as a risk tool. In September 2023 it halted the Silene border crossing point, justified through preventing threats linked to irregular migration pressure and border integrity.[3] In February 2024, the government decided not to reinstate Silene, explicitly connecting the decision to continuing illegal crossing attempts and internal-security risks in the war-time environment.[4]

Latvia’s security framing was reinforced by persistent border pressure. An official EMN report states that in 2022 authorities withheld 5,286 persons from attempting irregular crossing at the Latvia–Belarus border (up from 4,045 in 2021).[14]

Poland. Poland’s entry/border policy is the most clearly spatial and exceptionalist. It operationalises risk management by treating the Belarus border as a high-risk security space rather than a normal mobility corridor. One visible element was crossing closure: e.g., Bobrowniki was closed “in the interests of state security”[5]. In parallel, Poland framed border protection as a strategic priority (personnel + technology + “sealed” logic), treated as security infrastructure, not normal border administration.[6]

According to Poland’s Ministry of the Interior, after introducing the buffer zone the number of illegal crossing attempts fell from 17,030 (before 13 June 2024) to 6,130 (13 June–9 September 2024), while authorities also reported dozens of detentions of alleged smugglers.[19] Reuters similarly reported a 64% drop in illegal crossings after the buffer-zone policy was introduced.[20]

B) Documents / visas / residence permits (access to legal pathways)

Lithuania. Lithuania institutionalised individualised screening inside document procedures. In December 2022 the Migration Department introduced a special questionnaire for Russian and Belarusian citizens applying for national visas or temporary residence permits, making the submitted information decisive for decisions (including the possibility of refusal for non-completion or false/incomplete answers).[7]

Operationally, Lithuania’s “individualised screening” has generated a substantial volume of negative, security-related decisions. In 2024, the Migration Department assessed 598 Belarusian citizens as posing a threat to state security, public order, or human health; within this group, 179 were denied a temporary residence permit and 232 were required to leave when their expired permits were not replaced, while 175 still-valid temporary residence permits were cancelled on the Department’s initiative. In 2025, the number of Belarusians assessed as posing such a threat rose to 1,634; 391 were denied a first-time temporary residence permit and 1,023 were refused renewal/replacement upon expiry, and 214 still-valid temporary residence permits were cancelled. Taken together, these figures suggest that “individualised screening” can function as a high-impact restriction in practice, even though it is formally case-by-case.[18]

In May 2023 Lithuania added a more explicit legal layer via the Law on restrictive measures linked to aggression against Ukraine, which (among other measures) suspended acceptance of visa applications abroad for Russian and Belarusian citizens with narrowly defined exceptions.[8]

Latvia. Latvia relied more on eligibility compression, shrinking access to pathways first, then applying security controls. In April 2022 the Saeima suspended issuance of first-time temporary residence permits to citizens of Russia and Belarus (with exceptions), explicitly framed through the security environment after the invasion of Ukraine. [9] In September 2022 the Saeima further tightened the extension procedure for temporary residence permits for Russian and Belarusian citizens, continuing the logic of narrowing administrative access under the security frame. [10] By 2025, the consular domain was also formalised: Latvia’s MFA explains that visa applications from Belarusian citizens are accepted only in a limited list of exceptions, justified as reducing threats to public order and internal security. [11]

Poland. Poland combined securitised gatekeeping with selective legal channels. On the one hand, Poland suspended MFA participation in the Poland.Business Harbour programme in January 2024, explicitly arguing that “proper verification” mechanisms must be ensured, i.e., a legal-mobility channel was reclassified as a vulnerability requiring redesign. [12] On the other hand, Poland kept (and even simplified) controlled channels for particular groups, especially those already admitted on humanitarian grounds.

C) Legal stay: renewals, withdrawals, continuity of residence

Lithuania. Lithuania’s legal-stay governance is anchored in security-conditioned administration, where the same screening logic that structures access to permits can also shape continued stay. The questionnaire system is explicitly linked to decisions on visas/residence permits and is designed as a decisive component in the assessment of the person’s eligibility to remain. In addition, Lithuania used sanctions-linked mobility governance that spills into daily life: customs guidance details restrictions on Belarus-registered cars, including rules for entry and conditions/exceptions, contributing to an environment where Belarus-connected presence is treated as inherently higher-risk and more tightly regulated. [13]

Latvia. Latvia’s legal-stay tools emphasise procedural security clearance and pre-entry control. The EMN report for Latvia (reference year 2022) states that Russia and Belarus were included in the list of states with increased terrorism risk and that visa and residence-permit requests by their nationals are additionally assessed by competent state security authorities, justified by the “unstable security situation” in the region. [14] From 1 September 2025, Latvia also introduced an Electronic Travel Declaration requiring advance submission of travel information (including for transit), moving part of risk management upstream, before arrival. [15]

Poland. Poland’s legal-stay logic is segmented: it is restrictive at the border space but offers stability to selected humanitarian categories once inside. Poland introduced a simplified temporary residence permit for Belarusians holding humanitarian visas (D21), framed by the Office for Foreigners as targeted support for Belarusians facing repression since 2020 (including a clearer status regime and reduced administrative burdens). [16] At the same time, Poland escalated border-related exceptionalism by formalising the possibility to restrict the right to submit an application for international protection at the Belarus border under specified conditions, reinforcing a model where “legal access” can be suspended in the frontier space as a security tool. [17]

Taken together, these measures create a policy problem for Lithuania, Latvia, Poland, and the EU. The issue is not “being strict” as such, but low targeting: broad restrictions and heavy screening can produce many false positives, overload institutions, and push some mobility into less transparent channels. They also carry strategic and economic costs, including the loss of students, skilled workers, and pro-democratic exiles who can contribute to host societies on the EU’s eastern flank. When exceptional tools remain in place for long periods, transparency and the ability to challenge decisions can weaken, creating trust, legitimacy, and legal risks. Finally, because neighbouring states apply different “risk rules,” flows may simply shift across borders, producing displacement effects rather than real risk reduction.

PROPORTIONALITY AND CONSEQUENCES FOR BELARUSIAN COMMUNITIES

A proportionality problem appears strongest where group-level restriction is used as the main tool used to reduce perceived risk, because it structurally increases the chance of excluding low-risk people (“overbreadth”). Latvia is the clearest case: the Saeima’s 2022 decision temporarily suspending first-time temporary residence permits for citizens of Russia and Belarus makes access to legalisation exception-based rather than routine. Later, Latvia’s framework limiting the acceptance of Belarusian visa applications to enumerated categories reinforces the same “compress eligibility first” logic.

In securitization terms, once immigration/mobility is framed as a security threat, restrictive border/entry controls become the “intelligible” response; however, the trade-off is that the policy is less discriminating by design and can unintentionally block pro-democratic or politically neutral Belarusians who do not fit any exception.

A different proportionality risk is opacity and low contestability, especially where decisions rely on security-service inputs and administrative tools that are hard to challenge. Lithuania’s model is formally more individualized (a screening logic), but the “special questionnaire” is presented as a key administrative instrument in decisions on settlement/permit outcomes, and it sits within a wider ecosystem where security professionals (intelligence, border guards, immigration services) are not just implementers but co-producers of the “security landscape.”

The core risk-governance dilemma here is: individualized screening can be more proportionate in theory, yet if negative decisions are justified through classified reasoning or unclear thresholds, applicants’ ability to contest outcomes is weakened, turning screening into a tool that discourages applications rather than a calibrated filter. This mechanism matches the broader critique in migration–security scholarship that routine bureaucratic practices and professional security logics can make exclusion a standard bureaucratic outcome even without overt “emergency” rhetoric.

Poland concentrates securitization in space: border hardening and territorial exceptional measures create a frontier where ordinary rules of access and movement are restricted. The government’s maintenance of a buffer zone is explicitly justified through border-security rationales and is repeatedly prolonged as an operational tool. The legal architecture enabling temporary restrictions on the right to apply for international protection at the Belarus border institutionalizes exceptionalism under specified conditions and renewal logic.

This model can deliver short-term control, but it carries the highest humanitarian and legitimacy costs: it shifts costs onto people at the border and fuels long-running legal and reputational controversy, patterns widely discussed in securitized EU border-security debates.

Across all three cases, these dynamics affect Belarusian exile communities through uncertainty, reputational “othering,” and integration difficulties: when security framing becomes dominant, it tends to produce more unequal relations and generalized suspicion toward those who “fit the profile,” even if they are politically anti-regime.

ALTERNATIVE MODEL (DERG)

Differentiated, Evidence-Based Risk Governance (DERG) is designed as a response to the core securitization dilemma: once “Belarus-linked mobility” is framed as a security threat, restrictive measures become politically easier to justify, but they often expand beyond genuinely risky profiles and produce long-term costs for democratic exile communities.

DERG principles:

- Differentiate by risk profile, not nationality alone: treat nationality as a risk marker, but require additional indicators (institutional ties, sanction-evasion patterns, inconsistent histories) before escalation.
- Multi-gate screening with clear triggers: pre-entry checks → structured, verifiable questions → enhanced review only for flagged cases, with published escalation logic.
- Protected “trusted corridors” for verified low-risk/high-value mobility (students, critical skills, humanitarian cases), with stronger verification and early-period monitoring instead of blanket blockage.
- Contestability + oversight: minimum reasoning standards, meaningful appeal options, and special oversight where security details are classified (to avoid “black-box” denials).
- Sunset + metrics: emergency tools must expire unless renewed based on indicators (security incidents prevented + collateral impacts on legal mobility and integration).
- Limit data to what is needed for security checks for upstream tools: limit collection/retention and define purpose clearly so preventive management does not become profiling without clear limits.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Lithuania – “re-design screening”: keep individualized logic, but narrow the questionnaire to verifiable security signals, publish clearer thresholds for escalation, and add periodic review of negative decisions. Build a vetted “trusted corridor” for students/critical sectors to reduce false positives and strategic loss of pro-democratic Belarusians.

Latvia – calibrated access instead of total compression: preserve additional security assessment, but reopen controlled legal routes for low-risk categories via transparent exceptions (education, family, humanitarian, critical labour), and apply strict data-minimisation rules to the travel declaration + visa restriction regime.

Poland – keep border security, reduce spillovers/exceptionalism: maintain barrier/surveillance capacity, but tighten time limits and oversight for exceptional territorial tools (buffer zone; border asylum restrictions) and protect credible legal channels (e.g., humanitarian-visa residence track) so pressure does not translate into generalized exclusion.

Regionally (LT/LV/PL): agree minimum standards for screening and safeguards + structured information exchange to reduce incentives to move to the least restrictive neighbour and avoid mere displacement of flows across neighbouring borders.

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