

An aerial photograph of a Lithuanian city, likely Vilnius, showing a dense cluster of buildings with red-tiled roofs and several churches with white facades and domes. The city is built on a hillside, with green trees interspersed among the buildings. The sky is blue with scattered white clouds.

CENTER FOR NEW IDEAS

WHY LITHUANIA'S SECURITIZATION POLICY TOWARDS BELARUSIANS MUST SEE RISK REASSESSMENT

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SUMMARY

- Following the likely reinstatement of Aleksandr Lukashenka as President of Belarus in 2025, the absence of resistance from Belarusians within the country should not be viewed as the silent support of the regime and its radical pro-Russian stance.
- The perceived negative influence of Belarusians on Lithuania's national security is far less tangible than real risks associated with such domestic issues, such as a steep population decline and a brain drain in the healthcare sector.
- Additionally, with Russia's actions to attract Belarusians and Lithuania's lack of counterproposals, Belarusian society is at risk of becoming intrinsically pro-Russian — an uncomfortable neighbour and another long-term problem for Lithuania.
- A possible solution to these issues lies in the incentivisation programs for Belarusian students and healthcare professionals to integrate into Lithuanian society.
- Carefully designed programs should minimise the risks of security breaches while helping Lithuania's demographic and geopolitical weight.
- Meanwhile, qualified Belarusians will gain an opportunity to improve their standard of living and escape the ongoing repression.

CONTEXT

In 2023, Lithuania revoked the residence permits of [1,644 Belarusians](#) deemed a national security threat — a trend caused by Lukashenka’s support of the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Continuing this trend, Belarusians are also being discredited due to accusations of “Litvinism”, is an alleged movement claiming Belarusians as the dominant ethnos in the founding of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and claims that Vilnius is a Belarusian city.

At the same time, there is little evidence to believe that Belarusians pose a threat to Lithuania’s national security. For instance, upon closer investigation, Lithuania’s State Security Department has identified “Litvinism” as [a misinformation operation](#) designed to incite hostility between Lithuanians and Belarusians.

Another hostile operation is taking place at the time of writing this paper. In recent months, there have been [a brutal escalation of mass arrests](#) in preparation for the upcoming presidential elections scheduled for January 26th, 2025. In such repressive conditions, the almost certain illegitimate reinstatement of Lukashenka is unlikely to cause any protests from those within the country.

Instead, with [only 9% of Belarusians](#) satisfied with the current economic situation and [19% supporting](#) the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the majority are being forced into submission, with few opportunities for a better life elsewhere.

This paper calls on Lithuania’s newly empowered Social Democratic Party to reassess the previous government’s policies toward Belarusians. A revised approach could benefit Lithuania’s demographic and geopolitical position, as well as support the pro-democratic members of Belarusian society.

THE REAL CHALLENGES OF PRESENT-DAY LITHUANIA

Demographic Crisis

Lithuania is currently experiencing one of the deepest demographic crises in the EU:

- As of 2023, Lithuania's population stands at [2.8 million](#), a 25% decrease from the 3.7 million recorded in 1990.
- The fertility rate in Lithuania remains low at around [1.5 children per woman](#), significantly below the replacement rate of 2.1.
- Following the EU accession in 2004, thousands of citizens left Lithuania, for better economic opportunities abroad.
- By 2022, individuals aged 65 and older accounted for [20% of the population](#), up from 12% in the early 1990s.

If current trends continue, the population is projected to fall [below 2.5 million](#) by 2040.

Deficit of Healthcare Specialists

The current situation in Lithuania's healthcare system also raises concerns, as access to qualified medical care becomes increasingly difficult:

- Lithuania suffers from a notable shortfall in more than [40 medical professions](#), including family doctors, surgeons, psychiatrists, and nurses.
- Initiatives to draw in and keep healthcare personnel – such as financing incentives, housing help, funding for medical education – [have had little success](#).

The Lithuanian University of Health Sciences [predicts](#) that a further shortage, especially in the rural areas, should be expected as current medical staff approach retirement age.

Fewer Young Belarusian Talent Arrivals

The conflict in Ukraine has increased the number of Belarusian students pursuing studies abroad, showing a lucrative opportunity for Lithuania. However, stringent immigration rules are causing an adverse effect, evidenced by declining numbers of Belarusian students in Lithuanian universities:

European Humanities University (EHU) overall enrollment:

- **2022:** [631 students](#).
- **2023:** [639 students](#).
- **2024:** [455 students](#) (a decline of 28% due to fewer Belarusians applications).

Belarusian student enrollment in Lithuanian universities:

- **2022:** [574 students](#).
- **2023:** [114 students](#) (an 80% decrease within one year).

PROPOSED INITIATIVES

In light of these trends, this paper offers two specific initiatives aimed at improving Lithuania's demographic and geopolitical position while supporting the pro-democratic Belarusians:

Special Program for Attracting Belarusian Healthcare Specialists

To address Lithuania's healthcare workforce shortages, an initiative based on Poland's Business Harbour program could be developed. It would attract qualified Belarusian healthcare professionals and facilitate their integration into Lithuanian society:

1. Vetting Process

- **Thorough Security Checks:** Collaborate with European security agencies and Belarusian democratic forces in exile to screen applicants, with a processing period up to 3 months to ensure no affiliations that could pose risks.
- **Accelerated Medical Licensing:** Allocate resources to a licensing body to validate Belarusian medical degrees within three months.

2. Visa and Residency Program

- **Annual Targets:** Set a target to attract 500 Belarusian doctors in the first three years, increasing Lithuania's medical workforce by 5% (currently [around 11,000](#)).
- **Medical Specialist Visas:** Develop expedited visas exclusively for healthcare professionals, granting initial 2-year stays with options for renewal and eventual permanent residency.
- **Language Training:** Provide 6-month intensive Lithuanian language courses aimed specifically at medical professionals.

3. Financial Package and Integration Initiatives

- **Competitive Compensation:** An average starting salary of € 1,500 – €2,000 would be attractive compared to median doctor's salary in Belarus of €800 – €1,200 - while remaining below the median salary of Lithuanian healthcare specialists.
- **Performance Bonuses:** Introduce bonuses for healthcare services in rural or underserved areas to promote better coverage.
- **Community Connections:** Establish local mentorships pairing incoming doctors with Lithuanian healthcare professionals to foster workplace integration and build cultural ties.

Package of Small-Scale Liberalisation Steps for Belarusian Students

[In-depth interviews](#) with Belarusians within the country reveal that the isolation from the EU is a signal for some to cooperate with Russia instead. This way, Russia has become an increasingly attractive destination for Belarusian students, which is another worrying trend in the context of the region:

- **2021:** [563 students](#).
- **2022:** [2,000 students](#), a sharp increase of 255%.
- **2023:** [2,166 students](#), an additional increase of 8%.

This data suggests that Russia has taken effective measures to attract Belarusian students, while Lithuania is losing its appeal. For instance, Russia now recognizes the Belarusian Centralised Exam as a valid prerequisite for enrollment to Russian universities.

While Lithuania cannot fully replicate Russia's enrollment policy to such an extent, this paper suggests that there is room for targeted improvements:

- **Increased Investment into Higher Educational Institutions:** As demonstrated by the EHU and the Vilnius Francis Skaryina Gymnasium, Lithuania can be a top destination for Belarusian students. To revitalise those institutions, they should see their budgets increased by approximately **€1.5 million** in the first year and **€1 million** annually thereafter. Specifically, allocating an additional **€700,000** annually to EHU would fund scholarships and operational costs to enroll **200** more Belarusian students. Similarly, investing **€800,000** in the Vilnius Francis Skorina Gymnasium for both one-time infrastructure expansion and increased operational costs would bring in an additional **100** students.
- **Small Steps Towards Less Bureaucracy:** Obtaining an apostille in Belarus is extremely difficult, with reported delays of up to a year due to a waiting period and negligence of government officials. Belarusian students would benefit from the removal of an apostille requirement for their educational qualifications, such as high school certificates, bachelor's degrees. On top of that, creating an online platform for document recognition could be discussed, as it would also reduce the bureaucratic burden on students.
- **Reintroduction of Visa Type D for Belarusian Students:** With Visa Type C as the primary legalisation method, Belarusian freshmen have to apply for extensions midterm, disrupting their studies. In contrast, Visa Type D allows students to work part-time and support themselves financially.

CONCLUSION

It's essential to acknowledge the validity of Lithuania's security concerns. However, evidence that Belarusian doctors and students pose a substantial security threat is limited.

Limiting access to opportunities in Lithuania may push Belarusians towards Russia, foster a more pro-Russian society, as well as fuel movements like "Litvinism", which could become a long-term security threat. Not to mention, this paper argues that the security risks are minor compared to the challenges of Lithuania's demographic crisis and healthcare shortages.

For Belarus, soft power and presence from EU countries like Lithuania can serve as a crucial counterweight against Russia's growing influence. Eventually, this may become an important factor when drastic change will take place in the country — likely after the 2025 elections. In the meantime, the focus should be on supporting as many mobile Belarusians as possible in their search for better opportunities.

Ultimately, Lithuania should not let its existing challenges deepen, and it should conduct a proper risk reassessment of its policies towards Belarusians. A closer collaboration is a far more sensible path forward, even if it carries slightly greater risks.

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