



Institute of Political
Studies "Political
Sphere"

Palitsfera Working Papers No. 5/2026

BELARUS–LATVIA RELATIONS: GENERAL OVERVIEW 1991-2026

Palitsfera Working Papers No. 5/2026

Belarus–Latvia Relations: General Overview 1991–2026

Maksim Karaliou



Institute of Political Studies
“Political Sphere”

Political Relations

Political Cooperation. Diplomatic relations between the Republic of Belarus and the Republic of Latvia were established on 7 April 1992. At that time, both states were post-Soviet parliamentary republics. However, already in the first years of independence, their political development took different paths. Latvia returned to the 1922 Constitution and continued to strengthen parliamentary democracy, while in Belarus, after the office of president was introduced in 1994, there was a gradual transition to an authoritarian model of governance.

Latvia clearly defined its course and today is a member of the European Union, NATO, the Council of Europe, and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). Belarus is oriented towards Russian and Eurasian structures: the Union State of Belarus and Russia, the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), the Eurasian Economic Union, the Commonwealth of Independent States, and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. The key forums in which both countries are full members are the United Nations and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE).

The formation of bilateral contacts between Belarus and Latvia began while they were part of the USSR and continued after its collapse, even before the legal establishment of diplomatic relations. Thus, in December 1991, the Chairman of the Supreme Soviet of Belarus, Stanislau Shushkevich, the country's leader at the time, visited Riga to sign the Declaration on the Principles of Good-Neighbourly Relations. For both states, important tasks included international recognition, border demarcation and the creation of mechanisms for economic interaction.

In the first half of the 1990s, the main areas of cooperation were border settlement (Golubev, 2018: 281–287), transit, logistics and trade. In 1993–1995, a number of basic agreements were signed that laid the foundation for bilateral relations: on border issues, border crossing points, the state border, legal assistance, international road transport and air services. During the same period, regular contacts took place at the governmental level. In February 1994, Latvian Prime Minister Valdis Birkavs visited Minsk, and in 1995 the head of the Latvian government, Māris Gailis, visited Belarus twice.

For Belarus, cooperation with Latvia was of particular importance both because of geographical proximity and because of access to Latvian transport infrastructure. Latvian ports (above all Ventspils and Riga) were viewed by Minsk as export routes for petroleum products, potash fertilisers and other cargoes. Latvia, in turn, was interested in preserving Belarus's role as an important partner between the EU and the post-Soviet space.

After the constitutional crisis of 1996 and the deterioration of Belarus's relations with the West, the political dialogue between Minsk and Riga became more cautious, but did not stop completely. In the late 1990s, Latvia continued to maintain contacts with the Belarusian authorities even against the backdrop of Minsk's international isolation. In 1997, in Vilnius, on the sidelines of the international conference “Coexistence of Nations

and Good-Neighbourliness — a Guarantee of Security and Stability in Europe”, jointly organised by Lithuania and Poland, the only meeting to date between the two presidents — Aliaksandr Lukashenka and Guntis Ulmanis — took place. In addition to the issue of democracy, relations along the Russia–NATO line became increasingly contentious. Nevertheless, the parties stated that political disagreements should not hinder the economy, the transit of Belarusian goods through Latvian ports, or the completion of border demarcation. In 1998–1999, reciprocal visits by parliamentary and government delegations took place, and new agreements were signed in the areas of investment, customs cooperation and cross-border interaction.

The beginning of the 2000s became a period of gradual cooling in relations. After Latvia joined NATO and the European Union (2004), its policy towards Belarus became increasingly synchronised with the common European approach. As early as 2001, a statement by Latvian Defence Minister Ģirts Valdis Kristovskis, who called Belarus a potential threat to national security, caused considerable resonance, as did Riga’s refusal to recognise the legitimacy of A. Lukashenka’s election to a second term. Nevertheless, relations did not reach the stage of a complete freeze. The parties continued to maintain cooperation in transport, the economy and border interaction. In 1999–2004, agreements were concluded on the conditions for the transit of Belarusian cargo through Latvian ports, on economic and scientific-technical cooperation, and in the fields of education, culture, healthcare and combating crime.

A new stage of rapprochement began after 2008 against the backdrop of the launch of the EU’s “Eastern Partnership” initiative and the temporary normalisation of relations between Minsk and Brussels. A symbolic moment was the meeting of Prime Ministers Siarhei Sidorski and Ivars Godmanis at the “Urbany/Silene” border crossing in July 2008, which in practice opened a period of a new thaw. In 2008–2010, there was a series of visits by heads of government, foreign ministers and heads of sectoral agencies.

Of particular significance was the 2010 agreement on a simplified procedure for mutual travel by residents of border areas. The agreement on local border traffic became one of the most successful examples of Belarus’s cooperation with EU countries. It allowed residents of border regions to cross the border without Schengen visas using special permits. Tens of thousands of residents of the Vitebsk Region and Latvia’s Latgale fell within the area covered by the agreement. For many border territories, local border traffic became an important factor in maintaining interpersonal contacts, small-scale trade and local tourism. Latvia became the only EU country with which Belarus implemented such an agreement.

After the presidential election in Belarus in December 2010 and the introduction of new EU sanctions, relations deteriorated again. However, after the Ukrainian crisis and the beginning of Russian aggression in 2014, Riga began to take a more favourable position towards Minsk. Belarus was increasingly viewed by Latvian politicians as a factor of regional stability and an important transit partner. In 2014–2020, political contacts intensified again. Meetings of the intergovernmental commission on economic cooperation were held regularly, and meetings took place between foreign, transport and defence ministers and the heads of parliamentary bodies.

In 2016–2020, contacts between the states were fairly intensive and perhaps the most productive of the entire post-Soviet period. In 2018, Latvian Prime Minister Māris Kučinskis visited Belarus, and in January 2020 — Krišjānis Kariņš. During this time, issues concerning the development of the transit of Belarusian cargo through Latvian ports, cooperation within the Chinese “Belt and Road” initiative, and preparations for jointly hosting the 2021 Ice Hockey World Championship were actively discussed.

The first official visit by Aliaksandr Lukashenka to Latvia in history was planned for spring 2020, but it never took place — first because of the COVID-19 pandemic, and later because of the political crisis in Belarus. The events of August 2020 became a turning point in Belarusian–Latvian relations. Latvia did not recognise the results of the Belarusian presidential election, condemned the repression, supported the EU sanctions policy and substantially reduced political contacts with Minsk.

Legal Framework for Cooperation. By 2020, Belarus and Latvia had developed a broad legal framework comprising more than 80 interstate, intergovernmental and interdepartmental agreements. They covered virtually all major areas: border regulation, transport and logistics, transit, customs, education, science, culture, healthcare, social security, investment protection and regional interaction.

Agreements connected with transport and logistics occupied a particularly important place. For Belarus, agreements on international road and rail transport, the use of Latvian ports, and the transit of Belarusian cargo through Latvian territory were of fundamental importance. In 1999, an agreement was concluded on the conditions of transit through Latvian transport infrastructure. This agreement became one of the key arrangements for Belarusian exports to Western countries.

Documents in the field of border cooperation also played an important role. In addition to the 1994 treaty on the state border, the parties regulated the operation of border crossing points, border commissioners and other technical rules. In 2010, an agreement on local border traffic was signed, becoming a unique example of relatively deep integration between Belarus and an EU country.

After 2020, and especially after the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, carried out in part from the territory of Belarus, the legal framework of Belarusian–Latvian relations was gradually dismantled. In 2022–2023, Latvia suspended or denounced a number of key agreements. In September 2022, the Saeima suspended the agreements on economic and scientific-technical cooperation, local border traffic, and cross-border cooperation. In October 2022, Latvia withdrew from the agreement on mutual protection of investments, and later from the agreement on mutual travel by citizens.

In addition, agreements in the fields of aviation, military cooperation, information exchange and transport logistics were suspended or in practice lost their practical significance. As a result, the areas that had previously formed the basis of common interests suffered most: transit, regional interaction and interpersonal contacts.

At the same time, the parties did not move towards a complete rupture. Basic agreements on the state border, legal assistance, social security and some logistics

documents remain in force. This indicates a desire to preserve the minimum necessary mechanisms of legal coordination even amid a deep political crisis.

Diplomatic Presence. Until 2020, Belarus and Latvia maintained a substantial diplomatic presence. Latvia had an embassy in Minsk and, from 1994, a Latvian consulate in Vitebsk. Belarus had an embassy in Riga and a consulate general in Daugavpils. A special place in bilateral relations was occupied by the Belarusian sanatorium “Belarus” in Jūrmala, which was one of the symbols of the Belarusian presence in Latvia¹.

On 24 May 2021, the day after the forced landing of the Ryanair aircraft in Minsk, during the Ice Hockey World Championship (which Latvia and Belarus had originally been due to host together), Riga Mayor Mārtiņš Staķis and Latvian Foreign Minister Edgars Rinkēvičs² publicly replaced the official red-and-green flag of Belarus with the national white-red-white flag. The Latvian side called this a response to “state terrorism”. In response, Belarus ordered Latvian Ambassador Einars Semanis to leave the country within 24 hours, and all other embassy staff within 48 hours. Only one administrative and technical employee was allowed to remain to look after the building. Naturally, the Latvian side summoned Belarusian Chargé d’Affaires Natallia Sadouskaya and announced the symmetrical expulsion of all Belarusian diplomats and embassy staff in Riga. Since then, only the consular offices in Vitebsk and Daugavpils have continued to operate.

Since official diplomatic communication between Riga and Minsk had effectively been curtailed, in September 2024 Latvia appointed a separate special envoy to support Belarusian civil society, human rights defenders and independent media, and to coordinate work with the Office of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya and the United Transitional Cabinet. Gunta Pastore became *Ambassador-at-large for democratic forces in Belarus*.

Image of the Countries in the Media. Media discourse also became an important indicator of the transformation of Belarusian–Latvian relations. An analysis of publications³ by the state agency BelTA for 2020–2026 shows that Latvia was mentioned less and less often in the context of bilateral cooperation and increasingly in connection with sanctions, border control, the militarisation of the region, as well as socio-economic problems in EU countries. It can be argued that in the Belarusian state information space Latvia appears almost exclusively as part of the broader image of a hostile “collective West”. At the same time, Belarusian propaganda discourse promotes a narrative of Belarus’s openness to Latvian society, manifested in particular through the emphasis on visa-free travel for Latvian citizens and non-citizens even amid the political crisis.

1. After the beginning of the full-scale war in Ukraine in spring 2022, Latvia’s Guarantee Fund and financial authorities blocked the sanatorium’s bank accounts because its ultimate beneficiary was the Property Management Directorate of the President of the Republic of Belarus, which had been placed under EU sanctions. As a result, the sanatorium officially stopped receiving guests and patients, and its operations were mothballed. In order to circumvent EU sectoral sanctions and restore the operation of financial accounts, in autumn 2022 the Council of Ministers of Belarus adopted a resolution to urgently change the owner. The complex was transferred from the Property Management Directorate to the ownership of the Republican Centre for Health Improvement and Sanatorium-and-Resort Treatment of the Population. However, the Latvian authorities did not recognise this legal transfer as valid and kept the sanctions restrictions in force.

2. Now — President of the Republic of Latvia.

3. BelTA and LSM.lv were selected for comparison. It should be emphasised that the former is a Belarusian state news agency and is directly controlled by the current authorities. LSM.lv is also financed from the state budget and combines the content of Latvian Television and Latvian Radio, but it has a significantly greater degree of editorial independence. According to the RSF World Press Freedom Index 2026, Latvia ranks 17th and Belarus 165th out of 180 countries. The analysis was carried out using artificial intelligence tools.

Whereas previously Belarus was perceived primarily as a neighbouring state and an economic partner, after the events of 2020 and the beginning of the Russian invasion of Ukraine the main topics became political repression, illegal migration and security issues arising from Minsk's military cooperation with Moscow.

As a result, in Latvian state media discourse Belarus became increasingly integrated into the general context of threats from Russia.

At the same time, LSM.lv fairly actively covered the activities of Belarusian democratic forces, the Office of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, and human rights and cultural initiatives of the Belarusian diaspora in Latvia. Publications regularly raised the topics of political prisoners, support for civil society and the integration of Belarusian emigrants. Thus, Latvian media discourse clearly shows a distinction between the Belarusian regime, which is viewed as a source of regional threat and an ally of Russia, and Belarusian society, which is to a considerable extent presented as a victim of repression and a potential partner of the European democratic community. However, it must also be acknowledged that recently security issues have gradually been prevailing over the narrative of solidarity (Vasilevich, 2025: 117–124).

It is also worth noting the work of the VŠĮ DigitalHub team, which publishes monthly NARINT (*narrative intelligence*), comparing how major events were covered by leading media in Belarus, Latvia and a number of other countries (NARINT, 5.08.2026).

Visa Issues, Border Crossing and the Migration Crisis

Visa Regime. The visa regime between Belarus and Latvia was introduced in 1993. In the 1990s and early 2000s, bilateral agreements were in force between the countries that allowed border residents, pensioners, and people travelling to funerals or to visit relatives to obtain free or inexpensive national visas under a simplified procedure. The rules changed after 1 May 2004, when Latvia joined the European Union and terminated all previous bilateral agreements with Belarus. Latvian national visas began to be issued according to common European standards, and after Latvia joined the Schengen Area (21 December 2007), the country fully switched to issuing them under Schengen rules. Despite this, the number of visas issued to Belarusian citizens remained relatively high and fell sharply only after the events of 2020.

Local border traffic also played a significant role in cross-border contacts. In the first five years of its operation alone (2012–2016), more than 6.5 thousand permits were issued by the Latvian side and more than 45 thousand by the Belarusian side (Latvia–Belarus, 2018: 279).

Information on the number of Belarusian visas issued to Latvian citizens and non-citizens is quite difficult to find in open sources. Amid political confrontation, in April 2022 Minsk announced the introduction for one month of a visa-free regime for Latvian citizens and non-citizens, as well as Lithuanian citizens. The period was later extended. From July, Polish citizens were added to this “programme”, and from mid-2024

the Belarusian authorities announced a so-called expanded visa-free regime covering citizens of 38 European countries, which remains in force to this day⁴.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Latvia and the State Security Service (VDD) reacted critically and negatively to the Belarusian regime's initiative, warning of possible provocations and recruitment, as well as the lack of urgent consular support. Despite this, and despite actual detentions and sentences involving Latvian citizens, according to data from the State Border Committee of Belarus, from the introduction of the visa-free regime through May 2026 Latvian citizens and non-citizens crossed the Belarusian border 422,665 times. Only Lithuanian citizens travelled to Belarus more frequently (SBC, 2026).

Residents of Latvia, especially from border regions, travel to Belarus mainly for personal reasons: visiting relatives, buying cheaper goods and fuel, as well as treatment and recreation in Belarusian sanatoriums. Such trips peaked in 2022 (more than 180 thousand), while in 2025 they fell to approximately 18 thousand. In 2023, Latvia closed the “Silene” border crossing (“Urbany” on the Belarusian side), which by the shortest route connected Daugavpils and Braslau (the Minsk–Riga road), and also began reducing the number of permitted bus routes. In June 2026, bus traffic between Latvia and Belarus was completely halted at the initiative of the Latvian side. *Migration Crisis*. The Belarusian–Latvian border, approximately 173 km long, remained for a long time one of Belarus's least conflict-prone borders with EU countries. The main crossing points were “Urbany/Silene” and “Hryharoushchyna/Pāternieki”. The possibility of opening the “Druja/Piedruja” crossing across the Dvina/Daugava River was discussed — from launching a new tourist ferry to constructing a light pedestrian or pontoon bridge.

Until 2020, a significant share of traffic consisted of freight transport connected with the transit of Belarusian goods through Latvian ports. Several bus routes operated: Minsk–Riga, Vitebsk–Riga, Riga–Homiel, Daugavpils–Braslau, and Polatsk–Daugavpils. At one time, train No. 87/88 Minsk–Riga operated, with a through carriage Vitebsk–Riga attached to it (service was suspended because of the coronavirus pandemic and was never restored). The companies airBaltic and Belavia provided air connections between the countries, which were halted after the forced landing of the Ryanair aircraft in Minsk.

The situation changed radically in August 2021, when the migration crisis began on the Belarusian–Latvian border. Latvia accused the Belarusian authorities of organising a flow of irregular migrants from the Middle East to the EU's borders. On 11 August 2021, a state of emergency was introduced in four border administrative territories (Ludza, Krāslava and Augšdaugava municipalities and Daugavpils) (*ārkārtējā situācija*). This regime continued uninterrupted and was later transformed into an “enhanced border protection regime”.

A study by Mirko Forti (Mirko Forti, 2023) explains the Latvian approach through the theory of the “state of exception”. Instead of using standard refugee reception procedures, Latvia shifted the issue entirely into the sphere of national defence.

⁴. Citizens of Lithuania, Latvia and Poland can now stay in Belarus for up to 90 days a year, while citizens of other EU countries can stay for up to 30 days.

The main outcome was the adoption of government regulations that officially allowed the State Border Guard (*Valsts robežsardze*) to use force to return people to Belarus without accepting their asylum applications. Riga's official narrative, supported by the National Armed Forces and the Ministry of the Interior, is based on the idea that every migrant is an instrument in the hands of Aliaksandr Lukashenka and therefore a participant in a hybrid attack.

The Latvian government decided on large-scale construction of a 173-kilometre fence, as well as other engineering facilities to strengthen the border. By mid-2024, the main part of the fence, around 4 metres high and topped with barbed wire, had been fully completed. Total expenditure exceeded EUR 126 million (VNĪ, 18.03.2026). In September 2023, the Latvian government decided to close the “Silene” border crossing completely because Belarusian services had begun using the area near the crossing point to bring in and push through groups of migrants. The “Silene” staff were redeployed to guard the “green border”. Since then, the “Pāternieki/Hryharoushchyna” crossing has remained the only window between the countries. To minimise the risks of illegal entry under the guise of tourism, Latvia successively banned crossing the border on foot and by bicycle and significantly restricted transit possibilities for vehicles with Belarusian registration.

The measures adopted contributed to successful protection to a certain extent, although they did not bring attempts at illegal crossing to a complete end. In the first half of 2026, Latvia became the main destination for illegal migration from the territory of Belarus. According to the Latvian State Border Guard, the number of attempts to cross the border illegally was 5,286 in 2022, 13,863 in 2023, around 5.1 thousand in 2024, and more than 12 thousand in 2025 (BNN 4.03.2024).

Whereas at the beginning of the crisis the practices of Latvian border protection services did not fully comply with European law and were criticised by the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR), over time the approach of Latvia, as well as Lithuania and Poland, which faced the same problem, became the norm for the EU itself. Latvian, Lithuanian and Polish diplomats actively lobbied for recognition of the “instrumentalisation of migrants” at the Brussels level. As a result, strict practices were legalised within the updated Schengen Borders Code, turning a national protection model into a Europe-wide standard for protecting external borders.

The migration crisis finally transformed Belarusian–Latvian relations. Whereas in the 1990s–2010s the border was perceived primarily as a space for transit and cooperation, after 2021 it increasingly became a line of geopolitical confrontation between Belarus and the European Union.

Economic Cooperation

Despite similar socio-demographic trends, the economic development of Belarus and Latvia was very different. Whereas in 1995 Belarus's total GDP was almost 2.5 times larger than Latvia's, by 2023 it was only 1.7 times larger. Over this period, the Belarusian economy grew by 515%, while Latvia's grew by 753%. In per capita terms, Belarusian GDP increased 5.7-fold in 1995–2023 to USD 7,829, while Latvia's grew almost tenfold and reached USD 22,503.

Economic relations between Belarus and Latvia throughout the 1990s–2010s remained the most stable element of bilateral cooperation. Even during periods of political cooling, economic ties continued to develop thanks to geographical proximity, logistical complementarity and Latvia's role as a transit corridor for Belarusian exports to European Union countries. For a long time, economic cooperation with Belarus was viewed by Latvian political and business elites not only in terms of commercial interest but also as a tool for maintaining regional stability and involving Minsk in European economic processes. Relations were built on the principle of pragmatic cooperation, in which the economic interests of the transport and logistics sector and municipalities outweighed political and value-based contradictions (Bukovskis, 2012: 93–114).

Transport and export-logistics services formed the basis of Belarusian–Latvian economic relations and in practice became the main material foundation of bilateral cooperation. Latvia's geographical position, the presence of ice-free Baltic ports and a developed railway network made the country one of Belarus's key transit partners after the collapse of the USSR. In the 2000s–2010s, the Latvian ports of Riga, Ventspils and Liepāja served the Belarusian economy as one of its main channels of access to EU markets and world trade. According to Latvian estimates, before 2020 around one third of all Latvian railway freight came from Belarus or through Belarusian territory (Cooperation, 11.10.2019).

The transit of Belarusian petroleum products, potash fertilisers, carbochemical products, timber and container shipments was of greatest importance. Belarusian exports were particularly closely linked to the Port of Ventspils, which specialised in oil and petroleum products, as well as to Riga as a universal transport hub. For Latvia, Belarusian transit was not only an economic but also a political factor: the logistics sector accounted, and continues to account, for a significant share of Latvian service exports and provides tens of thousands of jobs (Investment, 28.01.2022). In this way, the competitiveness of Latvia's own transport system was maintained in competition with Lithuania's Klaipėda and Russian Baltic ports.

In the early 2000s, trade turnover between the two countries gradually increased, but truly explosive growth occurred in 2010–2012. This period became the peak stage of Belarusian–Latvian economic relations. In 2012, total trade turnover between the countries reached a historical record of around USD 3.5 billion, and Latvia temporarily entered the five largest trading partners of Belarus. A key factor in this growth was the use of the so-called solvent-diluent scheme. Its essence was that Belarus imported Russian oil without paying export duties, after which refined products were exported to EU countries under the guise of solvents, diluents and lubricants.

A significant share of these flows passed through Latvian ports and logistics infrastructure. In practice, Latvia became one of the main transit centres for implementing the Belarusian scheme on the European market. However, already in the second half of 2012, following pressure from Russia and the closure of the relevant customs loopholes, the scheme lost its relevance, and trade turnover returned to a more natural level.

In 2013–2020, Belarusian–Latvian trade stabilised at USD 400–650 million annually. This period was characterised by relative stability in economic ties, and Belarus had a positive trade balance with Latvia. The main Belarusian export items remained potash fertilisers, petroleum products, wood-processing, metallurgical and chemical-industry products. Latvian exports to Belarus were significantly smaller and included machine-building products, pharmaceuticals, electrical equipment, textiles and food products.

In the 2010s, the parties actively discussed the creation of new transport corridors and industrial-logistics sites (Assessment, 2021). In Latvian expert circles, Belarus was viewed as an important link between the EU, the EAEU and Chinese infrastructure initiatives.

Joint business projects also developed in this context. In 2011, 756 joint enterprises with Belarusian capital operated in Latvia, while 377 enterprises with Latvian capital operated in Belarus (Digest, 14.02.2012). The most visible were Belarusian logistics and transit companies in Latvia. Belarusian state companies and operators associated with them participated in the work of terminals, forwarding companies and railway logistics. In Riga and Ventspils, structures operated that were oriented towards transshipment of Belarusian petroleum products and potash. Companies connected with Belarusian exports, including in petrochemicals and potash fertilisers, operated in Latvian ports.

Priority areas included servicing Belarusian transit by logistics operators in Riga and Ventspils, as well as designing new industrial centres to receive these cargoes. Latvian ports competed with Lithuania's Klaipėda for the right to handle Belarusian exports. At the same time, the Belarusian authorities deliberately used competition among the Baltic states to obtain more favourable tariffs and conditions.

Joint projects in railway transport played a separate role. In the 2010s, Belarus and Latvia developed container routes between China, Belarus and the Baltic ports, seeking to integrate into the logistics of China's "Belt and Road" initiative. Projects to create "dry ports" and logistics hubs for working with Belarusian and Eurasian cargo were considered in Ventspils and Riga.

At the same time, economic cooperation also created mutual dependence. Latvian business, especially the transport and logistics sector, was interested in preserving pragmatic relations with Minsk. At the same time, this model had a structural vulnerability. The Latvian transport system was heavily dependent on transit from Russia and Belarus. According to estimates by Latvian researchers, oil, petroleum products and other raw materials from the post-Soviet space remained the main cargoes of the ports of Riga and Ventspils. As a result, any political or sanctions restrictions directly affected Latvia's transport sector. This partly explained Riga's more cautious position towards Belarus compared with Lithuania, especially in 2014–2020. Latvia sought to combine support for the common EU policy with maintaining economic cooperation in areas of strategic importance to the Latvian economy.

In 2018–2019, longitudinally sawn timber — boards — ranked first among Belarus's merchandise exports to Latvia (22.3% of the total); second by revenue were anti-knock preparations, antioxidants, inhibitors and thickeners (15.4%, probably a continuation of

the same “solvent-diluent scheme” for exporting petroleum and chemical products); third were petroleum products (10.8%). The main merchandise items imported into Belarus from Latvia were medicines packaged for retail sale (14.6%), used clothing (“second-hand”, 8.3%) and steel products — angles (5.7%) (What Belarus Trades with Latvia, 23.05.2019). After 2020, a significant part of Belarusian–Latvian economic projects began to be wound down. The political crisis in Belarus, EU sanctions, and then the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 led to the rapid dismantling of the previous model of cooperation. Transit of Belarusian petroleum products, potash and most other goods through Latvian ports was effectively halted. A number of joint logistics projects lost their economic rationale or were closed.

As a result, already in 2022–2023 the volumes of trade and transit collapsed to a historical minimum. The reorientation of cargoes of Belarusian state companies to Russian Baltic Sea ports meant for Latvia not only a loss of revenue but also a structural crisis of the entire transit model of development, which for decades had been built on cargo from Belarus and Russia. In Latvian public discourse after 2022, the need to diversify the economy and reduce dependence on eastern transit was discussed increasingly often.

By the mid-2020s, Belarus’s share in Latvia’s foreign trade had become minimal — around 0.3–0.5%. According to Latvian statistics, in 2025 (compared with 2024) exports from Latvia to Belarus fell by 7.1% to EUR 132.5 million, while imports from Belarus decreased by 56.1% to EUR 65.4 million. The largest decline affected supplies of animal and plant products, oils, textiles, plastics and rubber (Official statistics, 19.02.2026). Thus, by 2025 Belarusian–Latvian economic relations had in practice lost their former systemic role and moved into a state of limited and fragmented contacts maintained mainly in areas not covered by sanctions.

Cooperation in Culture, Education and Science

Cultural Cooperation. Cooperation between Belarus and Latvia in the fields of culture, education and science remained for a long time one of the most stable elements of bilateral relations. Even during periods of political cooling, humanitarian contacts continued to develop thanks to geographical proximity, regional cooperation and participation in European cross-border cooperation programmes.

The legal basis for cooperation was formed by several basic agreements. The most significant were: *agreement on cooperation in the field of culture and art* of 18 April 2002, as well as the *agreement on cooperation in the field of education and science* of 13 May 2004. Separately, in 2006 and 2018, agreements on scientific and technical cooperation were signed between the State Committee on Science and Technology of Belarus and the Ministry of Education and Science of Latvia.

In the 2000s–2010s, regional contacts developed particularly actively⁵, above all between the Vitebsk Region and Latgale. Latvian creative groups and folk ensembles regularly participated in cultural events in northern Belarus.

5. For more detail, see: Khmel'nitskaya, 2018: 339–361.

In particular, representatives of Latvia took part in the international festival of folk music and song “Cymbals and Accordion Ring Out” (Pastavy), the Cherry Festival (Hlybokaye), as well as other ethnographic and regional celebrations.

One of the best-known international cultural forums involving the Latvian side remained the International Festival of Arts “Slavianski Bazaar in Vitebsk”. Latvian performers, musical groups, craftspeople and delegations participated in it almost every year. In some years, Latvia organised its own cultural programmes within the festival. In 2002–2014, Belarusian singers participated in the “New Wave” competition for young performers in Jūrmala.

The Consulate General of the Republic of Latvia in Vitebsk played an important role in the development of cultural ties⁶. Until 2020, it regularly organised Latvian Culture Days timed to Latvia’s Independence Day (18 November). As part of these events, concerts, film screenings, art and museum exhibitions, literary meetings and presentations were held in Vitebsk, Polatsk and other cities of the Vitebsk Region. Particular attention was paid to cooperation between museums, libraries and art schools.

The “Belarusian Fair” in Daugavpils became an important platform for Belarusian–Latvian humanitarian contacts; since 2011 it has been held with the support of Belarusian organisations and the local authorities of Latgale.

In the 2010s, joint historical-cultural and tourism projects within EU cross-border cooperation programmes developed considerably. One of the best known was the project *BELLA DVINA (Belarus–Latvia)*, implemented in 2012–2014 within the *Latvia–Lithuania–Belarus Cross-Border Cooperation Programme*. The project was devoted to the development of tourism and cultural heritage in the basin of the Western Dvina (Daugava). Municipalities, museums and cultural institutions of the Vitebsk Region and Latgale participated in it. Within *BELLA DVINA*, joint tourist routes were developed, ethnographic festivals were organised, information materials on the historical and cultural heritage of the region were published, and studies of cross-border identity were conducted.

A notable research project was the initiative “Latvians and Belarusians: Together Through the Centuries”, which since 2012 has brought together researchers from Vitebsk⁷, Minsk, Mahiliou, Riga and Daugavpils. At the first stage, it was supported by the Latvian consulate in Vitebsk, which helped establish contacts with Latvian colleagues. The project is devoted to common aspects of the history of Belarusians and Latvians in the nineteenth–twenty-first centuries. Within its framework, academic conferences and round tables were organised, relevant scholarly publications were presented, publication of a peer-reviewed scholarly yearbook of the same name was established (the 15th issue is being prepared in 2026), and 14 expeditions were conducted to the sites of former Latvian colonies in Belarus.

6. For more detail, see: Korolev and Jekabsons, 2017.

7. Primarily lecturers from the Department of Social Sciences and Humanities of Vitebsk State Medical University.

A notable event was the translation into Belarusian of the book “History of Latvia” (Butulis and Zunda, 2017).

The main translation from Latvian was carried out by the Belarusian translator and historian Yahor Surski. The text was edited, and the introductory word and preface were translated, by the well-known Belarusian writer and philologist Leŭ Barščeŭski.

In education, the most active contacts developed between universities in the border regions. Relatively close cooperation existed between P.M. Masharov Vitebsk State University and Daugavpils University. The institutions organised academic exchanges, joint academic conferences and research in history, ecology, pedagogy and regional studies.

Polatsk State University and Riga Technical University also cooperated actively, above all in logistics, information technology and engineering research.

Belarusian students and lecturers participated in the *Erasmus Mundus* and *Erasmus+* programmes implemented jointly with the University of Latvia, Rīga Stradiņš University and other higher education institutions.

Scientific cooperation intensified particularly in the 2010s thanks to European cross-border cooperation programmes. Belarusian and Latvian researchers implemented projects in the areas of ecology of the Western Dvina/Daugava basin, water-resource monitoring, transport logistics, energy efficiency and development of cross-border territories. A separate place was occupied by research on East–West transport corridors and the integration of Belarusian logistics routes into the infrastructure of Baltic ports. Some of these projects were implemented with support from EU INTERREG programmes and other European funds.

After 2020, humanitarian cooperation began gradually to wind down. Some Latvian institutions and universities restricted cooperation with Belarusian state structures. After the beginning of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, a significant share of joint educational, cultural and scientific projects was effectively frozen. As a result, by the mid-2020s official humanitarian contacts between Belarus and Latvia had decreased substantially, becoming part of the general degradation of bilateral relations.

Sport. Sport remained a separate area of Belarusian–Latvian cooperation. The legal basis was the *Agreement on Cooperation in the Field of Sport*, signed on 7 February 2018 in Minsk. The document provided for exchanges of sports delegations, cooperation between federations, coach training, development of children’s and youth sport, and the organisation of joint competitions.

Until 2020, cooperation developed most actively in ice hockey, athletics, biathlon, rowing, and children’s and youth sport. Latvian and Belarusian clubs and national teams regularly participated in international tournaments in both countries. Contacts between border regions and municipalities of Latgale and the Vitebsk Region were especially active.

The most ambitious joint project in sport was the attempt by Belarus and Latvia to host the 2021 Ice Hockey World Championship jointly. Initially, the tournament was to be held in Minsk and Riga, which was viewed as a symbolic example of regional cooperation between an EU member state and an Eastern Partnership country. For Minsk, hosting the championship had important image-related significance and was intended to confirm the country's ability to host high-level international events. However, after the harsh suppression of the Belarusian Revolution of 2020 and international criticism of the actions of the Belarusian authorities, the International Ice Hockey Federation (IIHF) in January 2021 deprived Minsk of the right to host the tournament. As a result, the championship took place only in Riga. Latvian authorities and part of society openly opposed jointly hosting the tournament with Belarus after the events of 2020, which became another symbol of the deterioration of bilateral relations.

After 2020, sports contacts began to decline sharply, and after the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 cooperation was effectively stopped. Latvia took one of the toughest positions in the EU regarding the participation of Belarusian and Russian athletes in international competitions. In 2024, the Latvian parliament (Saeima) adopted amendments to the sports law prohibiting Latvian national teams from playing matches against teams from Belarus and Russia even under neutral status.

Expert Initiatives. After 2020, the academic and expert space between Belarus and Latvia was transformed: the old interstate ties were effectively frozen, while new centres of knowledge are developing either within Latvia (for the study of Belarus) or within the Belarusian independent expert community abroad.

Existing expert centres and platforms are distributed across several main areas. In Latvia, they focus on regional security, hybrid threats and migration:

Latvian Institute of International Affairs (Latvian Institute of International Affairs — LIIA) — Latvia's leading expert institution in the field of international relations. Its analysts regularly publish research on the geopolitical role of Belarus, the cross-border crisis and the impact of Russian–Belarusian integration on the security of the Baltic states. LIIA regularly publishes collections of articles and policy papers (for example, the annual *The Riga Conference Papers*), which address the issue of Belarusian foreign policy. As one of the principal advisers to Latvia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the institute conducts economic studies of the effectiveness of EU sanctions against Minsk.

NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence (NATO StratCom COE) — an international centre located in Riga, is a leading expert body for analysing information operations and hybrid threats. The Belarusian direction became one of the centre's priorities after the events of 2020, as well as in the context of the migration crisis and Minsk's complicity in Russian aggression against Ukraine. One of the centre's fundamental studies on Belarus was a detailed analysis of the events of August 2020 (Belarus protests, 2020). In this work Riga-based NATO experts examined in detail the mechanics of how official Minsk attempted to control the digital environment.

From the second half of 2021, NATO StratCom became involved in analysing the cross-border crisis on Belarus's borders with Latvia, Lithuania and Poland. Within the project “Narrative Detection in the Baltics” (*Narrative Detection in the Baltics*) the centre develops linguistic models capable of recognising cultural nuances and manipulation in the digital space in Latvian, Lithuanian and Estonian, including recording how Belarusian and Russian bots and IT armies work with audiences in the Baltic states (Narrative Detection 14.05.2024).

At the international level, Latvia is one of the financial and political donors to the database *International Accountability Platform for Belarus* (International Accountability Platform for Belarus). This is an expert-documentation project in which international and Belarusian experts, including the Viasna Human Rights Centre, collect and analyse evidence of human-rights violations by the regime in Minsk after 2020.

A consortium of five partners from Latvia (LIIA), Denmark (the Danish Foreign Policy Society; the Danish Cultural Institute in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania; the Beladania Cultural Society) and Lithuania (the Centre for Belarusian and Regional Studies at the European Humanities University), with financial support from the Nordic Council of Ministers, also created the Belarus Research Network on Neighborhood Policy (*Belarus Research Network on Neighborhood Policy*). Its goal is to include Belarusian scholars in regional research and to create an equal expert dialogue among the research communities of Belarus, the Baltic states and Scandinavia.

Until 2020, Belarus had a developed network of both state academic structures and independent analytical centres that purposefully studied Latvia, the Baltic states and regional cooperation. At that time, the Latvian direction was considered strategic for Minsk because Latvia acted as an important transit hub and a lobbyist for easing EU sanctions against Belarus.

At the Faculty of International Relations of Belarusian State University, the *BSU Centre for Baltic Studies* (National Centre of the international The Baltic University Programme) was established. The centre's scholars, together with Latvian colleagues (including from the University of Latvia and Daugavpils University), studied the Western Dvina (Daugava) River basin and worked on projects for sustainable development of shared natural resources. The centre coordinated the education of Belarusian students in specialised regional programmes (water-resource management, Baltic regional studies, sustainable tourism). The best students were sent to summer academic meetings and internships in Sweden, Latvia, Lithuania and Germany. The centre prepared expert assessments for the European grant programmes “*Latvia — Lithuania — Belarus*”.

Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies (BISS) and the *Research Economic Institute of the Ministry of Economy of the Republic of Belarus* (NIEI) prepared analytical materials for the Belarusian government on increasing Belarusian transit through the ports of Riga and Ventspils. They were the institutions that calculated the economic feasibility of joint ventures and coordinated logistics chains.

The Latvian track occupied an important place in the activities of “*Minsk Dialogue*”, especially during its heyday as a major international expert platform in 2015–2020. For the organisers of the initiative, Latvia was seen as an example of the most pragmatic

Baltic state. The Latvian side, in turn, readily used the platform to maintain economic and geopolitical ties with Belarus while bypassing Lithuania's tougher position. In May 2017, "Minsk Dialogue", together with the Latvian Embassy in Belarus, organised a special expert discussion (Belarus and Latvia, 3.05.2017). At it, Belarusian and Latvian analysts discussed the regional context and the Chinese "16+1" initiative (transport corridors from China to Europe). It was then that the experts jointly sought synergy between the infrastructure of the Great Stone Industrial Park and Latvian seaports.

After August 2020, almost the entire expert infrastructure in Belarus was destroyed: joint European cross-border cooperation programmes were blocked, academic exchanges were stopped, and independent analytical centres were forced either to liquidate or to evacuate to EU countries. The structures that remained (for example, BISS) operate exclusively within the narrow framework of state commissions. Experts of "Minsk Dialogue" in their analytical products consider Latvia exclusively in the context of the militarisation of the region, the introduction of transport bans and the general geopolitical deadlock in Belarus's relations with EU countries.

Independent Belarusian experts in exile rarely study Latvia separately, usually including it in a regional context (together with Lithuania, Poland and the Baltic states as a whole). The main topics here are sanctions and logistics, the migration crisis and the legal status of Belarusian relocants. Such institutions include the *Centre for Belarusian and Regional Studies* (CBRS) at EHU, the research centre *BEROC* and some others. Issues of disinformation, propaganda and manipulation are examined by the *VšĮ DigitalHub* ([FactCheck.LT](https://factcheck.lt)).

National Minorities and Migration

Latvians in Belarus. Despite geographical proximity and long-standing historical ties, today the Latvian diaspora in Belarus is very small: the 2019 census recorded just over 1.5 thousand Latvians (Ethnic Composition, 2020: 4). These are mainly descendants of Latvian peasant settlers from the period of the Russian Empire, among whom older people living in the Vitebsk Region and Minsk predominate.

In 1995, the Union of Latvians of the Vitebsk Region "Daugava" was founded. Its aims were to preserve the Latvian language and cultural heritage, maintain contacts between Latvians in Belarus and Latvia, organise cultural events, and popularise Latvian culture in Belarus. Its head was a member of the Consultative Interethnic Council under the Commissioner for Religious and Nationality Affairs of the Republic of Belarus. The organisation did not develop significant activity because it depended to a large extent on support from the Latvian consulate in Vitebsk. The growth of internal disagreements led to the effective cessation of all activity in the early 2010s. Despite all attempts by the consulate to revive the union and support from the local authorities, after 2017 the organisation entered the liquidation stage.

As early as 1994, a Latvian Sunday School was opened at the Latvian consulate in Vitebsk, where the language, history and culture of Latvia, as well as the traditions of the Latvian people, were taught. In 1997 it was attended by 35 children, and in 2005 by about 20. As a result of the absence of pupils, the school ceased to exist in 2008.

Thus, the Latvian community in Belarus today is in a state of complete decline. Most cultural organisations dissolved themselves even before 2020. The native language has almost been lost, and younger descendants of Latvians have long been assimilated or have left for Latvia through repatriation programmes.

Latvian labour or business emigration to Belarus practically does not exist today. Latvia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs officially requires its citizens to leave the territory of Belarus immediately. A peculiar phenomenon has been the so-called political refugees from Latvia — a small number of pro-Russian activists or bloggers, including persons hiding from prosecution for justifying Russian aggression. Their total number, at the highest estimate, does not exceed several dozen people. Belarusian state bodies and media make maximum use of these persons for propaganda purposes. State television channels produce reports in which the relocants expose poverty and oppression of Russian speakers in Latvia and praise prosperity and freedom in Belarus.

Another phenomenon has been the purchase of housing in Belarusian cities by Latvian residents and their relocation there while their apartments in Latvia are rented out. It can be assumed that among them there is a predominance of persons who have taken Russian citizenship while retaining residence permits in Latvia. There is still insufficient verified data for a full assessment of this process. In any case, it can be stated that there are no prospects for the formation of a significant emigrant community of Latvians, or even Latvian residents, in Belarus.

Belarusians in Latvia. The uniqueness of the Belarusian presence in Latvia today lies in the fact that it is quite clearly divided into two fundamental groups: the historical national minority and political emigration after 2020. These communities have different legal statuses and values, which usually makes it impossible to coordinate their activities.

The Belarusian population traditionally lived on Latvian lands, predominantly in Latgale. In the post-war Soviet period, there was a certain wave of migration supported by Moscow's political line towards this Baltic republic. After 1991, the number of Belarusians steadily declined, driven by demographic processes of population ageing and assimilation and, to a lesser extent, by return to the ethnic homeland. Statistics show that today about 53 thousand Belarusians live in Latvia, more than half of whom have Latvian citizenship, while the remainder have the status of Latvian non-citizens or Russian or Belarusian passports. It should be noted that a significant share of Latvia's Belarusians are people with a Soviet worldview who have a poor command of the Belarusian language⁸. Only participation in the activities of Belarusian societies helps preserve a certain national self-awareness.

A large number of Belarusian organisations and creative groups operate in Latvia, predominantly of a diaspora type. Since 1988, the Latvian Society of Belarusian Culture “Svitanak” has operated in Riga. From the outset, the society took firm national positions and quite quickly distanced itself from close contacts with official Minsk.

8. Research by the well-known Polish linguist Mirosław Jankowiak shows that Belarusian dialects in Latvia have survived only in certain “islands” and among elderly people. On this basis, the scholar concludes that living Belarusian speech in Latvia will disappear completely over the next decade (Jankowiak, 2025: 113; Jankowiak, 9.10.2025).

In 1990, the Belarusian society “Pramen” emerged in Riga, and in 1993 the cultural and educational society “Uzdim” was established in Daugavpils. This process then continued. In 1994, the first congress of Belarusians of the Baltic states took place.

In May 2003, the Belarusian societies “Pramen”, “Uzdim”, “Mara” (Liepāja) and “Spadchyna” (Ventspils) founded an association which from 2005 was called the “Union of Belarusians of Latvia (UBL)”. Over time, it expanded to 15 communities. Valyantsina Piskunova was elected chair of the UBL and headed it until August 2020, when she transferred the position to her daughter Alena Lazarava. Under her leadership, the UBL retained complete loyalty to official Minsk. In February 2021, A. Lazarava even officially participated as a delegate from the Latvian diaspora in the VI All-Belarusian People’s Assembly in Minsk, where she publicly supported the course of Aliaksandr Lukashenka. This position caused tension in relations with the Latvian government and led to the effective loss of previous ties with Latvian state educational and cultural institutions.

Since 1991, the association of Belarusian artists of the Baltic states “Maio honar” has operated in Latvia, headed by Viachka Tselesh, a holder of the Order of the Three Stars. The society regularly organises exhibitions of artists of Belarusian origin in various cities of the region. In 1994, through the efforts of the “Svitanak” society and other Belarusian forces, the first class of the Riga Belarusian Primary School was opened, with Viachka Tselesh becoming its first director.

In August 2024, the school was abolished as part of a nationwide reform transferring instruction in all national-minority schools to the Latvian language. For the time being, the Belarusian component has been preserved in the form of electives and supplementary extracurricular education programmes. The influence of the demographic situation should also be noted here — in recent years the number of pupils fluctuated around 150, which did not meet the minimum requirements of the Ministry of Education’s standards.

In 1999, by decision of the deputies of the Daugavpils City Council, the Belarusian Culture Centre (BCC) was established, with the aim of preserving and developing Belarusian national culture and traditions. The BCC was fully financed from budget funds. Six creative groups were established under it, a library and museum ethnographic exhibition were assembled, and a Sunday school was opened. Literary evenings and art exhibitions were held regularly, and folk holidays and commemorative dates were celebrated. Since 2011, the BCC together with the Belarusian society “Uzdim” has organised the large-scale “Belarusian Fair”, which became an integral part of Daugavpils’s cultural calendar and is the largest event of Belarusians in Latgale.

BCC ensembles became laureates of the Latvian National Song and Dance Festival (held once every five years). Since 2020, the BCC began organising the academic conference “Belarusian Readings”, timed to International Mother Language Day. The centre was headed by Zhanna Ramanouskaya. Despite all its successes, in connection with a change in the domestic political situation, at the end of 2025 the BCC as an independent institution was abolished and incorporated as a sector into the City House of Culture.

Overall, until 2022 the Latvian authorities quite actively supported Belarusian cultural societies through the Ministry of Culture. After Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, Riga’s

attitude towards “its own” Belarusians deteriorated and became characterised by tension and suspicion. In addition to what has already been mentioned, the monthly “Svitanak” programme on Latvian Radio (LR-4), which had been broadcast since 1989 and reported on the lives of Belarusians in Latvia, was closed.

Until 2020, the Belarusian authorities, through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the “Belarusians in the World” programme, also provided support to Belarusian societies (transferring books and national costumes) and facilitated the participation of their representatives in various events in Belarus. Significant assistance (including textbooks) was provided to the Belarusian school in Riga. After 2020, this activity was severely restricted.

Emigration to Latvia after August 2020 was not massive. Nevertheless, Latvia introduced humanitarian mechanisms to support Belarusians, including humanitarian visas, simplified procedures for obtaining residence permits, support for the relocation of independent media and NGOs, and programmes for students and the academic community. Separate statistics for this track do not exist, but a comparison of data from Latvia’s Office of Citizenship and Migration Affairs (PMLP) for 2020 and 2025 shows that the number of Belarusian citizens with residence permits rose from 1,289 to 4,370 (Pilsonības un migrācijas).

The new emigration initially enjoyed a high level of political trust from the Latvian authorities. At the initiative of the relocants, the “Supolka” association was created, which helps with adaptation and organises political solidarity actions and cultural and educational events in Riga and across the country.

Close contact between the new emigration and established Belarusian organisations did not develop. “Supolka” established cooperation only with the “Svitanak” society. In practice, mutual alienation and tension are observed. The historical minority often regards the new emigrants as “political radicals” and “destroyers of stability”, while the latter regard the locals as “pro-Lukashenka” and “pro-Russian”. A certain language barrier is evident. The new emigration more often uses Belarusian in everyday life and seeks to learn Latvian, while the “old” community communicates almost exclusively in Russian. As a result, the sides often ignore each other’s events and initiatives.

After 2022, the authorities’ attitude towards Belarusians who had arrived changed somewhat, which was explained primarily by security issues, above all potential espionage on behalf of the Belarusian security services. Restrictions were introduced on Belarusians holding positions and working in certain areas recognised as vulnerable or critically important, including medicine. Restrictions on acquiring property were added to this.

Summing up the situation of the Belarusian community in Latvia, a deep identity crisis can be observed. Among the older generation, Soviet nostalgic and pro-Russian sentiments are strong, and Russian is the main language. At the same time, these very people form the basis of Belarusian societies and creative groups, as well as their audience. It is exclusively this activity that allows “islands of Belarusianness” to continue to exist.

The complete transition of education in Latvia to the Latvian language, the closure of radio broadcasting in national-minority languages, and reduced support for national societies, even those that have demonstrated loyalty to the Latvian state, substantially reduce the use of Belarusian in everyday life. Disagreements and unwillingness to cooperate with the new wave of Belarusian emigrants destroy the basis for the renewal and rejuvenation of communities. In this situation, the prospects for the development of the Belarusian community look uncertain.

Summary

Belarusian–Latvian relations after 1991 travelled a path from relatively broad and pragmatic cooperation to deep political and economic alienation. Geographical proximity, a common border, historical ties and mutual economic interest created conditions for intensive contacts over several decades. A broad treaty and legal framework was formed between the two countries, covering transport and transit, border cooperation, trade, culture, education, science and regional projects.

Economic interests played a special role in this model. For Belarus, Latvia was an important transit partner and a channel of access to Baltic port infrastructure, while Belarusian cargo was of substantial importance to Latvia's transit sector. Cultural, educational and scientific contacts developed in parallel, including at the regional level. All this made it possible to maintain a working character of relations despite substantial political differences.

The turning point was the political crisis in Belarus after the 2020 presidential election. Latvia did not recognise its results, condemned the repression and joined the European Union's sanctions policy. After the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the confrontation intensified further. Sanctions, the cessation of transit of Belarusian goods and the reorientation of cargo flows led to the dismantling of the previous economic model.

At the same time, security and border-control issues acquired increasing importance in relations. The migration crisis associated with the organised movement of migrants through the territory of Belarus transformed the Belarusian–Latvian border from a space of cross-border cooperation into one of Latvia's key security problems.

Thus, the current state of Belarusian–Latvian relations cannot be described solely as a rupture. The previous model, based on economic interdependence, transit and broad interstate cooperation, has practically ceased to exist. In its place, a model is emerging in which geopolitical and security factors dominate, while contacts between populations and cultural and academic communities acquire peripheral importance. The prospects for Belarusian–Latvian relations will depend to a significant extent on Belarus's political transformation, the end of the war in Ukraine and the further development of the security architecture of the Baltic region.

References

1. Agnieszka Kulesa (2025). From Belarus to the EU: Migration Trends and Strategic Responses, Policy Brief, Prague Process, June,
<https://www.pragueprocess.eu/en/resources/repository/34-briefs/525-from-belarus-to-the-eu-migration-trends-and-strategic-responses>.
2. Assessment of the Transit Corridor Belarus — Latvia — Sweden within Baltic Loop. Case Study of the Freeport of Ventspils, Ventspils 2021
(https://www.balticloop.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Baltic-Loop-Assessment-of-Corridor-Belarus-Latvia-Sweden-by-VHTP.pdf?utm_source=chatgpt.com).
3. Belarus protests: Information Control and Technological Censorship (14.01.2021),
<https://stratcomcoe.org/publications/belarus-protests-information-control-and-technological-censorship/19>.
4. BNN (4.03.2024). [Home | State Border Guard](https://bnn-news.com/latvian-state-border-guard-reports-illegal-migrants-have-appeared-again-254809); Latvian State Border Guard reports illegal migrants have appeared again,
<https://bnn-news.com/latvian-state-border-guard-reports-illegal-migrants-have-appeared-again-254809>
5. Bukovskis K. (2012). State Institutions, Interdependence and Perceptions in Latvia's Economic Relations with the Russian Federation and Belarus, [in:] Sprūds, A. (ed.). The Economic Presence of Russia and Belarus in the Baltic States: Risks and Opportunities, Riga: Latvian Institute of International Affairs, p. 93–114.
6. Cooperation with Belarus offers good prospects to the Latvian transit sector (11.10.2019). Port of Riga
https://rop.lv/en/news/cooperation-belarus-offers-good-prospects-latvian-transit-sector?utm_source=chatgpt.com
7. Forti M. (2023). Belarus-sponsored Migration Movements and the Response by Lithuania, Latvia, and Poland: A Critical Appraisal, “European Papers”, Vol. 8 (1), p. 227–238.
8. Investment and Development Agency of Latvia (28.01.2022).
https://www.liaa.gov.lv/en/trade/industries/transit-and-logistics?utm_source=chatgpt.com
9. Jankowiak M. (2025). Belarusian Dialects in Latvia as an Example of the Lexical Heritage of the Baltic-Slavic Borderland. Prague.
10. NARINT for July 2026: Ten Events in Which Information Realities Diverged (5.08.2026).
https://factcheck.lt/bel/news/ndi_2026-07/
11. Narrative Detection and Topic Modelling in the Baltics (14.05.2024).
<https://stratcomcoe.org/publications/narrative-detection-and-topic-modelling-in-the-baltics/303>
12. Nina Linde (2021). Latvia external relations briefing: Diaspora as Latvian foreign policy priority, “Weekly Briefing. China-CEE Institute”, vol. 38, No 4 (LVA)
13. Official statistics of Latvia (19.02.2026). Value of exported goods rose by 3.7 % in 2025
<https://stat.gov.lv/en/statistics-themes/trade-and-services/foreign-trade-goods/press-releases/26797-foreign-trade-latvia?themeCode=AT>

14. Office of Citizenship and Migration Affairs (2020).
<https://www.pmlp.gov.lv/lv/statistika-uzturesanas-atlaujas-2020-gads>;
15. Office of Citizenship and Migration Affairs
(2025).<https://www.pmlp.gov.lv/lv/statistika-uzturesanas-atlaujas-2025-gads>
16. VNĪ: Construction of Latvia–Belarus Border Infrastructure Completed; Patrol Roads around Lake Riču Commissioned (18.03.2026),
<https://www.vni.lv/aktualitates/-vni-noslegusies-latvijasbaltkrievijas-robezas-infrastrukturas-izbuve-ekspluatacija-pienemti-rokades-celi-ap-ricu-ezeru>.
17. Belarus and Latvia Are Neighbours without Understanding Each Other’s Regional Context (3.05.2017),
UDF.by
<https://udf.name/news/politic/156166-belarus-i-latviya-sosedstvuyut-bez-ponimaniya-regionalnogo-konteksta-drug-druga.html>.
18. Butulis, Ilgvars and Zunda, Antonijs (2017). History of Latvia. Translated from Latvian by Yahor Surski.
Minsk: Zmitser Kolas Publishing House.
19. Vasilevich H. (2025). Transformation of Latvia’s Attitude towards Citizens of Belarus in 2020–2025: from
Political Crisis to Geopolitical Restructuring, “Latvians and Belarusians: Together Through the
Centuries”, issue 14, pp. 117–124.
20. Golubev V. (2018). Formation of the Belarusian–Latvian Border, [in:] Latvia — Belarus: 1918—2018, M.
Korolev (ed.-in-chief), Minsk, pp. 281—287.
21. Digest: Transit Volume between Belarus and Latvia Exceeded 33.8 Million Tonnes (14.02.2012).
Diplomatic Economic Club <https://dec.lv/NewsLv.php/NY14.htm?id=1451>
22. Korolev M., Jekabsons E. (2017). Latvia’s Consulate and Consuls in Vitebsk, Vitebsk.
23. Ethnic Composition of the Population of the Republic of Belarus: Statistical Bulletin, Minsk 2020
24. Khmelnitskaya L. (2018). Belarus — Latvia: Dialogue of Cultures, [in:] Latvia — Belarus: 1918—2018, M.
Korolev (ed.-in-chief), Minsk, pp. 339—361.
25. What Belarus Trades with Latvia and to What Extent (23.05.2019), banki24.by
<https://banki24.by/news/3313-chem-belarus-torguet-s>
26. Jankowiak, Mirosław (9.10.2025): Almost No Speakers of Belarusian Dialects Remain in Latgale, Polskie
Radio, URL
https://www.polskieradio.pl/396/7811/Artykul/3587853.%D0%BC%D1%96%D1%80%D0%BE%D1%81%D0%BB%D0%B0%D1%9E-%D1%8F%D0%BD%D0%BA%D0%BE%D0%B2%D1%8F%D0%BA-%D1%83-%D0%BB%D0%B0%D1%82%D0%B3%D0%B0%D0%BB%D1%96%D1%96-%D0%B0%D0%BC%D0%B0%D0%BB%D1%8C-%D0%BD%D0%B5-%D0%B7%D0%B0%D1%81%D1%82%D0%B0%D0%BB%D0%BE%D1%81%D1%8F-%D0%BD%D0%BE%D1%81%D1%8C%D0%B1%D1%96%D1%82%D0%B0%D1%9E-%D0%B1%D0%B5%D0%BB%D0%B0%D1%80%D1%83%D1%81%D0%BA%D1%96%D1%85-%D0%B3%D0%B0%D0%B2%D0%BE%D1%80%D0%B0%D0%BA?fbclid=IwY2xjawUTcjBwZG9mAWV4dG4DYWVtAjEwAGIyaWQRMW1QWFZWNB6S1NzcW5MT0lzcRjBmFwcF9pZBAyMjIwMzIxNzg4MjAwODkyAAEeHjhnSug3jen43UkIzwYvs9QVYocqyw-75uN2eO9U1hEtVp2-9aUt51fnMs_aem_AdFpNrPq_Oz-JjvtwIc-7Q

Institute of Political Studies “Political Sphere”
BELARUS–LATVIA RELATIONS: GENERAL OVERVIEW 1991–2026
Maksim Karaliou

www.palityka.org



**Institute of Political
Studies “Political
Sphere”**