

The Lithuanian-Belarusian migration crisis

Joanna Hyndle-Hussein, Piotr Żochowski

The Lithuanian State Border Guard (VSAT) has recorded a significant increase in the number of undocumented migrants arriving from Belarus. 387 people have tried to reach Lithuania from Belarus over the last five months. Most of them are Iraqi citizens, but there are also people from Syria, Tajikistan and Russia. This is nearly five times as many as during the entire 2020, when 81 foreigners were stopped from illegally crossing the Lithuanian-Belarusian border (there were 46 people in 2019, and 104 in 2018).

VSAT has recently stepped up security along the Lithuanian-Belarusian border; personnel from other units have been delegated to patrol it and they have also been equipped with additional technical means. VSAT is supported by the Public Security Service (which is tasked with ensuring security in emergency situations and the protection of important facilities) and the paramilitary Lithuanian Riflemen's Union. The Interior Minister, Agnė Bilotaitė, announced on 14 June that, despite an increased arrival of migrants illegally crossing the Lithuanian-Belarusian border, the Lithuanian government is not planning to declare an emergency situation yet but is holding consultations with its foreign partners on this issue.

Commentary

- The Lithuanian government has unequivocally been interpreting the increase in people illegally crossing the Lithuanian border from Belarus as pressure from Alyaksandr Lukashenka's regime, even as a form of hybrid war aimed at destabilising the border situation. This opinion is shared by Members of Parliament sitting on the security and defence committee who have been analysing information regarding the dynamics of changes at the border, together with representatives of the government and the border guard, for a week. They have drawn attention to the concurrence of the deterioration of Lithuania's relations with Belarus and increased migration which has been observed since the beginning of 2021. Lithuania has unequivocally attributed this to its support for the democratic opposition in Belarus. Analyses conducted by the Lithuanian border guard prove that illegal border crossings at the Lithuanian-Belarusian border have intensified following Lithuania's protest against the hijacking of the Ryanair aircraft by Belarus on 23 May and Lukashenka's speech in the Belarusian parliament made on 26 May, in which he threatened to limit check on the smuggling of undocumented migrants and drugs to the EU.
- There are visible correlations between flights from Baghdad and Istanbul to Minsk (four connections a week) and the increase in the number of illegal crossings of the

Lithuanian-Belarusian border. According to speculation from Lithuanian border guard (VSAT), some passengers on these flights are being flown abroad and intercepted by migrant smugglers in Dieveniškės Loop (near Šalčininkai), where border guards most often stop those who are arriving in Lithuania illegally. The intelligence assumes that Belarusian tourist agencies may be implicated in this practice. Director of the State Security Department in Lithuania, Darius Jauniškis, stated that the risk of terrorists and people recruited by the Lukashenka's regime coming to Lithuania is growing in line with the increased number of migrants arriving to Lithuania through the border with Belarus. According to the information collected by VSAT, approximately 1,500 migrants were grouped together in Minsk and they might be smuggled to Lithuania.

- The current situation indicates that the Lukashenka regime has decided to organise a migrant smuggling channel which is under the surveillance of the State Security Committee of the Republic of Belarus, the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the State Border Committee. The information provided by the State Border Committee, which consistently rejects the charges pressed by Lithuania regarding the illegal border crossings, should be deemed unreliable. The Belarusian government stresses in its official statements that Lithuania is responsible for the illegal border crossings since it does not ensure technical border security and is not interested in cooperating to tighten controls at the border. Andrey Filatov, a representative of the State Border Committee, admitted that Belarus had not introduced any limitations on flights with passengers from foreign countries and it has recognised that their arrival to Belarus was motivated by tourism. Belarus has also been attempting to make the Lithuanian statistics regarding the illegal migration appear lower. According to the State Border Committee, the rate of illegal migration has fallen, and the border guards have stopped only 55 people at the Lithuanian-Belarusian border since the beginning of 2021. Belarus has also provided assurances that the State Border Committee is fully competent in executing its duties, which is proved by the fact that five Iraqi citizens were stopped at the border on 11 June.
- The situation at the Lithuanian-Belarusian border proves that the border is not sufficiently secured. Cameras monitor only 37% of the border area and the Lithuanian border services, substantially understaffed, have not been able to pinpoint where the border is being breached. Nor does Lithuania monitor movements of Belarusian drones which are used to smuggle cigarettes and drugs. The country is also unable to stop the Belarusian border guard from removing the traces of illegal border crossings. In recent years Lithuania has modernised security measures only at its Russian border. At present, Lithuania has announced that it will handle the Belarusian border issue more swiftly, and will amend the budget in order to find approximately the 70 million euros needed for modernising and securing the border. Field work will be launched soon, perhaps within one year. It will also be vital to better equip the border guard – they currently use Kalashnikov rifles whose calibre is not compatible with NATO standards.
- Due to the tensions at the border, Lithuania is making corrections in its policy towards migrants. The government is planning to fast-track the procedures of issuing asylum decisions, including rejections of asylum applications. Most of the individuals who arrive in Lithuania illegally are economic migrants who do not fulfil the Geneva Convention requirements necessary to be granted asylum. A ban preventing migrants who are placed

in special centres from moving, alone or accompanied by third persons, to other EU countries is also planned; at present it is fairly easy to do this (approximately a third of those who arrive illegally to Lithuania leave their placement within the first month of arrival). Information that the transit through Lithuania to EU countries of choice has been made more difficult may act as a deterrent and discourage migrants from travelling to Lithuania, and this could limit the use of this measure as a form of pressure by Belarus in regard to Lithuania.

- Věra Jourová, the Vice-President of the European Commission, who visited Lithuania on 10 June, assessed that an increase in illegal crossings at the Lithuanian-Belarusian border was a case of human trafficking organised by the Belarusian state apparatus. Jourová encouraged Lithuania to provide humanitarian assistance and grant asylum above all to Belarusian citizens who are exposed to repression from the Lukashenka regime. She also stated that the European Union should contribute to protecting the eastern border of the Schengen zone, e.g. by dispatching Frontex experts on illegal migration there.

APPENDIX

The situation in undocumented migrant centres

According to data passed by the Head of the Foreigners' Registration Centre, Aleksandras Kislovas, there are 176 foreigners in the Pabradė Registration Centre at present, 60 of whom have been placed at the Vilnius Border Guard Station. There is no capacity to accommodate more foreigners at the Border Guard Training Centre in Medininkai - at present there are 57 people there. There are no foreigners at the border blockades near Varėna at present. The army has finished building a tent city for undocumented migrants near Pabradė (the tent city is in line with the standards of the Lithuanian Ministry of National Defence for the army). There are two zones in the city – one for the purposes of quarantine (for 60 people) and the other for housing 290 foreigners. Some families will be moved to the refugee centre in Rukla. Most migrants are unaccompanied men and they will be placed in the tent city.

The work on the text was completed on 16 June 2021.