

Lithuania's reactions to the escalating migration crisis

Joanna Hyndle-Hussein

As the migration crisis intensified, on 9 November the Seimas of Lithuania, upon request by the government and supported by President Gitanas Nausėda, adopted a resolution on the introduction of a state of emergency along the 679 km-long border strip with Belarus. Of the MPs present at the vote, 122 (out of 141 seats in parliament) were in favour of this solution, from both the government coalition and opposition groups. One person was against. The state of emergency was effected at midnight from the 9–10 November and will be in force for one month in a five-kilometre wide area at the border. The state of emergency zone was also extended to the detention centres within Lithuania (in Paberžė, Medininkai, Kybartai, Rukla) and the areas within 200 metres from them. By August this year, almost 4,200 people were placed in local centres for migrants.

The parliament also passed a three-month extension for the additional powers granted in September to the armed forces to provide border support to the Border Security Service (VSAT) and the Public Security Service (VST) for arrests and to apply special measures to stop illegal migration. The Ministry of Defence announced the mobilisation of troops in areas lying near the borders, but did not specify the number of soldiers involved.

The resolution introduced a ban on entry into the zone (excluding residents and property owners; those working there will have to obtain a permit from VSAT). The troops are empowered to search vehicles moving in the zone and the right to assembly is prohibited. The Ministry of the Interior of the Republic of Lithuania has announced that checks in the state of emergency zone will be tightened primarily directly at the border, and will be random in remote areas. This approach is aimed at reducing the inconvenience for residents; the cities of Druskininkai, Šalčininkai, Švenčionys and Visaginas are located in this area. NGOs providing assistance to migrants (e.g. the Red Cross) have reported that their activities at border crossings, border barriers and in detention centres have not been curbed yet.

Currently, the largest concentration of migrants, divided into smaller groups by the Belarusian services, is on the Polish-Belarusian-Lithuanian border on the Lithuanian side at the Lazdijai District Municipality, near the dam by the border in Kapčiamiestis. Since 3 August this year, when Lithuania began diverting the illegal migrants to the territory of Belarus, over 6,000 attempts to cross the border illegally have been prevented.

Commentary

- The Lithuanian authorities fear the destabilisation of the situation both on the border with Belarus and inside the country, where Belarusian services may inspire uprisings in migrant camps. On 9 November, riots took place in the camp in Medininkai, involving

around a hundred people (migrants are mainly complaining about the conditions of their stay and the lack of access to medical staff). The services used tear gas and some of the participants in the incident were handcuffed. The government assumed that the attempts to forcibly pass the border and camp riots are synchronised and thus the resolution on the introduction of the state of emergency will allow migrants staying in these facilities to access phones and the Internet only when needed to communicate with the Lithuanian institutions considering their asylum applications. Some of the migrants directed to the camps since the onset of the crisis have already left the country voluntarily (more than 400 persons), more than 500 have fled and are in Germany. The remainder are waiting for decisions on asylum applications in appeal proceedings or for deportation.

- The government considers the most effective way to prevent the escalation of the crisis to be to limit the possibility of bringing further groups of migrants to Belarus. The Lithuanian service has reported that there are 40–50 flights a week to Minsk (e.g. from Istanbul, Dubai, Beirut), in which some of the passengers are from the Middle East and Africa. According to the Lithuanian government, the sanctions against Lukashenka's regime introduced to date have not yielded results, therefore the Lithuanian authorities are proposing that EU states adopt restrictions against specific airlines and directly against airports in Belarus, including the severance of commercial contracts with them. They have also proposed the extension of EU diplomatic action. Government representatives cite the example of the summer negotiations conducted by the Lithuanian diplomacy with Iraq on stopping flights from Baghdad, as well as the closure of Belarusian honorary consulates there since they are part of the migrant trafficking structure. EU instruments in the form of visa policy and economic support for Iraq proved to be an asset in these negotiations.
- The Lithuanian authorities consider the construction of a physical barrier along a 500-kilometre stretch of the border with Belarus in the form of a four-metre high fence made of metal panels with razor wire on top (Latvia is planning a similar one) by September 2022 as another effective way of stopping illegal migration. In addition to the barrier itself, video surveillance systems will be installed to facilitate the detection of illegal crossing attempts and to make the smuggling of goods significantly more difficult, if not impossible. Temporary barriers in the form of razor wire obstacles have already been installed along 68 km of the border. The construction of a physical barrier is also an important argument for Vilnius to fend off criticism from some EU institutions for Lithuania's violations of asylum procedures and inhumane treatment of migrants, who are consistently pushed out of its territory.
- The escalation of the conflict on the border between Belarus and Poland, and the threat of similar actions by Belarusian services against Lithuania, mean that despite Brussels' refusal to provide financial support for the construction of a physical barrier at the border, Vilnius (supported by Riga) is determined to still seek this assistance and has the support of several EU states, as well as the chairman of the European Council, Charles Michel, to do so. However, the position on this issue may be reconsidered, as the Lithuanian government is contemplating asking for support to install modern surveillance systems at the border. Lithuania, like the other Baltic states and Poland, has also announced the formation of a broader alliance within the EU to change asylum law and to

debate the creation of an EU migration policy.