

Germany: a major drop in the number of illegal migrants crossing the Polish border

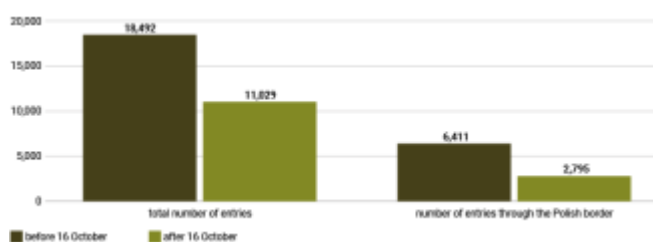
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Since 16 October, regular random checks have been carried out at Germany's borders with Poland, the Czech Republic and Switzerland. Controls on the border with Austria, which were temporarily introduced in 2015, have also been extended. According to information published in *Welt am Sonntag* (26 November), the number of illegal border crossings has decreased by around 40% since mid-October. In the 30 days preceding the reintroduction of border controls with Poland, the Czech Republic, Austria and Switzerland, a total of 18,492 illegal entries were registered, while in the following month, this number dropped to 11,029 until mid-November. According to German law enforcement agencies, there has been a particularly strong decrease in the number of attempts to illegally cross the German-Polish border: from 6411 to 2795 since the checks were introduced (-56%).

Since the border controls were introduced, a large number of refusals of entry has also been reported. From mid-October to mid-November, a total of 4292 people were prohibited from crossing the German border at four border sections (+7.8%), including 772 on the border with Poland (four were refused entry a month earlier).

Since the beginning of this year 267,384 asylum applications have been submitted in Germany, as compared to 159,669 last year (+67.5%).

Chart 1. Comparison of the number of illegal entries into Germany on the borders with Poland, the Czech Republic, Austria and Switzerland



Source: the author's own calculations based on Federal Police data quoted in *Welt am Sonntag*.

Chart 2. Comparison of the numbers of unauthorised German border crossings in 2021–2023



Source: the author's own calculations based on Federal Police data (data for the period until October this year).

Positive reactions from politicians

The reinforcement of the border controls has been assessed positively by both regional and federal politicians (including Interior Minister Nancy Faeser, SPD), who had been demanding this for many months.

- The Minister of the Interior of Brandenburg, Michael Stübgen (CDU), admits that the regular controls on the border with Poland have brought visible effects. He has emphasised that the reduction in the number of illegal crossings is not only the result of the checks, but also of the tightening of the Polish-Czech border: the number of illegal entries into Brandenburg nearly halved in the first days of October, and since 16 October has dropped further, by 25%.
- A similar assessment was given by the Minister of the Interior of Saxony, Armin Schuster (CDU), in whose opinion the checks on the borders with Poland and the Czech Republic have been a success. He pointed out that since the additional restrictions were introduced, the number of detained refugees had dropped to around 20–25 per week, and there were basically no more smugglers among them.
- The Minister-President of Brandenburg, Dietmar Woidke (SPD), also believes that the checks have been an effective measure to prevent illegal immigration. He has suggested that they should be carried out in Poland also, as this would help minimise the negative impact on the residents of the border region (such as traffic jams). Since the regular controls were introduced, the situation in refugee centres in Brandenburg and other places has improved. Previously, 80 to 100 people used to check in at refugee centres daily, but this number has fallen to 20–30 since mid-October. At present, 3800 out of around 4400 places in Brandenburg's reception centres are occupied, which means that they are operating at 82% of their capacity.

Criticism from business circles

The German Chamber of Commerce and Industry (IHK) in Frankfurt an der Oder has pointed out the serious problems transport companies and commuters have encountered in the border region. Knuth Thiel from IHK Ostbrandenburg has noted that the smooth operation of many enterprises depends on easy flows of border traffic, and these have been experiencing great difficulties due to the controls. There are 1500 Polish companies operating in the

region, and approximately 14,000 people commute to work from Poland to Brandenburg on a daily basis.

Commentary

- Since politicians of most parties (except Die Linke and some of the Greens) are satisfied with the effects of the introduction of border controls, the restrictions are set to be extended uninterrupted, as has been the case with the German-Austrian border checkpoints since 2015. Germany emphasises that the controls have helped curb cross-border crime. During the first month of additional checks at the border with Poland, 152 people with arrest warrants were identified (only 22 such cases were recorded in the previous month). Most political parties will emphasise the need to maintain the border controls in their campaigns ahead of the elections to the parliaments of Brandenburg, Saxony and Thuringia in autumn 2024.
- Since the introduction of the controls, the issue of migrants reaching Germany from Belarus via Poland is no longer so frequently discussed in the German political debate or media. Attention has been shifted to the Balkan migration route, one branch of which runs through Slovakia and Poland, and the other through Austria; however, it has not been revealed which one is currently being used more frequently. The efforts made by the governments of both Germany and Poland to seal the Balkan migration route have so far been positively assessed. It is also emphasised that the measures taken by the Serbian government on the border with Hungary and the spread of information about the tightening of asylum law in Germany and the border controls have been quite effective, and have had a deterrent effect on both the smugglers and the migrants. The number of illegal border crossings may also have dropped because the smugglers are waiting to see how the situation will develop, and are adjusting to the new border regime.