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Latvia: significant increase in migratory pressure from Belarus

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On 13 July, Lithuania's Minister of the Interior, Martynas Katelynas, proposed the introduction of temporary controls at the border with Latvia in response to a significant increase in the number of migrants entering Lithuania from Belarus through Latvian territory. Data from the Lithuanian Ministry of the Interior indicate that secondary migration from Latvia increased fourfold in the first six months of this year compared to the same period last year, rising from approximately 300 to 1,200 cases. Katelynas noted that potential measures could replicate those implemented by Poland at its border with Lithuania, specifically the reintroduction of temporary border controls. He emphasised, however, that such strict measures would be considered if the volume of illegal border crossings exceeded the capacity of Lithuania's border services. Both the president and prime minister of Lithuania have expressed opposition to the implementation of these controls.

Migratory pressure from Belarus at the Latvia–Belarus border has continued to increase steadily. In 2025, the authorities prevented 12,046 illegal border crossing attempts. By mid-July 2026, approximately 8,000 such incidents had been recorded. The number of attempted crossings rises significantly during the summer months, with around 1,000 attempts prevented in the first two weeks of July alone. In contrast, just over 260 cases were recorded at the Poland–Belarus border in the first half of this year, down from approximately 15,000 in 2025. At the Lithuania–Belarus border, the authorities recorded 905 cases during the same period.

Belarusian migratory pressure at the Latvia–Belarus border is likely to persist in the coming months. Key factors contributing to this trend include the limited effectiveness of Latvian authorities in countering migrant smuggling and insufficient border security measures. There are strong indications that, in the short term, the authorities in Riga will be unable to resolve the existing weaknesses in protecting the EU's external border independently.

Commentary

- **Latvia continues to represent the most vulnerable point among EU member states bordering Belarus.** This vulnerability results from both institutional shortcomings and the natural features of the border area. Although the Latvian section is the shortest at 173 km, it is especially challenging to secure due to extensive marshland and dense forests. Additionally, Latvia is the only country facing migratory pressure from Belarus that has

not completed its border barrier infrastructure and is still developing the electronic surveillance system for the barrier (see '*The Baltic states and Finland: fencing themselves off from Russia and Belarus*').

- **Latvia's State Border Guard (SBG) continues to experience staff shortages and insufficient resources necessary for effective border security.** Although the SBG receives support from the police and the armed forces, the current level of assistance from these institutions remains insufficient. The leadership of the Latvian SBG has called for increased involvement of the military in countering irregular migration. However, the Ministry of Defence has cited its own personnel shortages and is considering deploying conscripts to the border. Latvia's Mucenieki asylum seeker accommodation centre, which has a capacity of 450 places, is also operating beyond its limits and is therefore unable to accept migrants returned from Lithuania under the readmission procedure.
- **Countering irregular migration is currently the primary objective of the Ministry of the Interior.** This position has been emphasised, for example, by Jānis Dombrava of the nationalist National Alliance (*Nacionālā apvienība*), who has served as Latvia's Minister of the Interior since 28 May this year. He has committed to reducing migration, strengthening security services, and implementing broader institutional reforms. Planned changes will affect the State Border Guard, the Office of Citizenship and Migration Affairs, and the Mucenieki facility. The government also plans to reduce cooperation with liberal non-governmental organisations working on migration issues, tighten asylum policy, and increase focus on deportations.
- **The introduction of border controls by Lithuania is considered a measure of last resort.** Instead, Vilnius is prioritising support for Riga in addressing migratory pressure. On 15 July, the interior ministers of both countries signed an agreement on cross-border cooperation to combat irregular migration. Lithuania has increased its support by deploying additional State Border Guard officers to Latvia in July. Currently, around 20 Lithuanian border guards are stationed in Latvia, conducting joint patrols with their Latvian counterparts. Riga has requested an additional contingent of approximately 100 officers.
- **The increase in migratory pressure along the Latvian section of the border suggests that Belarus and Russia are continuing their hybrid operation against the West.** However, the direction of migrant flows, controlled by Belarusian authorities, has shifted to align with current tactical objectives. The significant reduction in pressure along the Lithuanian and Polish sections of the border may be linked to efforts to obtain consent from Vilnius and/or Warsaw for the transit of potash fertilisers, which the United States removed from its sanctions regime in December 2025. By adjusting the level of pressure along different border sections, the Belarusian regime may also be testing the unity of Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia in their policy towards Belarus. Additionally, the decline in the number of attempted illegal crossings at the Polish border may reflect the effectiveness of the recently constructed border barrier, as well as the performance of border services and military personnel deployed in the area.