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Reactions to the Belarusian provocations

Lithuania at the center of Belarusian provocations and illegal migration

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One week after the preliminary apogee of the Belarusian provocations against Lithuania and the EU with a high number of illegal migrants at the Belarusian-Lithuanian border and verbal threats of possible terrorist attacks in Lithuania, the arrival of illegal migrants to Lithuania has initially stopped. However, this situation has led to consequences for the neighboring states of Latvia and Poland. Lukashenka continues to try to destabilize the situation. He wants to prevent illegal migrants from returning to Belarus. In a special session on August 10, the Lithuanian parliament made far-reaching decisions to deal with the crisis. It was decided to build a physical barrier and expand military powers. Not only the EU, but also NATO are now asked to provide support in the crisis.

Illegal Migration Data

After the border guards were instructed on August 2nd to turn back illegally arrived migrants in Lithuania, the influx of newcomers has greatly reduced.

Starting from August 3rd the decision has been enforced, consequently since August 6th **only five more illegal migrants** have been admitted to Lithuania, including a mother with a child who was admitted for humanitarian reasons. Since that day, the Lithuanian border guards have stopped **around 1,370 illegal migrants** at the border and

sent them back to Belarus. There are currently **4,115** illegal migrants registered in Lithuania, 2,797 of them Iraqis. The negotiations between Lithuania and the EU and the Iraqi government have been successful. **The Iraqi authorities have indefinitely suspended all passenger flights to Minsk.** At the moment, only empty planes are flying into the Belarusian capital Minsk, which are supposed to bring back those Iraqis willing to return. The Lithuanian Foreign Minister Gabrielius Landsbergis said that Iraq could count on more intensive cooperation with the EU. According to the Lithuanian Foreign Minister, some of the **migrants in Belarus are prevented from returning to Baghdad by the Lukashenka regime.**¹

In order to accelerate the voluntary return of migrants from Lithuania, Interior Minister Agnė Bilotaitė signed an order on August 9, 2021. According to this, a migrant who voluntarily returns to his or her country of origin will be paid for the tickets as well as one-off financial support of EUR 300.²

Special session of the Lithuanian Parliament

In an extraordinary session of parliament on August 10, 2021, the Lithuanian government decided **to build a fence** along 508 km of the border with Belarus (total length of the border:

¹<https://www.lrt.lt/naujienos/pasaulyje/6/1465431/lietuvos-uzsienio-reikalu-ministras-baltarusijos-rezimas-neleidzia-migrantams-isvykti-i-iraka>

²<https://vrm.lrv.lt/lt/naujienos/vidaus-reikalu-ministre-pasirase-isakyma-del-uzsienieciu-savanorisko-grizimo>

679 km). Interior Minister Bilotaitė stated that protecting the most endangered areas of the state border was the first priority. That's **about 95 kilometers**. The entire construction is estimated at EUR 152 million. **The fence is to be erected by 2022**. The construction of the border fence was classified as a project of national importance. Thus the law makes it easier to purchase materials for construction. The Lithuanian government wants to ask the European Commission to cover part of the construction costs.³

The situation on the border remains very tense. Lukashenka wants to prevent migrants who have fled to Lithuania from returning to Belarus. From now on, **"nobody is allowed to cross the border from either side, neither from the south nor from the west," said Lukashenka**. That is why the Belarusian border guards intimidate migrants **with force and machine guns** and force them into the sovereign territory of Lithuania. On the Lithuanian side, shots were even registered in this context.⁴ In some border sections, especially in the south-eastern border area, **an increase in the number of Belarusian border troops was registered**.⁵ In this way, illegal migrants from Iraq and other countries are currently trapped between the borders of the two states.⁶

The head of the Lithuanian border guard, Rustamas Liubajevs, rightly asked what the migrants who are there do if they are not allowed into Lithuania. "We cannot know 100 percent where they (illegal migrants) are. We imagine that they stay in the border zone. The situation there is very complicated. There are several scenarios possible. They could try again to get to Lithuania, or they could choose another route, via Latvia or Poland. Our Polish colleagues have noticed and increase of groups crossing the Belarusian-Polish

border. We believe it could be a consequence of our actions and measures," said Liubajevs.⁷ The latest developments show that more and more illegal migrants are reaching Poland and Latvia (349 and 295 respectively, as of 11.08.21) In Latvia, 170 illegal migrants were registered within three days. On August 10, Latvia also declared a state of emergency for the regions on the Belarusian border. This is initially valid until November 10th.⁸

The head of the Lithuanian border guards trade union, Jevgenijus Amelinus, also sees the risk of escalation and is concerned about the security of the border guards. It is a matter of time before groups of migrants will try to penetrate through the border guarded by the border guards or even to storm it. In order to quickly meet the staffing needs of the border guards, a new training offer was made for a four-week training course for the border guards, although the standard training lasts two years.⁹

In order to further strengthen border protection, parliament adopted **changes to the military law** on August 10, 2021. This gives the Lithuanian armed forces additional powers. The changes give soldiers the right to issue binding instructions to natural and legal persons as well as to prosecute persons who do not adhere to these instructions and to take them into custody. They are also allowed to search vehicles and goods and check suspicious people and their luggage. Physical as well as psychological measures are also permitted with this law. These special rights for the armed forces may be granted for a maximum of three months; however, this period can be extended.

³ VILNIUS, Aug 06, BNS.

⁴ <https://www.delfi.lt/news/daily/lithuania/neileido-ne-vieno-neteiseto-migranto-uz-baltarusijos-sienos-girdejo-suviu-garsus-ir-raketas.d?id=87901319>

⁵ <https://www.delfi.lt/news/daily/lithuania/vsat-pietrytinės-sienos-pakrastyje-fiksuoja-baltarusijos-pajegu-pagausejimas.d?id=87903479>

⁶ <https://www.lrt.lt/naujienos/lietuvoje/2/1464138/dilema-pasienyje-migrantu-lietuva-neisileidzia-bet-kas-iu-laukia-baltarusijoje-neaisku>

⁷ VILNIUS, 06. August, BNS

⁸ <https://www.tagesschau.de/ausland/lettland-belarus-101.html>

⁹ <https://news.bns.lt/64371003/>

<https://www.delfi.lt/news/daily/lithuania/pasienieciu-profesajungos-vadovas-laiko-klausimas-kada-migrantai-nuspres-sturmuoti.d?id=87903599>

The deployment of the armed forces on the border is even more explosive in the context of the Russian-Belarusian military exercise "Zapad" planned for mid-September, which increases the possibility of a provocation or a military incident between NATO and the Russian troops.¹⁰ Defense Minister Anušauskas said that the "armed forces are prepared for any developments".¹¹

Belarusian propaganda and provocations and domestic political discussions about human rights

Belarusian online portals are full of videos allegedly showing victims of violence by Lithuanian border guards. Lukashenka mentioned several times the Nazi methods allegedly used by Lithuania. In Lithuania, such statements are treated as propaganda.¹²

But even in Lithuania itself there is criticism of the government, especially with regard to the pushback policy.

The head of the human rights office of the Seimas Ombudsman, Vytautas Valentinavičius, said that he believed that Lithuania was heading towards a **humanitarian crisis**. He named two problems: The first represented the rejection without differentiating the persons according to need for protection: "International instruments require that each application be examined individually," criticized Valentinavičius.¹³

He sees the difficult reception conditions as a second problem, including lack of or poor access to information about applying for asylum and lack of legal advice.

The treatment of asylum seekers in Lithuania is "difficult" to reconcile with the European Convention on Human Rights, warns Tomas Vytautas Raskevičius, Chairman of the Human Rights Committee of the Lithuanian Parliament: "We are walking on thin ice."¹⁴

A representative of the UN Refugee Agency has traveled to Lithuania to assess the situation of illegal migrants at the border. However, the Lithuanian government reiterates that it believes the border guards are acting humane and within the law. Interior Minister Bilotaitė assured: "Lithuania is doing its best to ensure that human rights are respected to the best of its knowledge and belief."¹⁵

At the special session on August 10, the Seimas also passed **an amendment to the law on the legal status of foreigners in Lithuania**. This provides for a more detailed asylum application system: According to this, the application of a foreigner must be submitted to the state border guard or the migration office. If this route is not followed, a foreigner will not be allowed to enter the territory of Lithuania.

The Minister of the Interior makes a very precise distinction between the Belarusian refugees who are fleeing the dictatorship and those who come with the support of officials from the Lukashenka regime. "The **humanitarian corridor** was and will continue to be open, despite the restriction of places where you can apply for asylum. We will do everything we can to ensure this," said Bilotaitė. In one year, 800 Belarusian refugees have been admitted to Lithuania.¹⁶

EU-Reactions

¹⁰ <https://www.delfi.lt/news/daily/lithuania/migrantu-krizes-iaudrintai-lietuvai-dar-vienas-isbandymas-rusija-iau-pradedatelkti-pajegas.d?id=87783631>

¹¹ <https://www.tv3.lt/naujiena/lietuva/anusauskas-lietuva-pasiruosusi-bet-kokiai-ivykiu-eigai-zapad-pratybu-metu-n1107985>

¹² <https://www.delfi.lt/news/daily/demaskuok/baltarusijos-sou-tesiasi-lietuvai-mete-baisius-kaltinimus-bet-greitai-isaiskejomelas.d?id=87915081>

¹³ <https://www.lrt.lt/naujienos/lietuvoje/2/1464138/dilema-pasienyje-migrantu-lietuva-neisileidzia-bet-kas-ju-laukia-baltarusijoje-neaisku>

¹⁴ <https://www.delfi.lt/news/daily/lithuania/raskevicius-ivertino-neteisetu-migrantu-apgrezimus-pasienyje-mes-vaikstome-plonu-ledu.d?id=87855615>

¹⁵ VILNIUS, Aug 09, BNS

¹⁶ <https://www.delfi.lt/news/daily/lithuania/bilotaite-apribojus-prieglobscio-prasymu-pateikimo-vietas-humanitarinis-koridorius-likd?id=87914841>

The Lithuanian Prime Minister Šimonytė and her Polish counterpart Morawiecki have called on the European Union **to extend the existing sanctions against Belarus because of the ongoing migration crisis.**¹⁷ Foreign Minister Landsbergis suggested tightening the sectoral sanctions against Belarus. This is likely to affect the fertilizer industry in particular, and possibly the alcohol industry.¹⁸

The European Union threatened the Belarusian ruler Alexander Lukashenka with additional sanctions on the anniversary of the presumably falsified presidential election. "In view of the regime's blatant disregard for international obligations, **the EU is ready to consider further measures,**" said the EU's foreign affairs representative, Josep Borrell, on Sunday, August 8th, on behalf of the 27 member states. By exploiting migrants for political purposes, Belarus is calling into question other international norms.

On August 11th, the European Commission pledged 37 million euros in financial aid for Lithuania to solve the ongoing migrant crisis.¹⁹

In view of the tense situation at the EU's external border in Lithuania, a **special meeting of the EU interior ministers** will be convened on August 18th. The aim now is to raise awareness of the situation and take concrete measures to ensure the security of the border. In addition to the interior ministers of the EU countries, representatives of the EU Border Protection Agency Frontex and the European Police Office Europol will also take part in the meeting organized by video conference.

Request to NATO

The security experts in Lithuania are discussing whether one should proclaim Article 4 of NATO.

The article states: "The parties will consult each other if one of them believes that the integrity of the area, political independence or security of either party is threatened." Defense Minister Anušauskas is currently opposed to this declaration. However, the President Nausėda has expressed different opinion, in a conversation with NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg he stated that Lithuania is considering the possibility of formally contacting the Alliance and **requesting the deployment of a NATO support group for hybrid threats.**²⁰ Stoltenberg assured the president that the alliance is closely monitoring the situation on the eastern border and is ready to draft appropriate reaction scenarios and take all necessary measures to ensure security in the region.²¹

Conclusions

By his actions, Lukashenka is challenging not only Lithuania, but the entire European community of states. His actions harbor the potential for escalation for the entire region. Because of Lukashenka, Europe and Lithuania are confronted for the first time with a situation in which people are being used as a "political weapon" through organized illegal migration.

The European Union should therefore have a set of rules for such situations, when confronted with illegal actions. The EU should be prepared for such hybrid attacks as a part of today's reality.

¹⁷ VILNIUS, 06. August, BNS

¹⁸ VILNIUS, Aug 11, BNS

<https://www.lrt.lt/naujienos/lietuvoje/2/1465775/nato-generalinis-sekretorius-apie-padeti-pasienvyje-su-baltarusija-aljansas-pasirenges-projektuoti-atsako-scenarijus>

¹⁹ <https://www.lrt.lt/naujienos/pasulyje/6/1465790/landsbergio-atsakas-i-siulymus-deretis-su-lukashenka-su-teroristais-nesiderama>

²⁰ <https://www.lrp.lt/lt/prezidentas-su-nato-generaliniu-sekretoriumi-aptare-nelegalios-migracijos-situacija-lietuvos-baltarusijos-pasienvyje/36400>

²¹ Ebd.

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