

REPORT

Context of the ongoing Belarus-EU migration crisis

In May 2021 Belarus forcibly landed a plane going from Athens (Greece) to Vilnius (Lithuania) with a Belarusian opposition journalist Raman Pratasyevich on board. The journalist was arrested and went through allegedly torturous interrogations for [“crimes against the Belarusian authorities“](#). After these aggressive acts of Belarus, [EU, UK, USA and Canada intensified sanctions](#) on Belarus. In response, [Belarus started a massive visa issue to Iraqi citizens](#). Moreover, Belarus initiated a full scale advertisement campaign in Iraq inviting Iraqis to Europe through a new, allegedly safe continental route through Belarus, promising direct connection from the airport to the Belarus-EU border, which migrants could supposedly simply cross and proceed to peaceful and well-off Western Europe. Many Kurds have seen this new route as an opportunity to escape a terrifying future in Iraq, yet it turned out to be a false promise.

After a slow start in early June 2021 the numbers of irregular entries into Lithuania from Belarus rose steeply in July 2021. By the beginning of August 2021 there were over 4 000 registered people who had irregularly crossed into Lithuania. Since the beginning of the migration wave in June 2021 until the 1st of January 2022 Lithuania has registered 4 326 people, 72% men and 28% women. 25% of all migrants were under the age of 18, over 500 - children under 9 years old. The majority of these people were registered and let in before the 11th of August 2021, when the Ministry of Interior [issued the order](#) to deny the entry and push back all irregularly migrating people back to Belarus.

Countries of origin:

Iraq: **2,858**

Congo: **203**

Syria: **179**

Cameroon: **135**

Belarussia: **106**

Afganistan: **101**

Russia: **89**

Iran: **87**

Guinea: **81**

Sri Lanka: **80**

Other: **71**

India: **67**

Nigeria: **29**

Togo: **27**

Pakistan: **27**

Turkey: **25**

Democratic Republic of Congo: **23**

The Ivory cost: **23**

Gambia: 19

Yemen: 17

Somali: 19

Senegal: 15

Mali: 18

Eritrea: 10

Tajikistan: 17

(as of 2022.01.02, source:

<https://ls-osp-sdg.maps.arcgis.com/apps/dashboards/9b0a008b1fff41a88c5efcc61a876be2>)

On the 10th November 2021 Lithuania declared a [state of emergency](#), thus restricting access to the border area for journalists and humanitarian activists, with no exceptions for those providing medical and humanitarian aid. Additionally, in December 2021 changes in migration policy regarding rights of migrants and standards of living in the camps and detention centres took place. Under the new law migrants with rejected or pending asylum applications can be detained [for up to one year](#).

Since the beginning of August 2021, when the State Border Guard Service was ordered to deny entry to Lithuania from Belarus by irregular crossing, app. 8200 cases of push backs of migrants took place (data as of 23rd of January, 2022).

Sulaymaniyah City, Iraq – On May 18, 2021 Behzad Mahmoudi, a Kurdish asylum seeker from Iran, set himself on fire in front of the United Nations office in Erbil, capital of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) of Iraq.

The majority of migrants crossing into Lithuania were and are from countries affected by political and socio-cultural turbulences: Kurdish minorities from Iraq, Iran and Syria; Pashtun minority from Pakistan; other minorities affected by the civil war in Syria, Afghanistan and in African countries. All these people have been seeking asylum [in](#)

[EU neighbouring countries and some of them in the EU countries](#).

Negative sentiments among Lithuanians towards migrants and asylum seekers

[According to polls and media research](#) that has been issued in November 2021 by Diversity Development Group, the Department of Ethnic Studies of the Institute of Sociology at the Lithuanian Centre for Social Sciences, and the media monitoring and journalism innovation program “Media4change”, the public opinion in Lithuania regarding migrants has significantly changed into more negative.

The amount of Lithuanians perceiving the impact of migrants to the society and the state has increased. 85% of survey participants agreed with the statement that “migrants/refugees might contribute to the increase of crime in Lithuania” and 82% agreed that “migrants/refugees might cause social unrest”. Only 14% of respondents agreed with the statement that “migrants/refugees might enrich Lithuanian cultural life”. Nevertheless, it is important to note that about 39% of respondents agreed that “the state should pay more attention to the integration of migrants/refugees that already live or newly arrive to Lithuania” and app. 33% of respondents agreed that “migrants/refugees belong to a vulnerable group and Lithuania shall help them”.

The increase of negative attitudes towards migrants and refugees is partly due to negative narratives in the media that focus on faceless and dehumanised statistics of push-backed people, with no details on gender, age, religion, nationalities, etc. The mainstream media, in accordance with the majority of Lithuanian politicians, depicts the migration crisis solely as hybrid aggression of Belarus and migrants as [“weapons of hybrid war”](#). Thus, it fails to encourage emotional involvement and empathy for migrants. In the early phase of the pushback policy the minister of Interior Affairs of Lithuania was [criticised](#) by a host of BBC News for dehumanising narrative about migrants and for failing to present the diversity of migrating people including women, children, disabled people and elderly. In addition to that, the chairman of the Lithuanian parliamentary Committee on *National Security and Defence* Laurynas Kasčiūnas recently called migrant children [“less worthy”](#) in their cultures. The media focuses on the “great job” of the State Border Guard Service when protecting the border but fails to put forward the issue of human rights and to report on the situations in the countries people are fleeing from – Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, African countries, etc.

Border group (“Sienos Grupė”). The humanitarian aid volunteers

In October 2021 a group of Lithuanians started to organise and provide humanitarian aid at the Lithuanian-Belarus border. The group is collecting and providing humanitarian aid for migrants stuck in the forest. The aid consists not only of food items, water, thermo materials, dry sleeping bags, tents, etc. but also of teaching survival skills in subzero temperatures and forest environments. “Sienos Grupė” consists of local Lithuanians working in humanitarian/social fields by profession and of activists from other EU countries (Portugal, Poland, Czechia, Germany, France, Finland)

coming for short-term volunteering periods. Recently “Sienos Grupė” has also been supporting migrants and refugees in Lithuanian detention centres.

At the end of December 2021 the volunteers of “Sienos Grupė” participated in two humanitarian missions, both times accompanied by journalists, and in addition to that, one mission was accompanied by “Doctors without Borders”.

The State Border Guard Service announced an initiated pre-trial process investigating human smuggling, implying it was the “Sienos Grupė” humanitarian volunteers, who organised the smuggling and trafficking, as they did not inform the guards about the people in the forest immediately. Notably, there is no requirement or obligation for civilians to inform authorities about any people they meet in the forest (quite the contrary: civilian citizens are not allowed to check other people’s - foreigners’ or residents’ - documents). Border guards themselves admitted more than once that citizens don't have to report possible illegal migrants according to any law, yet not doing so would be “irresponsible” and “non-civic”. The information about the pre-trial investigation was announced on the public radio a few days before new year, yet only in the beginning of February 2022 an invitation for interrogation was officially delivered to a nominal group leader. The situation of humanitarian criminalisation is not a new phenomenon in the EU, volunteers and volunteer groups trying to save lives [are in danger of penalties and criminal accusations](#).

In the week preceding the Christmas of 2021 “Sienos Grupė” participated in two humanitarian missions, which went public. In the first case, the 4 Pakistan men contacted the groups hotline number and eventually were helped and provided with food for five days in the forest by “Sienos Grupė” volunteers. Once we and the migrants realised that the situation is not sustainable, we learned to do an Interim protection measures application for EHRC in Strasbourg (Rule 39), once we got the positive answer, thus the migrants got international protection for a month, we called the Border Guard Service.

More about the Pakistani case here:

<https://www.15min.lt/naujiena/aktualu/lietuva/eztt-neleido-is-lietuvos-issstumti-keturiau-migrantu-miske-jie-praleido-kelias-dienas-56-1618084>

<https://www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/1572264/wolves-will-not-be-starving-this-winter-volunteers-struggle-to-help-freezing-migrants-at-lithuanian-border>

A couple of days later, on the 24th December 2021 we got a call from a Syrian Christian man, who claimed being alone in the forest and couldn't move his legs, thus could not walk. "Sienos Grupė" activists reached the man together with three members of "Doctors without Borders" and a journalist. After providing food, first aid and evaluating his condition, a decision was made to call an emergency and thus the State Border Guard Service. The Interim protection measures application was sent to Strasbourg with a positive answer arriving a couple days later (after the Christmas weekend.). In the meantime, the Syrian man was hospitalised due to his foot condition, which protected him from a possible push-back to Belarus.

(More about the case here:

<https://www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/1572055/msf-among-volunteers-fined-for-helping-migrant-on-lithuania-belarus-border>)

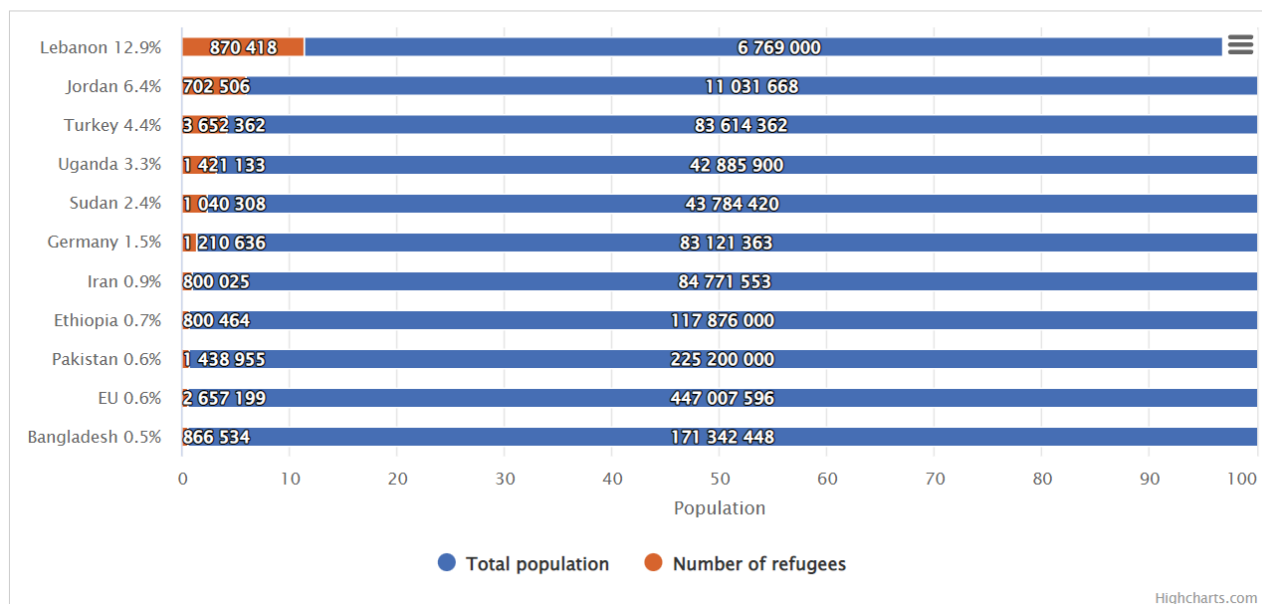
From 11th of August 2021 a total of 94 people, who have illegally crossed the border, were allowed into Lithuania due to humanitarian reasons (as of 1st of January 2022). 446 people were arrested for illegal border crossing. App. 20-30 pushbacks take place daily. On 7th of January 2022, the European Border Guard Agency „Frontex“ Fundamental rights bureau gave [recommendations to Lithuania](#) to change the migration procedure essentially providing people with access to plea for asylum, otherwise "Frontex" would have been stopping the mission in the country. The migration policy is not going to be changed so far and migrating people are allowed to be detained for a long time at the border. In the meantime, the Ministry of Interior has been offering 1000 € for voluntary choice to return to the country of origin. Up to 150 people voluntarily left back to their home countries risking persecution, poverty and personal bankruptcy. 104 people were granted asylum (by February 2022).

Migration through Belarus - a safe overland path

There are some wide-spread yet groundless myths about migration to the EU. One of the myths is that Western Europe has already taken in many refugees. According to 2020 Eurostat statistics on migration, the majority of world-wide refugees have settled in Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, Uganda, Sudan. Germany is number 6th on the list.

Number of refugees compared to total population

Several countries around the world host a large refugee population:



Another myth in the media and among anti-refugee politicians is that Belarus has created a completely artificial migration route in order to cause the crisis for the EU, which is only partially true. Migrants have been heading towards EU shores through hostile seaways of Mediterranean and Aegean for many years, making them risk their lives at much higher rates, thus making the choice of overland migration trail through Belarus a reasonable option.



86,300 sea crossings in 2020
Decrease of 19% compared to 2019



38,800 land border crossings in 2020
Increase of 9% compared to 2019

2021

161,600 illegal border crossings (January-October 2021)
72% more than in the same period of 2020

2021

- Year-on-year (January-October data) increase in crossings on the **Central Mediterranean route** (+95%, 56,100), the **Western Mediterranean route** (+30%, 33,500) and the Eastern borders route (+1465%, 7,300)
- Decrease in crossings on the **Eastern Mediterranean route** (-11%, 15,800)
- **22% increase of deaths at sea**: 2,598 persons were reported dead or missing in January-November 2021 on the three main routes, compared to 2,128 in the same period of 2020

(Source:

https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/promoting-our-european-way-life/statistics-migration-europe_en#illegalbordercrossings)

Additional sources:

1. [2https://www.lrt.lt/naujienos/lietuvoje/2/1491915/2-minutes-nustatyti-nelegalas-ar-pabegelis-kaip-realybeje-atrodo-reikalavimai-isvykti-savo-noru?fbclid=IwAR0h3VMjhsMTUh2WaYZ-wfcztb0pjeAKEwSGMu6x-up_UJPk0SVdDEv4hCA](https://www.lrt.lt/naujienos/lietuvoje/2/1491915/2-minutes-nustatyti-nelegalas-ar-pabegelis-kaip-realybeje-atrodo-reikalavimai-isvykti-savo-noru?fbclid=IwAR0h3VMjhsMTUh2WaYZ-wfcztb0pjeAKEwSGMu6x-up_UJPk0SVdDEv4hCA)
2. <https://www.lrt.lt/naujienos/pasaulyje/6/1582437/frontex-teisiu-biuro-atstove-apie-rekomendacijas-lietuvai-jei-ju-nesilaikoma-misija-gali-buti-nutraukta>
3. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/6/8/iranian-kurds-in-iraq-hopelessly-seek-asylum-un-assistance>)
4. <https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics/>
5. <https://migrationresearch.com/resoma-topic/criminalisation-humanitarian-assistance>