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The State of the World's Human Rights; Lithuania 2023

The authorities continued to summarily return refugees and migrants to Belarus, and passed legislation to this effect. The Constitutional Court struck down legislation on detention of asylum seekers and migrants. Belarusian and Russian nationals faced increasing obstacles in renewing residency permits and other documentation. Same-sex unions were still not legalized.

Refugees' and migrants' rights

Lithuania continued to host at least 52,262 people who had fled Ukraine following Russia's full-scale invasion. However, other refugees and migrants, mostly from the Middle East and Africa, were pushed back to Belarus, with at least 2,599 people being subjected to summary forced returns, despite the risk of torture and other ill-treatment by Belarusian authorities. In May, upon the government's proposal, parliament approved legal amendments enshrining the power of border guards to carry out pushbacks, in violation of international law. The Lithuanian authorities completed the construction of a physical barrier along the land border with Belarus and insisted that asylum seekers apply for protection at official border crossing points. However, in August, the government closed two of the six crossings and announced the future closure of another two.

In June, the Constitutional Court found that provisions of the Law on the Legal Status of Foreigners, introduced in 2021 and April 2023 and providing for the automatic detention of asylum seekers and those considered irregular migrants, violated Article 20 of the constitution, protecting liberty. In December, parliament approved legislative amendments introducing some guarantees against arbitrary detention and limiting the maximum length of detention to five months. The

measure did not provide for reparation to the thousands of people who had suffered prolonged arbitrary detention between 2021 and 2023. At the end of the year, 38 asylum seekers and migrants were being detained in Lithuania.

In June, an inquiry by the Lithuanian Bar Association confirmed serious malpractice in the provision of legal aid to refugees and migrants.

In September, the Ministry of Interior reported a decline in attempted crossings from Belarus, but also an increase in the number of refugees and migrants entering via Latvia. The Lithuanian authorities carried out checks at the Latvian border and summarily removed 1,072 refugees and migrants – including unaccompanied minors – to Latvia.

During the second half of the year, the Ministry of Interior designated a total of 1,654 Belarusian and Russian citizens living in Lithuania as a threat to Lithuania's national security, partly based on a questionnaire which asked for individuals' views on the Russian aggression in Ukraine. As a result, many Russian and Belarusian nationals were refused asylum, visas, renewal of residence permits, or continued Lithuanian citizenship. In August, Olga Karach, a Belarusian activist based in Lithuania, was declared a threat to national security and refused asylum, and only allowed to remain on a temporary residence permit.

LGBTI people's rights

In January, the European Court of Human Rights found that the Lithuanian authorities had acted unlawfully by censoring a fairy-tale book depicting, among others, same-sex relationships. A legislative proposal to repeal the prohibition of the promotion of non-traditional family models was voted down by parliament in November, and another, to provide some limited rights to LGBTI couples through the introduction of gender-neutral civil unions, had not been adopted by parliament by the end of the year.

Right to a healthy environment

The year was marked by extreme weather associated with climate change, including drought, heatwaves and violent storms, which caused damage to livelihoods and health. Lithuania had no clear plan to phase out fossil fuels, and long-term emissions reduction proceeded at a slower pace than the EU average.

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