

EU Eastern Borders: Poland Opposes EU Migration Pact Amid Permanent State of Emergency Along its Border — MSF Concludes its Activities in Belarus After Two Years — Migrants Manage to Reach Finland Despite Tight Border Controls — Human Rights Defender on Trial in Latvia for Assisting Migrants — Lithuania Closes Two More Border Checkpoints while Austria Calls for Talks over Repatriations to Afghanistan and Syria

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- A new report on the situation along the Poland-Belarus border has highlighted the ineffectiveness of the fence while the government looks to secure exemptions from certain elements in the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum.
- After two years of providing essential services in Belarus, Doctors Without Borders (MSF) withdraws and calls on Belarus, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland to

stop inflicting violence on people on the move.

- **As the Finnish interior minister plans tougher measures on migration, migrants find new ways to reach the Nordic country.**
- **Lithuania closes two checkpoints along its border with Belarus for “security” reasons while the Austrian interior minister calls for talks on repatriations to Syria and Afghanistan.**

A new [report](#) by Balkan Insight on the situation along the Poland-Belarus border has highlighted that crossing the fence is not a problem for most young people despite the permanent state of emergency with 2500 surveillance cameras and more than 10,000 soldiers and border guards in place. Mariusz Kurnyta, a member of the Podlaskie Voluntary Humanitarian Emergency Service (POPH), confirmed that “the fence is not working”. “The steel posts can be cut through with a normal angle grinder. Also, the concrete was poured very shallow in the swamp. In most of the border area, there is the fence. But if it collapses, the rest will follow like dominoes,” she explained. Dominika Pszczółkowska, a researcher at the Centre of Migration Research at the University of Warsaw, said: “The route through the Białowieża forest is still one of the safest ways for asylum seekers to reach Europe”. “I see it as a symbol, not as a real border protection,” Pszczółkowska stated, adding: “Barriers like the one on the US-Mexico border cannot stop people from seeking safety... There is a great determination in these people, they always find a way to get across. The fence on the Polish-Belarusian border is a tool of torture”. The report also underlines that the recent change of government has not had an impact on the country’s asylum and migration policies. Just recently, migration expert and undersecretary of state in the interior ministry, Maciej Duszczyk, said that “pushbacks will not be stopped for now, and this will only happen when the migration route through Belarus and Poland is closed”. Also, Business Insider Polska reported that the government was planning to spend 2.5 million Polish zloty [€571,000] on maintaining the border fence in 2024.

Days after the [removal of “temporary” checks](#) on the Poland-Slovakia border that have been in place since October 2023, Poland’s interior minister, Marcin Kierwiński, [expressed](#) opposition to the European Pact on Migration and Asylum, citing border challenges. He said that “The current proposals of the migration pact fail to adequately consider Poland’s specific situation” especially regarding the “uniqueness” of its border situation with Belarus and the reception of the significant number of refugees from Ukraine. Kierwiński also said that he would negotiate an exemption from elements of the EU’s planned migration pact relating to the relocation of asylum seekers, criticising the previous government for having “failed to negotiate necessary safeguards for Poland”. “Our primary goal is to secure an exemption, acknowledging our substantial support to Ukraine amid the refugee crisis,” he said.

The humanitarian NGO Doctors Without Borders (MSF) has [ended](#) its activities in Belarus after two years of responding to the acute humanitarian crisis on the EU’s eastern borders. The move comes following numerous reports from people on the

move of being criminalised, abused, pushed back, put in danger and denied access to healthcare, protection and assistance at Belarus' borders with Latvia, Lithuania and Poland in 2021. MSF explained its decision, stating: "We found that the medical needs of people on the move were outweighed by their needs for protection and legal support, which requires the special expertise of dedicated organisations, including, but not limited to, UN agencies with mandates related to asylum and protection. With this in mind, we decided to conclude these activities in Belarus." The organisation has called on the state authorities of Belarus, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland to "immediately stop inflicting violence on people on the move in the border area dividing Belarus from the EU" and demanded that aid agencies are "given access to the border areas to provide medical care and humanitarian assistance to people in need".

Migrants are finding **new ways** to overcome tight controls and reach the Finland-Russia border by crossing forests. A refugee named Rakan, who made it to Finland in January, has described his previous experience of violent pushback by the Latvian authorities and multiple failed attempts to cross to Poland. "The Belarusian army was hitting us and telling us to go back to Poland, and the Polish army was hitting us and telling us to go back to Minsk," he said. "We were like a ball, everyone throwing us to the other," Rakan told InfoMigrants. Jussi Laine, a professor at the University of Eastern Finland, recently told the French broadcaster RFI: "At the moment, there are only a few migrants waiting to pass to the Finnish side". However, Interior Minister Mari Rantanen announced in February that there were "thousands of (migrants) on the Russian side ... waiting to get to Finland" and presented the situation as a "threat to national security". Meanwhile, the government is planning to introduce tougher measures to prevent migrant arrivals. Interior Minister Rantanen has called for an urgent reform of Europe's asylum and immigration policies, and expressed support for the outsourcing of asylum processing to third countries, along the lines of the UK-Rwanda or Italy-Albania models. Although only 1300 people have arrived in Finland since autumn 2023, Rantanen **said**: "We must look at what is behind these numbers: what happens, and how these people arrive at our borders".

In Latvia, the first court hearing in the trial against human rights defender Ieva Raubiško took place on **28 February** at the Rezekne court. Raubiško has been charged under Article 20 and Article 284/2 of the Latvian Criminal Code for "assisting a group of asylum seekers at the Latvia-Belarus border in January 2023 and working to ensure that they would not be deported from Latvia in violation of a decision of the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR)". The human rights NGO Front Line Defenders has issued a **statement** in which it urged the authorities of Latvia to drop all charges against Raubiško and to provide a hospitable environment for human rights defenders in Latvia.

Following their decision to close two checkpoints on the Lithuania-Belarus border in the summer of 2023, Lithuanian authorities **closed** two more checkpoints on 1 March due to "security concerns". Interior Minister Agnė Bilotaite told AFP: "The precarious neighbourhood with Russia, which has launched a military aggression in Ukraine, and its ally Belarus, whose undemocratic regime has used migrants as a tool of political

pressure against Lithuania, makes it necessary to take additional security measures". She also **noted** that two border checkpoints remained open to maintain a "humanitarian corridor" for people fleeing the Belarusian regime. Meanwhile, Austria's interior minister, Gerhard Karner, **told** his European counterparts on 4 March that it was "necessary and urgent" to begin talks over repatriations to Syria and Afghanistan. "Currently, we are not able to repatriate anyone to countries like Syria or Afghanistan, as it would be against EU law," Karner said, explaining that this should be reexamined "in the medium-term". "In Austria, these two countries account for about three-quarters of all asylum applications," he said, adding that the same is true for most other EU countries.

For further information:

- ECRE, EU Eastern Borders: Poland Publishes Data Showing 6000 Pushbacks in Past Six Months — Finland-Russia Border Closure Extended Again — Estonia Considers Closing Border Crossing Points, February 2024
- ECRE, EU Eastern Borders: Hundreds of NGOs and Individuals Demand that Polish PM Ends Pushbacks, Finland Extends Closure of its Borders with Russia, Slovenia Extends Closure of its Borders with Hungary and Croatia, January 2024

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