

Date of Crisis

First increase in number of people arriving to Lithuania: **May 2021**
Escalation along the Polish and Lithuanian border: **8 November 2021**

Glide Nos:

[OT-2021-000167-POL](#)

[OT-2021-000076-LTU](#)

National Societies engaged in response operations:

Belarus Red Cross, Lithuanian Red Cross Society, Polish Red Cross

Number of people affected:

Approx. 10,000



Polish Red Cross is setting up a Humanitarian Service Point at Michalowo, near the border with Belarus.

Photo: Agnieszka Sadowska, Agencja Wyborcza.pl

This bulletin is being issued for information only and reflects the current situation and details available at this time. The **International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC)** has issued a [DREF for the Lithuanian Red Cross](#) on 12 July 2021 ([extended](#) on 13 October) and is processing a DREF request from the **Polish Red Cross**. A DREF request for Belarus is currently being drafted.

National Societies may require assistance to provide support to the affected population. In case you wish to offer any kind of support, please [consult IFRC Regional Office for Europe Partnerships and Resource Development Team](#).

The situation – overview

Political tension between the EU and Belarus increased significantly in late 2020 following elections in Belarus. EU did not accept the election results and has since imposed economic sanctions on Belarus. In May 2021, migrants arriving from Belarus started to cross or attempt to cross the border into Lithuania. EU leaders have accused Belarus of facilitating the situation as a reaction to the sanctions.

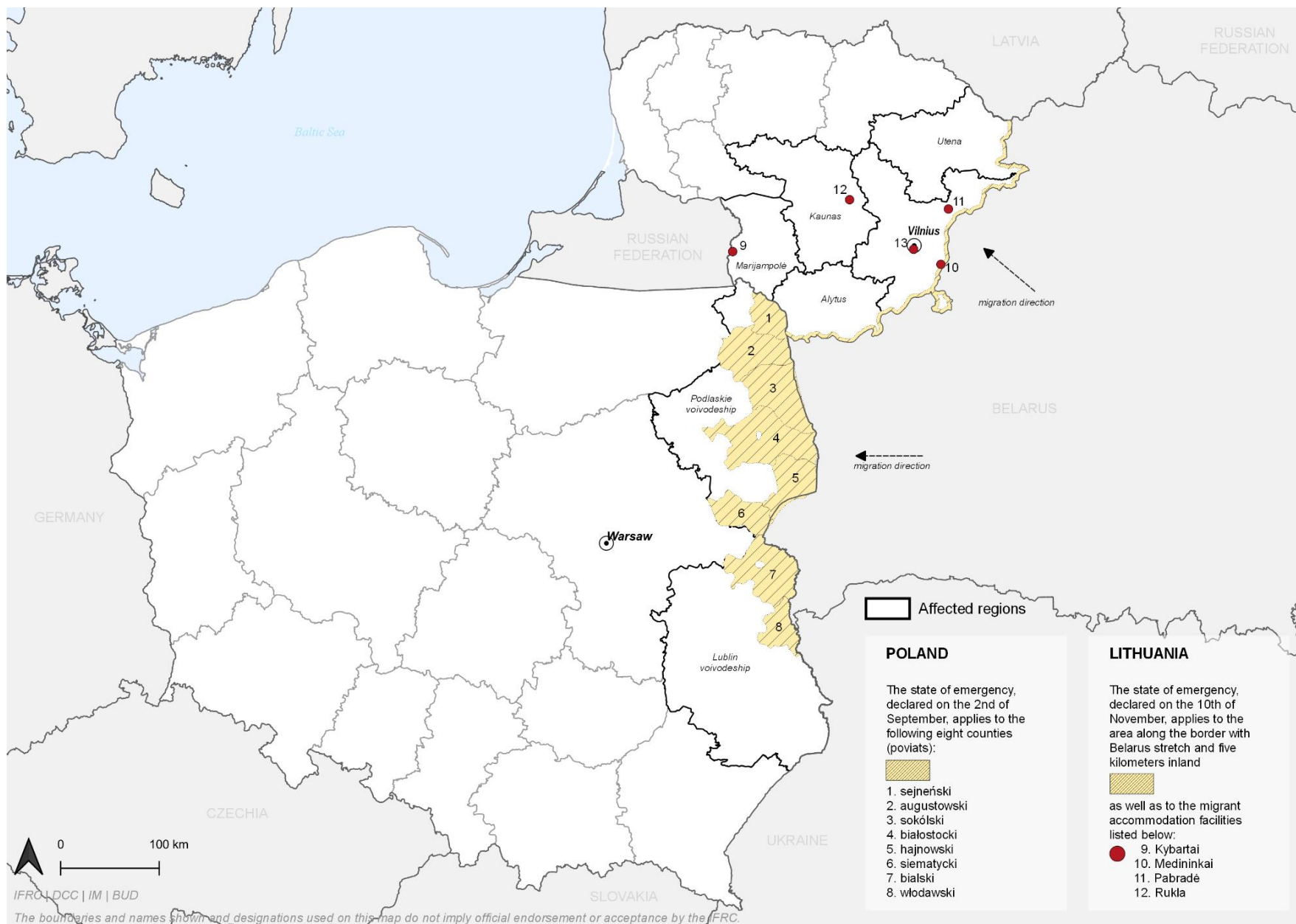
In July, when more than 4,000 migrants had crossed into Lithuania since the beginning of the year, the government reinforced the border and made it increasingly difficult to cross, shifting the attention to the Polish border from August onwards. In early September the Polish government declared a state of emergency. Small numbers of migrants have also crossed into Latvia since May 2021. Since the start of the situation all countries have significantly reinforced their borders both physically and through additional deployments of border guards, police and soldiers.

The Red Cross National Societies in the affected countries have been responding since the situation started in May, but with no or very limited and irregular access to the border zones. Pending access that has been sought in dialogue with the authorities throughout the situation, migrants have been reached indirectly by supplying relief materials to those with access to the border zones. Outside of the border zones, the focus has been on providing broad support to migrants in camps or centres outside of the border zone and support to migrants have make their way out from the border zones.

In early November the situation escalated when large groups of migrants approach the border with Poland and Lithuania, creating a stand-off. Migrants have attempted to breach the border structures but have been apprehended and returned to the Belarusian side.

Timeline of events:

- › Since the presidential elections in Belarus in August 2020, political tension between the EU and Belarus has been growing.
- › Since mid-May 2021 the number of people who enter Lithuania irregularly from Belarus has been increasing rapidly. Since the beginning of the year approximately 4,154 arrivals have been registered in in the country.
- › In July 2021 - Lithuania begins construction of a fence along its border with Belarus and passes legislation on restricting freedom of movement for asylum seekers registered in the country and imposes additional limitations on access to asylum and in asylum procedures.
- › On 2 July “State of Emergency” announced in Lithuania
- › In August 2021 Lithuania initiates additional legal amendments, limiting the entry of any irregular migrant accessing the territory and asking asylum.
- › 9 August 2021 - Latvia starts to record arrival of smaller number of migrants and declares a “State of Emergency” along its border and initiates measures to deter migrants entering the territory.
- › 2 September 2021 – After an increase of migrants attempting to cross Poland, Poland declares a “State of Emergency” in towns bordering Belarus, banning mass gatherings and limiting people's movements in a 3-km wide strip of land along the border.
- › Since the legislations on “State of Emergency” have been announced in the three countries, government authorities control access the “emergency zone” in the border area between Poland/Lithuania/Latvia and Belarus. The groups of migrants stranded in the region has been reportedly growing and since the end of September 2021, border guards have recovered seven dead bodies of migrants, both in Polish territory and on the Belarus side.
- › 14 October 2021 - Poland passes legislation, restricting the possibility to any migrant arriving irregularly to access territory and seek asylum in the border area.
- › In October 2021 alone, Germany reported that the number of migrants who came to the country through Belarus reached 5,000.
- › 8 November 2021 – Groups of migrants arrive to the Polish/Belarus border in an attempt to cross the borders. In response, Poland and Lithuania reinforced police and army presence on the border and declared “State of Emergency”. Large groups of migrants remain in the border area in dire need of humanitarian assistance, without access to shelter and essential support in freezing temperatures.



Situation Update per Country

Belarus

Number of People Affected: 2,000¹

Since mid-May 2021 thousands of people have crossed from Belarus to Lithuania, Poland and neighbouring countries. A significant increase of irregular entries from Belarus into the European Union (EU) has been observed, compared to the same periods of 2020. According to the migrants, the majority of them is aiming for Germany. Germany reported that in October alone the number of migrants who came to Germany through Belarus reached 5,000. The majority of migrants are from Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, Syria, Democratic Republic of Congo, Yemen, Sudan and other Middle East, African and Asian countries. Among the migrants, many are women and children, some are infants.

On Monday, 8 November, thousands of migrants were massing in Belarusian territory along the borderline with Poland in organized groups. According to the media estimations, there are 2,000 migrants at the border. The migrants who want to cross the border and get to EU started a camp and are currently situated closed to the border refusing to return to Belarus.

Lithuania

Number of People Affected: 4,000²

Since 12 July 2021, the number of people who entered Lithuania irregularly from Belarus this year rose from 1,416 to 4,154. Consisting of either single men, women or families as well as minors. In October 2021, there were 36 centres operational. These centres were spread wide either along the border with Belarus or inside the country within a radius of at least 100 to 200 km from the capital of *Vilnius*. They housed about 30 to 800 migrants, all living in together, with often inadequate humanitarian standards and de facto under detention conditions.

As of 10 November, almost all people have been relocated to 5 centres. 93% of migrants live in heated buildings or modular houses in centers in Rukla, Pabradė, Medininkai, Kybartai and Vilnius, and about 7% migrants still live in heated hangars / tents in Pabradė Reception Center, but until the end of this week will also be moved to modular cabins. All minors are housed in buildings or container houses. The Ministry of Social Security and Labor takes care of the most vulnerable. All temporary accommodation in municipal premises are closed. 17% of migrants, members of the LGBTIQI + community are accommodated separately, and most migrants have access to mobile shops, and can prepare their own food.

While the transfer to 5 centres with more appropriate structures has significantly improved conditions, many agencies still, report significant gaps in how these are set up and that there is reportedly a lack of personnel and services at these facilities to provide assistance and protection for the people accommodated there. The facilities will remain as de facto detention centres, without the possibility for anyone leaving the centres, including children. Issues that the LRC is actively working to be resolved:

- ensure that 4 m² is allocated to one person,
- also that people are segregated on the basis of ethnic groups;
- ensure a sufficient number of sanitary facilities inside the premises for long-term accommodation in the camps,

¹ Estimation of Belarus Red Cross

² Based on the [Operation Update: Lithuania Population Movement \(MDRLT001\)](#) published on 13 October 2021.

- increase the number of camp staff (social workers, psychologists),
- to provide permanent medical services in each camp, as at the moment doctors only visit camps on daily basis, but there aren't dedicated only to the camps doctors.
- ensure that mobile shops are accessible to all migrants,
- to create opportunities for regular communication with relatives, contacts with NGOs, lawyers

The centres are visited by the LRC on a regular basis as well as the authorities. Mobile Specialist Teams (MST) visit the camps every day, migrants need information, collect their needs, and help the camp administrations to perform daily functions.

Poland

Number of People Affected: 6,000³

The number of people, mainly from Afghanistan, Iraq and Sudan, crossing the Polish – Belarusian (PL-BY) border started to increase rapidly at the end of May 2021. The Polish Border Guard (PBG) officially reported the first incidents of detaining groups of people who irregularly had crossed the PL-BY border at the end of May. At this time the total number of people irregularly crossing the PL-BY border detained by PBG was 78 since the beginning of 2021. Since September the number of people trying to cross the border has risen significantly with Polish government reporting between 500 – 800 people prevented to enter the country daily. On 8 November, large groups of migrants made their way to the Polish border from Belarus and attempted to cross the border, which was prevented by PBG, police and army who increased up to 12,000 number of troops at the PL-BY border. According to the PBG there were over 30,000 “illegal” attempts to cross the PL-BY border year to date. Polish authorities estimate there are 12-15,000 migrants in Belarus, from whom 4,000 are already at the PL-BY border. The situation is expected to be escalated in the near future. The Polish Red Cross, other NGOs and all media are banned from entering the state of emergency zone. There's no reliable information what exactly happens with people within the zone. PRC sent official letters to the Minister of Interior requesting access to the state of emergency zone.

Red Cross and Red Crescent action

Belarus

Number of People Assisted as of 10 November: **tbc**

On 9 November, Belarus Red Cross received confirmation of long-term access to the group of migrants who are currently on the border between Belarus and Poland. It was already late evening when Grodno branch staff and volunteers got there to distribute help. They were able to provide support with the locally raised (from business, state enterprises and local authorities) items, as well as used some items from their stocks. The support included food parcels with bread, sausages, tinned meat, water, biscuits and fruits; hygiene kits; warm clothes and socks; blankets:

- | | |
|-------------------------------|---|
| • Water – 5,300 l | • Meat products – 1.5 tons |
| • Tinned meat – 500 kg | • Bread – 1,000 pcs |
| • Biscuits/pastry – 1,200 pcs | • Clothes, socks – 1,000 pcs |
| • Apples – 200 kg | • 100 food parcels, warm clothes, 51 blankets |

³ Based on the draft DREF Operation Poland: Population Movement (MDRPL001) currently being processed, expected [to be published](#) in the coming days.



Figure 1- Red Cross teams delivering life-saving aid to migrants stranded at the border. Photo: Belarus Red Cross.

BRC is coordinating support with the local partners and authorities.

Lithuania

Number of People Assisted as of 31 October: **4,319⁴**

Current Lithuanian Red Cross (LRC) activities across all migrant reception centres and temporary accommodation centres include:

- **Monitoring living conditions and the wellbeing of the migrants** either via the Protection Monitoring teams or the Mobile Specialist teams. The Monitoring teams are made of 1 legal adviser, 1 RFL, 1 monitor and 1 interpreter; the Mobile specialist team is composed of 1 Team leader administrator 1 PSS, 1 social worker and as needed 1 interpreter.
- Providing **clothing, hygiene, and food parcels, psychological first aid, legal advice, translation services, RFL services**, referral to professional psychologist services, activities for children. The relief distributions are managed by the volunteers under the leadership of the branches and the newly hired volunteer coordinators. The Lithuanian Red Cross has agreements with psychologists who provide both individual and group consultations to migrants, but the need for such consultations is greater than at present.
- Responding to special requests such as **provision of prescribed medication**, items for babies; reporting situation of vulnerable individuals. The Lithuanian Red Cross also seeks to ensure that regular and daily medical services are provided in major camps.
- Leading the **coordination** of civil societies' assistance and other NGO partners involved in the operation.
- Presenting its observations, concerns, and recommendations to the relevant stakeholders during weekly meeting and diligently following-up on the situation.
- Participating in meetings with the authorities so as to ensure the LRC is able to fulfil its humanitarian mandate.

The LRC has started so-called "social clubs" where migrants can adapt their skills (food production, hairdressing, etc.) and provide services to other migrants in the camps.

⁴ 4,319 people have been assisted by LRC under the [DREF Operation - Lithuania: Population Movement \(MDRLT001\)](#)

From the second week of November 2021, the Lithuanian RC started to make relief items/humanitarian kits available for the authorities as a means of indirect distribution to people trying to enter/entering the emergency zone, irrespective if they are staying in Lithuania or no.



Figure 2- A Red Cross volunteer is playing with children at a reception centre in Pabrade.
Photo: Lithuanian Red Cross.

Poland

Number of People Assisted as of 10 November: **1,000⁵**

The Polish Red Cross is expanding its activities and is providing support in the following areas:

- **Clothes, food and hygiene items distribution:**
 - Country-wide ad-hoc fundraising and a public goods collection have been announced and are in progress.
 - 6 Local Distribution Points based on local RC branches offices in Biała Podlaska, Białystok, Hajnówka, Sokółka and Suwałki have been established by the state of emergency zone and in Włodawa in the emergency zone. Currently (as of 24 October) over 1,000 ready-to-go kits have been provided to the migrants (with the support of regional RC branches and local NGOs staff and volunteers).
 - PRC is providing food and non-food items (clothes, blankets, sleeping bags, hygienic kits and educational materials for kids, COVID prevention kits) also to the PBG facilities on the PL-BY border)
 - PRC cooperates with the Office of Commissioner for Human Rights (CHR). At the moment, CHR Office is the only institution allowed to enter the state of emergency zone. PRC staff and volunteers 6 times accompanied the CHR in visiting the PBG reception points in the zone (note: the entrance approval for PRC is always on the local Border Guard leadership).
 - Refugee Centres run by Office for Foreigners – several visits with non-food items like clothes, shoes and hygienic-kits have been done.
- **Provision of First Aid:**
 - During visits in PBG's posts (a few of them are in the emergency zones) PRC Rescuers provide first aid assist to migrants, identify potential future medical risk and advice PBG authorities to send

⁵ Based on the draft DREF Operation Poland: Population Movement (MDRPL001) currently being processed, expected [to be published](#) in the coming days.

those migrants to public health system for future assessment. First aid was provided also to a few migrants found in open terrain during travelling between posts. The information about the migrants looking for help were taken from the CHR Office who had been informed by the activist working in the field.

- **Restoring Family Links:**

- Information leaflets of provision of the RFL Services with access to online platforms are added to ready-to-go clothes and hygienic-kits for migrants.

Polish Red Cross (PRC) Tracing service has received several phone calls directly from people stranded in the emergency zone and 26 emails from family members who are living in Europe or in the Middle East. All written enquiries were referred to closest Tracing services in ICRC Delegations or NSs. In addition, ICRC has also received several enquiries through the ICRC webpage that were referred to the RFL Network. Tracing Service of PRC is expecting to receive new Tracing requests through RFL Network.

- **Communication**

- Regular information in social media about current activities of the PRC dedicated to migrants outside the state of emergency zone supported by the GB statements on the PRC mandate, auxiliary role and cooperation with other RC Movement's components.
- Regular media interviews for national and local TV, radio stations or press.
- Since 11 October, the IFRC delegate's support – new Twitter account opened, field visits in Podlaski and Lubelski Regional Branches with interviews with volunteers and local NGOs collaborating with the PRC promoted, meetings with Office for Foreigners and IOM, interviews for national and international media held and published.

- **Cooperation with Partners**

IFRC Regional Office

- A DREF has been issued to support the Lithuanian RC in July 2021. The operation is ongoing and is continuously supported by Regional Office teams.
- A DREF request to support the Polish RC response is being processed, and a DREF request for Belarus is being drafted.
- An Operations Manager is being engaged to coordinate the overall situation and support the National Societies in their operations
- A mission from the Danish RC technical teams is facilitated for 11-12 November to Lithuania, to support with providing perspectives to the Lithuanian RC on how response to the humanitarian needs of migrants in the newly established centres for migrants can be improved, including in dialogue with national authorities.
- The escalating situation on the Polish-Belarusian border have been leading news bulletins across Europe. From 10 to 27 October, IFRC deployed a delegate to support Polish Red Cross on communications and humanitarian diplomacy. She has supported the National Society in managing a reputational issue related to migration; in liaising with authorities and other organizations; and on media engagement, including interviews with national and international outlets such as [Deutsche Welle](#) and TVN 24.
- Key messages, photos and videos have also been shared via the IFRC Newswire and regular updates have been posted on social media platforms, highlighting the work of all three National Societies.

Contact information – IFRC Regional Office for Europe

For further information specifically related to these operations please contact:

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How we work

All IFRC assistance seeks to adhere to the [Code of Conduct](#) for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) in Disaster Relief and the [Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Humanitarian Response \(Sphere\)](#) in delivering assistance to the most vulnerable. The IFRC's vision is to inspire, **encourage, facilitate and promote at all times all forms of humanitarian activities** by National Societies, with a view to **preventing and alleviating human suffering**, and thereby contributing to the maintenance and promotion of human dignity and peace in the world.