



Migrant Crisis: Tensions Escalate at Polish Border

Summary

Thousands of migrants have attempted to cross westward from Belarus into Poland over the past few weeks. On November 16, Polish forces at one crossing used water cannons and tear gas to deter hundreds of migrants attempting to force their way across the border; they responded by throwing stones and other items. This incident is the latest in a crisis that has led the European Union to place fresh sanctions on Belarus, which it accuses of manufacturing the migration crisis on the bloc's eastern frontier for political gain. Belarus has denied this claim, instead blaming the West for the crossings, and accusing it of poor treatment of migrants. Due in part to the remote location of the crossing, there are currently no direct implications for the U.S. private sector, although border closures would have logistical implications for travelers between Warsaw and Minsk. However, this crisis deepens concerns over the potential for a humanitarian crisis in Belarus and a wider geopolitical crisis in Poland and across Europe.

Background

Since November 8, a large group of migrants from the Middle East and Central Asia has been stuck in Belarus at the Poland border, attempting to enter Europe. Most are reportedly economic migrants aiming to reach Germany or other western European countries. Belarus authoritarian leader Alexander Lukashenka is accused of using the migrants as pawns to destabilize the 27-nation bloc in retaliation for its sanctions on his regime. Belarus denies orchestrating the crisis, but has reportedly opened its borders to nationals of several unstable countries such as Iraq, Syria, and Afghanistan by issuing visas to travelers with one-way airline tickets—something usually not allowed for any traveler, let alone one a government feels won't return to their home country. As the harsh Belarusian winter looms, the humanitarian situation has reportedly deteriorated. Some people have been taken to hospital for hypothermia and loss of consciousness, but were later brought back to the border; the temperature is forecast to drop as low as 25 degrees in coming days. Videos on Telegram channels also reportedly show food distribution chaos, with migrants fighting over food. Belarusian authorities were reportedly transporting migrants to the border, and not allowing them to return to Minsk. As of this report's publication, there are [reports](#) that Belarus is clearing the migrant camps, though it is unclear the future status of the migrants and their attempts to cross the border into Poland amidst overnight (November 17) [reports](#) of aggressive border crossing attempts.

Polish Forces Respond to Recent Attempts at Aggressive Entry

On November 16, Polish forces used water cannons and tear gas to deter hundreds of migrants attempting to force their way into Poland at the Kuznica-Bruzgi border crossing. Allegedly led by plainclothes Belarusian personnel, migrants threw stones, sticks, and other items at Polish troops. The resulting clashes injured nine Polish officers. The Polish Defense Minister reported that several small groups of migrants also attempted to enter Poland unlawfully elsewhere during the night of November 16-17, while attention was focused on Kuznica. Near Czeremecha, a group of approximately 50 migrants attempted to enter Poland while Belarusian personnel reportedly used laser pointers to blind Polish troops. There appears to be a dramatic increase in violence by migrants; in addition to sticks and stones, some migrants have [reportedly](#) used stun grenades, allegedly supplied by Belarus.

According to the Polish Border Guard service, there were 161 attempts to enter Poland unlawfully on November 16, and 35,000 such attempts so far in 2021. Poland has declared a state of emergency in the border zone with Belarus, including in parts of the Podlaskie and Lubelskie provinces. The Polish

government has established a [website](#) to provide updates, including images and footage, on the border situation.

The Belarusian Defense Ministry [accused](#) Poland of an "unprecedented" military buildup on the border, saying that migration control did not warrant the concentration of the 15,000 troops backed by tanks, air defense assets and other weapons that Poland has deployed as a result of the migration issue. Poland, in return, has said there is "no military threat" at the border, and that the primarily civilian police and border guards that there have deployed to protect Poland and the EU from the pressure of "illegal migration." Meanwhile, Belarusian joint military exercises with Russia mean that [multiple overflights](#) of Russian military aircraft, escorted by Belarusian fighter jets, have occurred contemporary to this buildup. The exercises had been previously scheduled, but provide a backdrop of military muscle for the humanitarian and diplomatic tussle between neighbors.

Private-Sector Implication

While difficult to verify, on November 17, Polish authorities [reportedly](#) said that the situation had calmed down, with fewer people reportedly in the large migrant camp by the Kuznica crossing. However, the Polish government said that on the same day, there were several attempts to cross the border by force, including by one group with as many as 500 people. The Polish government [reported](#) that some migrants threw stone and firecrackers, while "the Belarusian services used lasers and flashlights". The Belarusian state news agency reported that migrants were being given shelter inside a logistics center at the border, giving them the first chance after many days to sleep indoors. The situation remains fluid and can deteriorate without notice.

The remote location of the border crossing from major cities means that events at the border likely will not have a direct impact on the U.S. private sector apart from logistics. The Kuznica-Bruzgi border crossing is located approximately 60km northeast of Bialystok, the nearest major Polish city, along the main road (Belarus M6/Poland 19) connecting Warsaw and Minsk. The crisis has temporarily closed the border crossing, providing some logistical challenge to organizations seeking to transit from one capital to the other. At this time, OSAC recommends monitoring the situation for its broader geopolitical implications. Previous waves of migration, although at a much larger scale, caused major political issues across the EU and led to civil unrest and targeting of non-native populations in many member states. Should an EU country relent and allow even some of the migrants to enter its borders—due perhaps to its obligation by international law to allow persecuted populations to apply for asylum—security managers should prepare for demonstration activity especially in areas with more right-leaning governments, such as Poland and Hungary, and in areas deemed to be desired destinations for migrant populations, such as Germany and France.

It is important to note that not all migrants have the right to have their cases heard by a destination country. While those fleeing persecution are covered by international law in this case, those fleeing for economic reasons are not. Given the relative recent stability in a country such as Iraq, for example, it is unlikely that EU countries would recognize asylum requests from Iraqi citizens. Iraq has reportedly been appealing for its citizens to fly home, with the Iraqi Embassy in Moscow announcing plans to organize evacuation flight for those who wish to return to Iraq; given their willingness to undertake arduous travel to an inhospitable climate such as Belarus in November, it is not clear how many will want to go. On November 18 approximately 370 migrants boarded an evacuation flight from Minsk to Baghdad, according to the Iraqi MFA, and approximately 200 other migrants in Belarus have requested voluntary return. Given the problematic nature of migration in Turkey, currently home to more than three million refugees, Turkish Airways has announced that it will not allow citizens of Yemen, Iraq, and Syria to board its flights to Minsk.

Additional Information

For more information on the security environment in Belarus and Poland, and across the Europe region, contact [OSAC's Europe team](#).

- [OSAC Country Security Report: Poland](#)
- [Government of Poland Update on the Situation](#)
- [U.S. State Department Travel Advisory: Belarus](#)
- [U.S. State Department Travel Advisory: Poland](#)

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