

## **ETUC Statement on the Belarus-EU border: Border guards, walls and razor wire cannot be the response to a humanitarian emergency**

Updated version adopted by the Executive Committee of 8-9 December

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The European trade union movement is extremely concerned about the humanitarian crisis at the border of Poland and Belarus and calls for immediate EU action to ensure migrants' fundamental rights are respected and their humanitarian needs are met.

For several weeks now, we have been witnessing the drama unfold at the border of Poland and Belarus. Thousands of migrants, including pregnant women and children, are stranded in Belarus on the opposite side of the barbed wire. People are living in a makeshift camp in the vicinity of the border, with no food and trying to keep warm in freezing temperatures. At least ten people have died.

The ETUC strongly condemns the actions of the Belarusian authorities and international smuggling networks. The EU must stand against the blackmailing and political game that Lukashenko's regime is performing by showing an EU way of solidarity and responsibility. Furthermore, the ETUC condemns the geopolitical games against the EU played behind the scenes by Russia and Turkey.

The EU's and Member States' response to the arrival of migrants cannot be the deployment of border guards, walls and razor wire, and their detention or deportation. Pushbacks are a clear violation of international and human rights conventions and should immediately stop.

The ETUC strongly opposes the European Commission proposal to allow Member States to suspend the rights of asylum seekers. The EU's militaristic approach to the humanitarian crisis on its border has played into the hands of Lukashenko's regime and rewriting fundamental rights under pressure would only serve to further encourage hostile actors to weaponise the lives of vulnerable people to exert pressure on Europe. The suspension of media freedom is also setting Europe on a slippery slope – it is more important than ever too that journalists are given free access to the area<sup>1</sup>.

The ETUC has been calling for an EU asylum and migration policy based on human rights, solidarity and shared responsibility as well as more regular labour migration pathways. After the so-called migration crisis of 2015, the EU is still struggling to find a common and fair asylum and migration policy. This dysfunctional system, exacerbated by a lack of EU competence in this field, is a weakness, which has now been exploited by Lukashenko. As stated by the ETUC<sup>2</sup>, the proposed new Pact on Asylum and Migration in 2020 will not solve the current failures in the system.

The ETUC calls on the European Institutions to immediately intervene to put an end to this situation, and to concretely support those EU Member States facing the arrival of migrants at their borders. The EU should organise the reception of these migrants

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.etuc.org/en/pressrelease/rewriting-asylum-rules-victory-blackmail>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.etuc.org/en/document/etuc-statement-new-pact-migration-and-asylum>

and support them in applying for asylum or international protection and relocate them among all Member States.

The ETUC urges Poland, Lithuania and Latvia to fully respect EU and international human rights obligations and calls on Poland to put an end on the state of emergency and allow immediate access to humanitarian organisations, journalists and doctors into the border area.

The ETUC and its affiliates in Latvia, Poland and Lithuania are concerned about the working conditions of the frontline workers – border guards, police officers and soldiers – which should be supported, their safety and mental well-being ensured as much as possible, and not be trapped between Lukashenko's games and the securitarian approach of the EU. Teachers, doctors and other workers supporting migrants directly often face complex and stressful challenges, higher workloads and their situation should also be taken into account. The ETUC appreciates the commitment and contribution of these workers.