

Who is the real organisator? Who controls the flow of illegal immigrants?

Refugees keep flowing to EU through Belarus. Lithuanian authorities think that this is Lukashenko's revenge in response to Brussels sanctions. Although Minsk denies its involvement in it. However, on July 15, Iraq announced the initiation of investigation of the criminal network organised by Lukashenko's regime.

Who is the real organisator? Who controls the flow of illegal immigrants? In whose hands have real people become a weapon and in whose - goods? How much have smugglers made this year? And how much have Belarus authorities earned? We were looking for the answers to all these questions along with Lithuanian online edition 15min.lt and Belarus Independent Investigators Alliance.

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AFRICAN DEALS

July 19, 2021. “Davayte razbiratsya” film crew went to the Belarusian-Lithuanian border to examine the situation. Locals told us that an unusual flow of south foreigners to the village had started at the beginning of this summer. The next day at 6 am when the journalists were on their way back, a man of non-Slavic appearance ran into them right from the woods.

This is what Bari Alpha, a refugee from Conakry told us: “I went to Istanbul from Conakry and bought a ticket to Belarus. I was told that Belarus has an internal border with Lithuania. Only now I realise that this is not true and dangerous indeed. My visa expiration date was due so I had no time to prepare nor money to extend my visa. Thus, I left all my things behind and headed to the border. Only there I realised that I had forgotten my passport but I couldn’t go back.

He came to Belarus from Sierra Leone, a country in West Africa. The whole journey cost him € 2500.



This is what he told us about the reasons for his leaving his home country: “We have poor facilities, like electricity - there’s no lighting anywhere. I talked about our government that does nothing about it in the streets and they decided to arrest me. So I had to flee. And my dad died in this political war. I was hiding in Guinea, where I spent a lot of years.

He took a flight to Minsk with a layover in Istanbul. In Minsk he stayed in a hostel, which is where he left his passport behind. Then he took a taxi bus and headed to the border along with other refugees. There his border-guide left him in the woods:

“He took my money and promised to meet me at the border. He dropped me off and said to meet him on the other side. But he just left me there alone. I had never seen him before and have no idea who he was. He told me that he was just doing his job and that’s it. I also know that he lives in Belarus”.

Bari Alpha learned about the way of getting to Belarus from his friend: “I was working in Conakry to put aside some money. I even had to borrow some cash from my uncle. Thus, all the money I had I gave to get a visa to Belarus. They gave me a job invitation. I used to play football well so the invitation says that I’m invited to Belarus as a football player.”

The refugee showed us a paper from a Belarus private football club “Academic”. This paper was his grounds for getting a visa to Belarus. Spelling and punctuation are retained.

This sport establishment has been working since 2016 with the head and owner Andrey Semtsov. We tried to call him to find out what basis he prints out such invitations for immigrants but managed to reach only his voicemail.

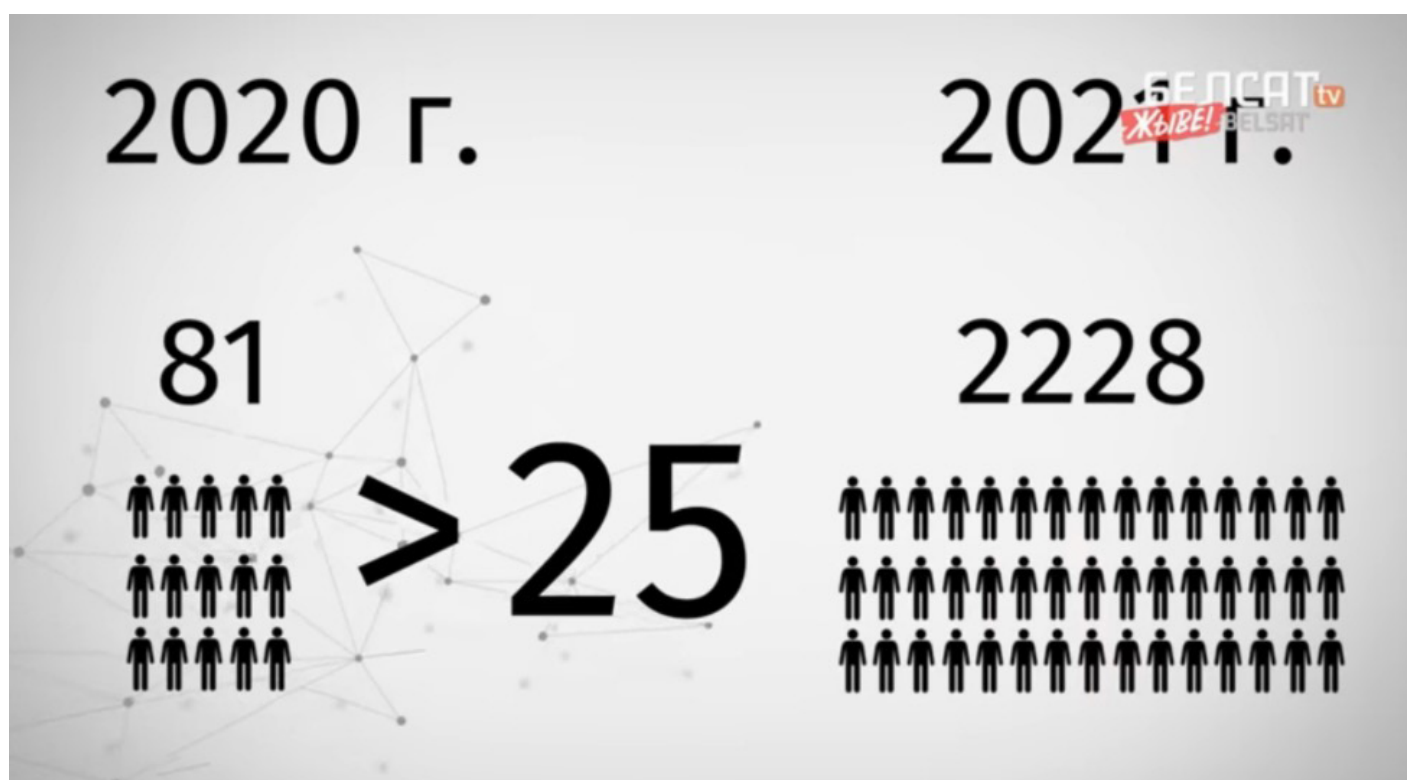
**“We are happy to offer you
to take part in training
from 15.07.2021 to 10.08.2021 in Minsk
to showcase your personal sport qualities”.**

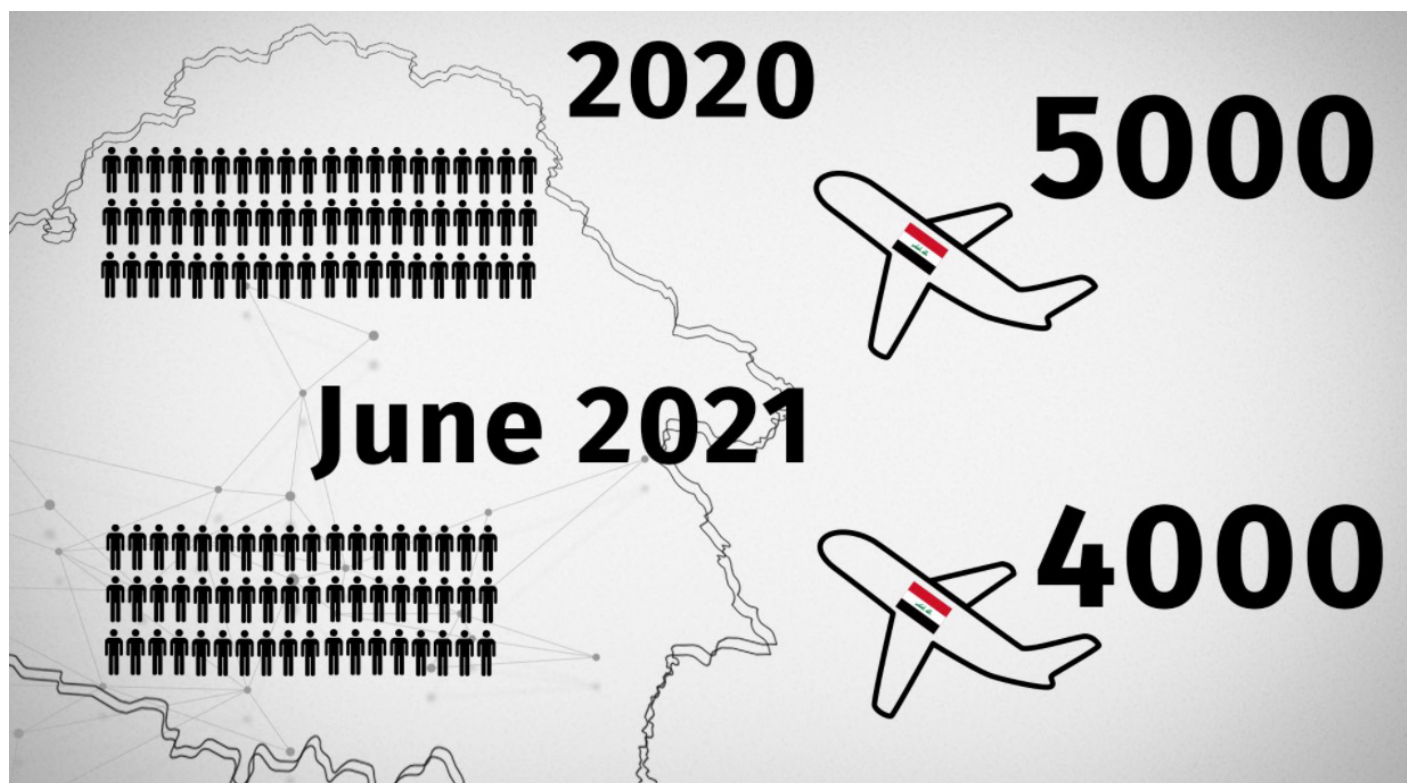
IMMIGRANTS FOR EXPORT

Since the end of spring Lithuania has been flooded with illegal immigrants from Belarus. About hundreds of people from Iraq, Syria and Africa cross the border on a daily basis. This number is 25 higher than the overall number of refugees crossed the border last year.

The migration crisis in Lithuania coincided with tourism boom in Belarus. This immigrant rush aroused concern in Iraq.

Last year about 5000 of Iraqis visited Belarus compared to 4000 of tourists from Iraq only in June 2021.



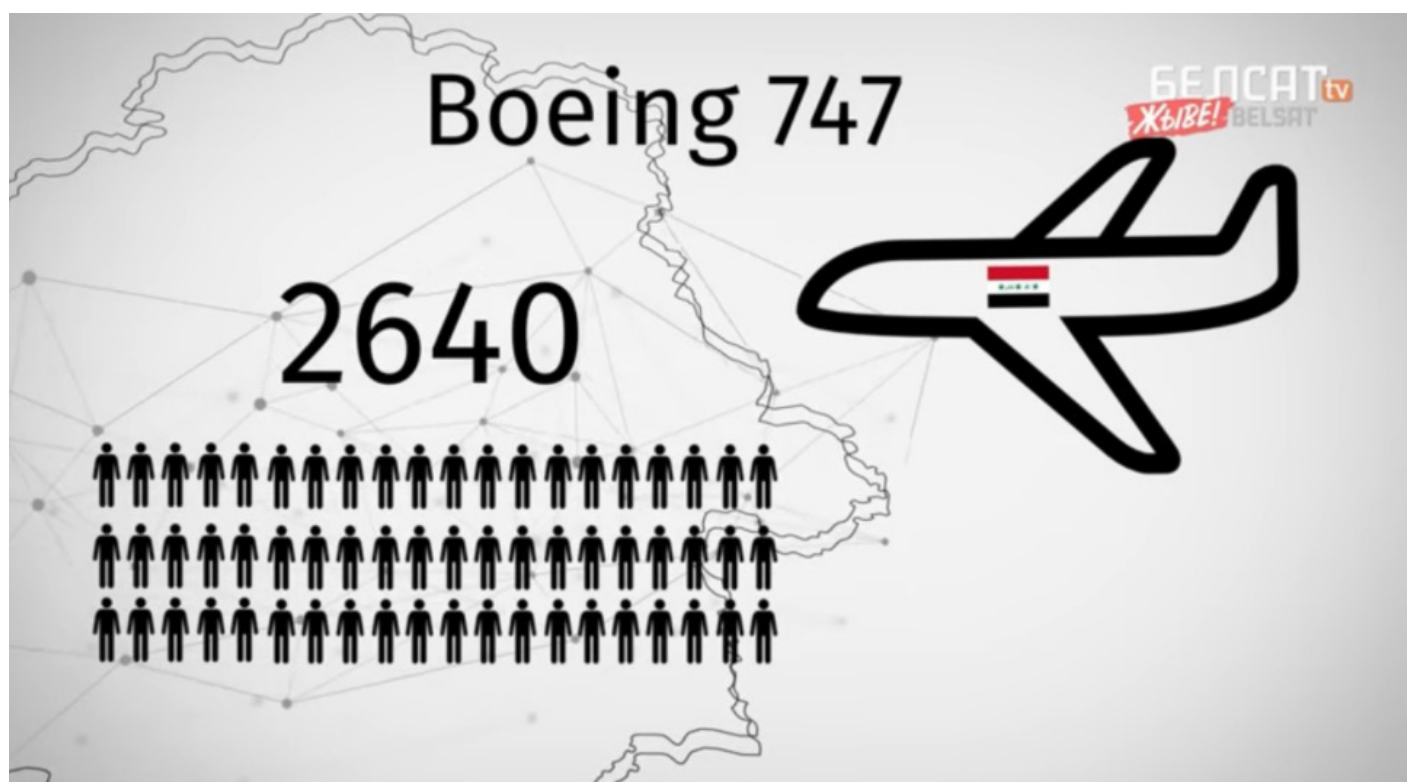


In July a large aircraft “Boeing 747” from Baghdad started its routing flights to Belarus. This aircraft can carry 660 passengers, which makes it 2640 of tourists a week compared to 1000 a week last year.

The number of Iraqis during these two summer months is much higher than the overall number of immigrants last year. Vidmantas Balkunas, journalist from 15min.lt, is convinced that the flood of immigrants is not going to end:

“The way immigrants start they journeys is always the same - they get tourist visas to Belarus. They arrive legally. On arrival they either contact smugglers or try to make it on their own”.

Immigrants are met in the airport by a group with a definite hierarchy. The leaders are simply dressed,



although they wear expensive watch and phones. From time to time they approach their subordinates to give some instructions.

There are many girls among those who meet immigrants in the airport. They have a list of passengers and walk them into the street. There they get into cars which take them to hotels. Our team three times came to the airport and observed the same picture: they never meet a big group of tourists nor do they take them to the city on a big tourist bus.

Although the President of Belarus is informed about the situation at the Lithuanian border, he has repeatedly stressed that his lack of actions is the response towards Brussels sanctions.

While Lukashenko is trying to negotiate economic relaxations, tickets to a better life are being sold on the Internet.



**“Arabian taxi to go abroad.
For additional information
contact us on Facebook or WhatsApp.
We offer quality services
for low prices”.**

Apart from that, Arabs post videos on YouTube and other social networks in which they instruct other immigrants on how to cross the Belarusian-Lithuanian border and get into Europe bypassing border guards.

Ahmed ali Badry read through a number of such instructions as he is going to leave Iraq and get into Europe through Belarus. Once he tried to get into Finland through Belarus but, unfortunately, he was sent back to Baghdad.

“It was the easiest way to get into Europe. We just want to live in peace and quiet, we want our children to get education. Those, who left already, share contacts of trusted smugglers. They accept payment in cash only”.

Ahmed points out that Belarusian border guards have a pretty loyal attitude to refugees:

“They just turn a blind eye to us cross passing illegally and let us go. It might be an order from the president. They see us crossing the border but don’t arrest anyone”.

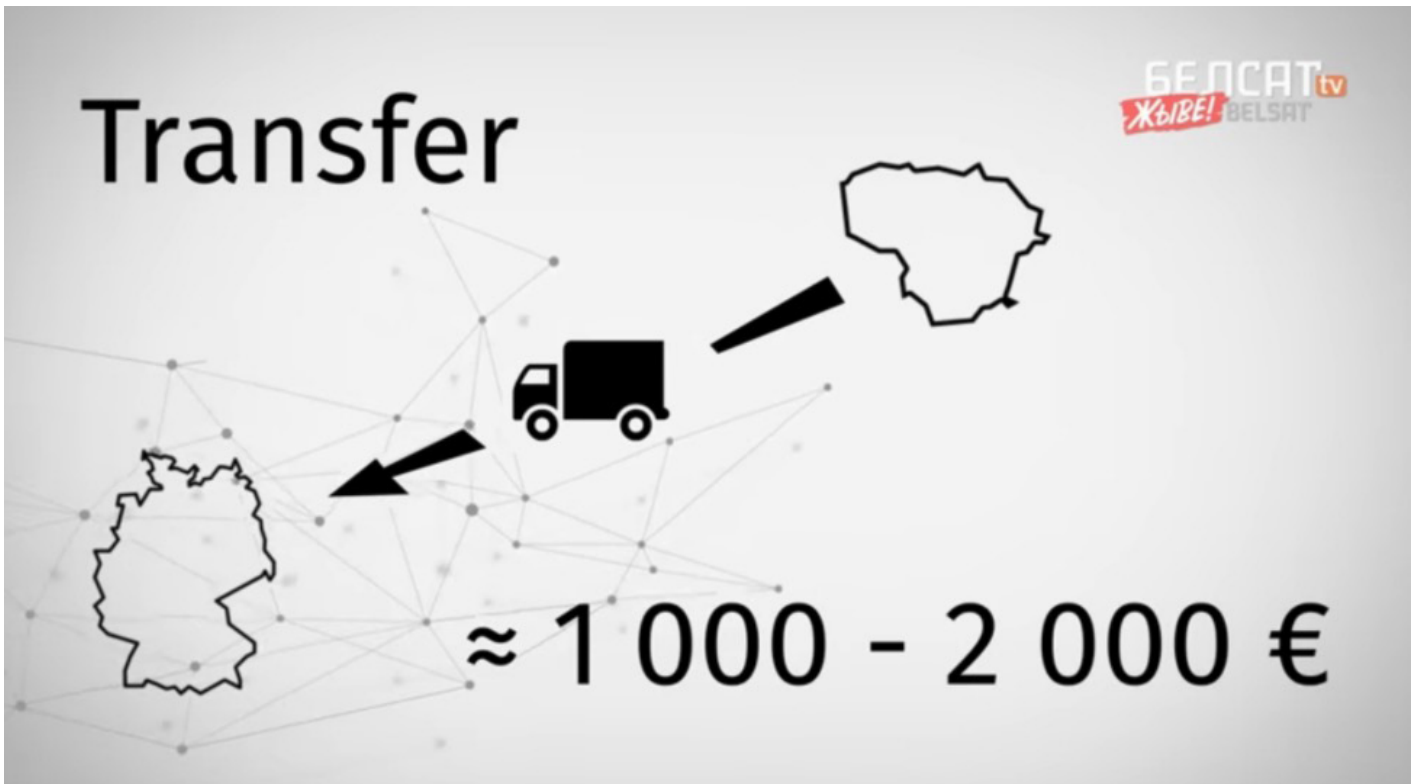
It’s cheaper and easier to get to Europe through Europe tell insiders. But they say that you have to pay on every stage and this is how a way to better life looks like. A person gets visa and buys tickets, which costs about €600, then €250 for a hotel and €200 to get to the border and for guide services through the border.



**“Take a taxi on arrival and go to a hotel.
Take some rest as then you’ll have to get to the village at the border.
It costs \$70. It takes 18 minutes to get to the border on foot.
There you will see a fence 1.5 metres long.
All you need to do is just pass it to get into Lithuania.
If you manage to get to Vilnius without being caught,
then you'll be able to go to any European country you like.
But if they take your fingerprints in Lithuania, this is the end”.**



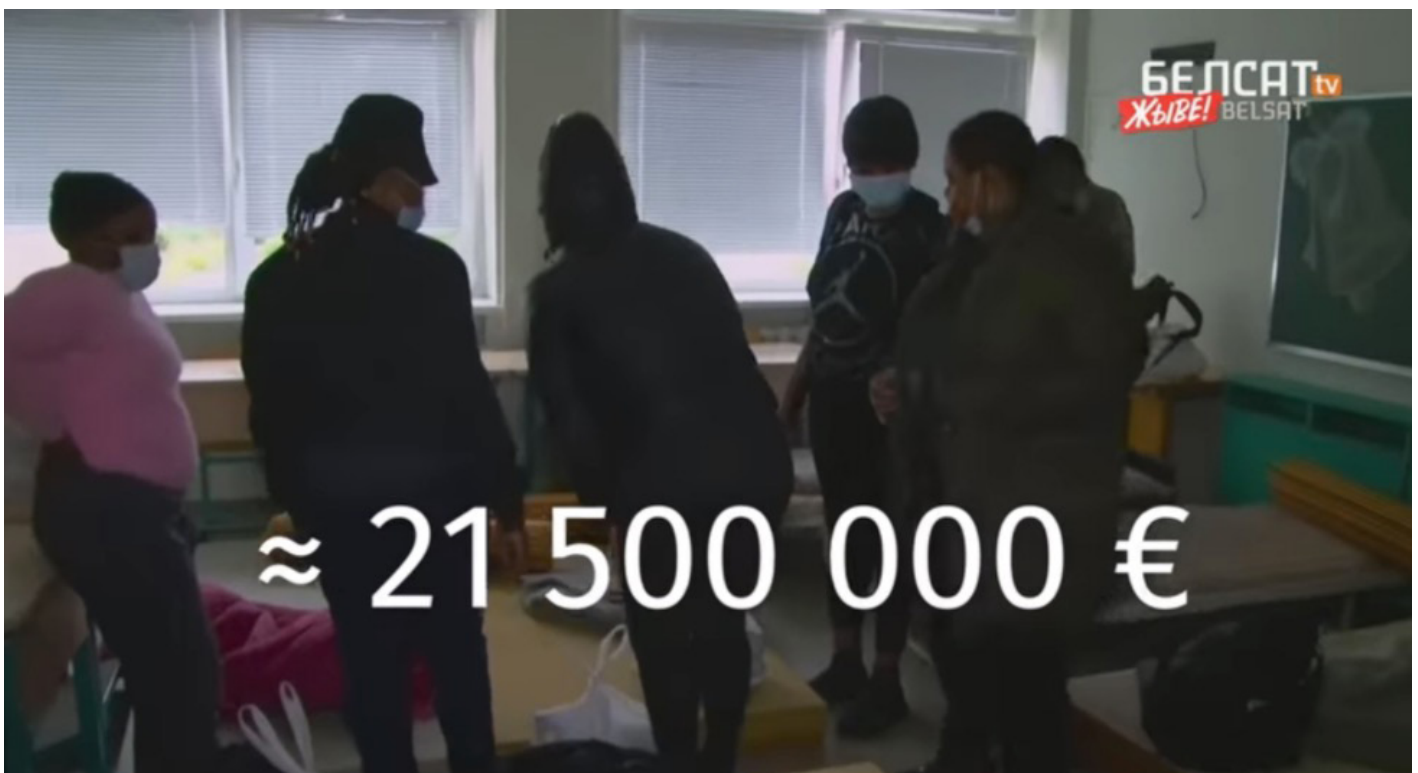
If you manage to pass unnoticed, you pay €1000-€2000 for transfer to Germany.



Overall, it makes about €5000 in cash. Otherwise, there is an option of services package which costs €15000. However, if one decides to illegally get into Europe on his own, it is possible to stay within €2500.

“If you do it with the help of smugglers, then it is likely to go well. Almost everyone made it successfully. But those who did it on their own were caught”, - says Ahmed ali Badry.

As it turned out, some tourist companies do business on transferring refugees. There are even those who can buy their property or business for a low price at short notice. Overall, about 2228 immigrants went to Lithuania and 300 to Poland through Belarus. Thus, this year smugglers have earned about €21 500 000 as on average they get around €8500 per person.



BELARUSIAN CORRIDOR

How does Belarus make money on this smuggling business? First, at the expense of coronavirus vaccination, which are obligatory included in the tourist service package. Despite the third coronavirus wave and Indian stamm, on July 1 Lukashenko introduced visa-free regime for citizens from 73 countries who don't have to quarantine.



“Citizens from 73 countries got an opportunity to come to Belarus to get a COVID-19 vaccine”.

Указ № 251 от 1 июля 2021 г.

However, “Sputnik”, which is offered to foreigners, is not accepted in Europe. Second, tourism services themselves. The Minister of Foreign Affairs of Lithuania Gabrielius Landsbergis said that a state travel agency “Centerkurort” that is owned by Administration of the President is somehow connected to refugee trafficking. Thirdly, the way of making money on immigrants means informal taxes on illegal entrance to Europe. Belarus authorities received \$2000000 for 1000 Iraqis caught by Lithuanian border guards. In fact, a state travel agency “Centerkurort” has an agreement with Iraq. Every tourist pays the travel agency \$3000-\$4000, which goes to Belarus in case a tourist doesn't return to his home country.

If a refugee crosses the border unnoticeable, another taxi driver will meet him on the other side. Our colleagues from Lithuania pretended to be refugees and called such a taxi.

Vidmantas Balkunas, a journalist from 15min.lt:

“We talked to many people - those who already crossed the border and those who are only planning. We joined public groups for illegal immigrants, where they discuss prices and exchange contacts of smugglers. We even called some smugglers and ordered a taxi. A taxi from the Lithuanian border to Germany, in case refugees manage to cross it unnoticeable, costs from 400 to 1300 euros.

On July 15 the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Iraq Fuad Hussein supported the idea of running an investigation of illegal transfer of Iraq immigrants to Lithuania through Belarus.

“Iraq is willing to participate in the investigation of smuggling our citizens to Lithuania through Belarus. We don’t accept smugglers in our state”.

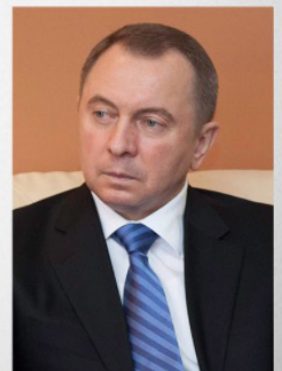
**Fuad Hussein
Minister of Foreign Affairs of Iraq**



What does Vladimir Makey, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Belarus, think about this situation?

“If they stop investing in mutual projects in Belarus, impose sanctions, they must not take offense at seeing a flood of immigrants. The money that we used to ensure the safety of our mutual borders is going to be used for our people’s needs”.

**Vladimir Makey
Minister of Foreign Affairs of Belarus**



Lithuanian border guards say that around 30% of immigrants get into Lithuania unnoticeable. Pursuing better life, most of them get into risk of deportation. A 22-year old Ahmed from Yemen crossed the border to Lithuania through the woods, gave in to Lithuanian border guards and got into a refugee camp. This is what he told us:

“I don’t remember exactly but I was going for 4 hours about 15 kilometres. It was freaking cold and we soaked wet by the time the guards found us. Then wet and cold we waited for 9 hours until they decided what to do with us. They were not sure if to send us to a refugee camp or else. However, they sent us to

prison for three days where we took a COVID test and quarantined for 2 weeks. Once the quarantine was over, they took our fingerprints to immigration office. Then we were sent to a refugee camp. The guards there turned to be pretty hostile. They shouted at us and treated us like slaves. So now we warn all of our friends not to go through Lithuania. Before we got into Netherlands, we spent some time in Poland. There we got caught and went to prison for 20 days. There we even had no chance to have shower”.

This man took a taxi from Poland to the Netherlands, where he stays until now. While he is trying to settle in a new country, other refugees from different countries go to Belarus borders with Europe seeking for better life. They pay big money, they get coned and left behind in the woods. These people are used as a weapon and goods.