



Weekly Briefing

**Latvia external relations briefing:
Latvia lifts travel restrictions during the Covid-19 crisis and open
borders between Baltic States**

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Latvia lifts travel restrictions during the Covid-19 crisis and open borders between Baltic States

The unprecedented situation of the spread of the COVID-19 has created challenges for all states that will impact their economies and societies for the foreseeable time, and has highlighted the importance of cooperation between nations and governments, starting from close neighbours. Cooperation between Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania has been traditionally very close. It is based on common interests and goals of the three countries in foreign and security policy, fostering economic development, and cooperation in the European Union (EU). In May 2020, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Latvia was working intensively in order to coordinate cooperation of three Baltics States and partners on the incremental easing of COVID-19 restrictions.

Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania agree on actions needed to establish an area for freedom of movement

Latvian government has been cooperating closely with Lithuania and Estonia, so that an agreement with respect to the Baltic States internal borders can be finalized. On May 6, Prime Ministers of all three Baltic States has agreed to reciprocally open the borders on 15 May 2020 to restore the movement for the three countries' citizens, and persons legally residing in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. "We unite three countries in one common space. It means that people from Lithuania to Estonia would travel through Latvia without restrictions and vice versa,"¹ said Prime Minister of Latvia Mr. Krišjānis Kariņš.

Decision to open the borders between the Baltic states was based on the similar epidemiological situation in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. The understanding between the Baltic States on the journeys of their residents does not affect restrictions on entry set by other

¹ https://www.lsm.lv/raksts/zinas/latvija/premjeri-vienojas-no-15-maija-atlaut-iedzivotaju-brivu-kustibu-baltijas-valstis.a358688/?utm_source=email&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=news

countries concerning the Latvian nationals. The external border with Russia and Belarus remains closed.

The prime ministers also discussed regional transport and energy infrastructure projects, which will play an important role in combating the effects of the Covid-19 crisis and the region's economic recovery. Continued close cooperation at the regional, EU and global level and working jointly, step by step, remains the keyword, with common objective to being able soon to eliminate restrictions related to COVID-19, help to restore much needed economic activities and free movement throughout the EU and Schengen area as soon as possible, taking-into-account the epidemiological situation of countries and health requirements.

Latvia opens borders between Baltic States since 15 May

On 15 May 2020, the Foreign Ministers of the Baltic States have signed a Memorandum of Understanding on Lifting of Travel Restrictions between Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania for Land, Rail, Air and Maritime Transport and Cooperation thereof during the COVID-19 Crisis, which provides agreement for removing restrictions on cross-border travel of persons between the Baltic States. During the meeting, the Foreign Ministers of Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia have discussed cooperation between the Baltic States during the COVID-19 crisis, the recovery of regional economies and topics on the agenda of the European Union's Foreign Affairs Council.

It was agreed by all three countries that, the nationals of the Baltic States and persons legally residing in the three countries may travel in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania without any restrictions since 15 May, provided that the person:

- has not travelled outside the Baltic States for the last 14 days;
- is not in self-isolation due to having tested positive for COVID-19 or having been in contact with someone who tested positive for COVID-19;
- has no symptoms of a respiratory infection².

² <https://www.mfa.gov.lv/en/news/latest-news/66003-memorandum-of-understanding-of-latvia-lithuania-and-estonia>

The above-mentioned individuals are allowed to cross the Estonian-Latvian border and the Latvian-Lithuanian border in their own vehicle or using the passenger transportation services available. Such persons are exempt from the quarantine requirement both upon entering the neighbouring country and returning home. The nationals and permanent residents of Latvia who arrive in Estonia or Lithuania from other countries may cross the territories of Estonia or Lithuania in transit only and on the condition that they do not have any symptoms of COVID-19.

The air flights have been resumed between Baltic states, to Germany and Norway

With the introduction of a comprehensive epidemiological safety program #ForbidTheVirusFromTravelling³, Riga Airport will resume international passenger flights to Vilnius, Tallinn, Oslo and Frankfurt on Monday, 18 May. Four flights daily will be operated by the national airline *airBaltic*. After receiving a special permission from the Ministry of Transport of the Republic of Latvia, *airBaltic* will also resume direct flights from Riga to Helsinki and Munich on May 25, 2020, and from Riga to Berlin on June 1, 2020.

The program #ForbidTheVirusFromTravelling was introduced to provide a set of measures for the protection of the Airport and Airport employees and the safe handling of passengers in order to minimize the risks of the spread of COVID-19. In developing the program, the Airport has consulted with Latvian health authorities and taken-into-account the recommendations of international aviation organizations.

Latvian Foreign Minister takes part in a videoconference of the Council of the Baltic Sea States to discuss cooperation in regard with COVID-19 pandemic

On 19 May 2020, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Latvia, Edgars Rinkēvičs, took part in a videoconference of the Foreign Ministers of the Council of the Baltic Sea States (CBSS) arranged by the Danish Presidency. The ministers were joined by the Secretary General of the European External Action Service.

³ <https://www.riga-airport.com/press-room-2/news-2/riga-airport-resumes-flights-in-the-conditions-of-increased-epidemiological-safety/en>

The participants shared views on current cooperation and challenges in the Baltic Sea region, including in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic and cooperation to address its consequences.

The Latvian Foreign Minister underlined the importance of the Roadmap of CBSS Reforms 2018–2020. The Roadmap underlined the need for the CBSS to become more flexible, innovative and productive, being able to cooperate with its partners in the region more closely and effectively, while retaining its ability to deliver concrete results in areas in which the CBSS is uniquely suited. The document underscored the high importance of regional cooperation formats.

Regarding the **COVID-19 outbreak**, participants underlined the importance of strengthened cooperation in the field of civil protection and encouraged the CBSS Civil Protection Network to focus on prevention, preparedness and relevant research actions. They also recommended continuing relevant cooperation through the Northern Dimension Partnership in Public Health and Social Well-being. The Latvian Foreign Minister noted that exit from the current crisis must take place by both increasing economic growth and facilitating the achievement of goals in addressing climate change with a view to facilitating sustainable development of the Baltic Sea region.⁴

Baltic states and Germany talk over security matters

Latvia extended its cooperation also with Germany to tackle negative effects of the Covid-19 crisis. On 20 May 2020, the Ministries of Foreign Affairs of the Baltic States and Germany held security policy consultations online. The consultations addressed the latest security policy related developments in the context of the upcoming German Presidency of the Council of the European Union (EU). The topics discussed were the development of the EU security and defense initiatives, strengthening of the EU's crisis management capabilities, and security aspects of dealing with the consequences of the COVID-19 crisis not only in the Member States but also in EU neighbourhood. According to release, the participants were in complete agreement that the EU should continue strengthening its security and defense capabilities. The consultations also addressed matters on the NATO agenda, including NATO's role and action during the pandemic, and the reflection process to further strengthen the Alliance's political dimension.⁵

⁴ <https://www.cbss.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Bornholm-Declaration.pdf>

⁵ <https://eng.lsm.lv/article/politics/diplomacy/baltic-states-and-germany-talk-over-security-matters.a360687/>

Conclusion

As a consequence of measures taken by the states in recent months, progress towards countering the spread of the COVID-19 has been made and the gradual easing of restrictive measures has commenced. On 15 May 2020, the Foreign Ministers of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania gathered in Riga to sign a trilateral Memorandum of Understanding on lifting travel restrictions between Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania for land, rail, air and maritime transport and cooperation thereof during the COVID-19 crisis. This memorandum is accompanying the decision initially taken by the three Baltic states' Prime Ministers on 6 May 2020 to reciprocally open the borders on 15 May 2020 to restore the movement for the three countries' citizens, and persons legally residing in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, and respective individual decisions by the Governments of the Baltic states. Internal borders between Baltic states were open and flights to several directions gradually resumed. Latvia has also continued its cooperation with Council of Baltic Sea States and Germany to deal with the consequences of the COVID-19 crisis.

References:

[1] Prime Ministers agree to allow free movement of citizens between Baltic States since 15 May (in Latvian): https://www.lsm.lv/raksts/zinas/latvija/premjeri-vienojas-no-15-maija-atlaut-iedzivotaju-brivu-kustibu-baltijas-valstis.a358688/?utm_source=email&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=news

[2] Memorandum of understanding of Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia. Available:

<https://www.mfa.gov.lv/en/news/latest-news/66003-memorandum-of-understanding-of-latvia-lithuania-and-estonia>

[3] Riga Airport website: <https://www.riga-airport.com/press-room-2/news-2/riga-airport-resumes-flights-in-the-conditions-of-increased-epidemiological-safety/en>

[4] Bornholm Declaration. Available at: <https://www.cbss.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Bornholm-Declaration.pdf>

[5] Baltic states and Germany talk over security matters. Available: <https://eng.lsm.lv/article/politics/diplomacy/baltic-states-and-germany-talk-over-security-matters.a360687/>