



Vilnius: weaponising a nuisance

Smuggling balloons from Belarus repeatedly closed Vilnius airport. Organised crime, tolerated by a state, used as a hybrid lever.

INCIDENT DETAILS • 5WH

Who Actor - Belarus-based smugglers; framed by Lithuania as state-enabled hybrid pressure.

What Contraband-carrying balloons repeatedly close airports.

Where Vilnius (VNO) and Kaunas (KUN); ~30 km from Belarus.

When Escalating Oct-Dec 2025, into 2026 - a dozen-plus closures.

Why A smuggling method tolerated, and weaponised, by the state.

How Balloons at 3-4 km (aircraft altitude); radar forces closures.

IMPACT

- Physical: real air-safety hazard - uncontrolled objects at aircraft altitude.
- Economic: 60+ hours closed; ~350 flights and ~51,000 passengers disrupted.
- Reputational: a small state's aviation switched off from across the border.
- Adversary gain: deniable leverage Minsk can throttle or unleash at will.

SEQUENCE OF EVENTS



A 2021: Belarus engineered a border migration crisis

B 2023-24: smuggling balloons emerge, then widespread

C 2025: 544 balloons intercepted; state of emergency declared

1 Balloons launched from Belarus

2 Drift at aircraft altitude (3-4 km)

3 Radar detection closes Vilnius/Kaunas

4 Border shut; state of emergency

Schematic, not to scale

ASSESSMENT, LESSONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- Nuisance is now a vector - a crude method disrupts a NATO airport at near-zero cost.
- Detection and calm are the answer - each closure is also the adversary's win; reopen fast.
- Proportionality is the trap - "shoot them down" is fraught over populated ground.
- Attack the enabler - border, customs and financial pressure on the tolerated networks.