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# INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION



## LOCAL BORDER TRAFFIC AS AN EFFICIENT TOOL FOR DEVELOPING CROSS-BORDER COOPERATION

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*Local border traffic (LBT) is a tool for cooperation between the EU member states and neighbouring countries. It emerged as a measure to mitigate the barrier effect of the EU's external border. In 2006, the European Parliament authorised the EU member states to conclude bilateral agreements on a simplified border crossing regime in border areas. This article analyses local border traffic as a cross-border cooperation tool. The territory described in the study includes the external borders of the EU (and Norway) with the Russian Federation and the Republic of Belarus. The article will be of interest to specialists in international and, particularly, in cross-border cooperation. The authors analyse the mechanism of local border traffic and identify possible trends based on the general socio-economic situation and foreign policy background in Russia, Belarus, and the EU (Norway). The article employs the cartographic method to enhance the visual component of the study. It is concluded that the LBT mechanism is effective and it has a positive effect on the development of border contacts between countries. There is a need to continue the dialogue between Russia, Belarus and the EU countries on both expanding the geographical scope of the LBT mechanism and ensuring its qualitative development.*

*Key words:* local border traffic, cross-border traffic, European Union, Russian Federation, Republic of Belarus

### Introduction

Local border traffic is a form of cross-border cooperation between neighbouring countries. Theory and

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practices of cross-border cooperation are studied by many renowned Russian political scientists, historians, economists, and geographers. Some of the works of Russian economic geographers — L. B. Vardomsky [3; 6; 4], A. G. Granberg [18; 23], V. A. Kolosov [14; 28] — have become classics in the field. As to recent publications, it is worth mentioning studies into cross-border cooperation between Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus. [26; 27; 19] However, there are few works focusing on the mechanism of local border traffic, most of them being dedicated to cross-border cooperation in general. Probably the most interesting work examining the mechanism of local border traffic as a theoretical object rather than its practical application at a border of two countries is the study by the Belarusian author, A. Eleseev, published in the English language. [36]

Most publications in periodicals analyse individual cases of the mechanism's application in the border areas of certain countries, primarily, in the Kaliningrad region of the Russian Federation and the border voivodeships of the Republic of Poland. [35; 2; 7; 8] The increased interest in the local border traffic mechanism operating between Russia and Poland is explained by its unique characteristics and scope, which will be proven below. This article examines local border traffic as an instrument of cross-border cooperation, analyses the factors behind its emergence, and uses geographical tools to analysis all the cases of LBT at the external borders of the EU and Norway, on the one hand, and the Russian Federation and the Republic of Belarus, on the other. Special attention is paid to the Russian-Polish border.

### **LBT as a tool of cross-border cooperation**

It is important to understand that the local border traffic is not an alternative to a visa-free regime, being an independent cross-border cooperation tool used by the EU since 2006. LBT between the Kaliningrad region and the Republic of Poland is a unique, but not the only, mechanism functioning in the Baltic Sea region and the Russian Federation.

The LBT regime as a tool for cooperation between the EU countries and the neighbouring states was developed as a measure to reduce the barrier function of the Union's external border. In 2006, recognising the need to support cross-border contacts at the local and regional levels, the European Parliament delegated the member states the authority to conclude bilateral agreements on a simplified border-crossing procedures for individuals residing, according to the general rule, within a 30 (maximum 50) km area from the border in each of the neighbouring states. [37]

Eight bilateral LBT agreements were functioning at the eastern EU border as of January 1, 2015 — three with Ukraine (signed by Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia), three with Russia (Norway, Latvia, and Poland), one between Moldavia and Romania, and one between Belarus and Latvia.

This article provides a description of the LBT agreements functioning at the borders of the EU/Norway with the Russian Federation and the Republic of Belarus. Four functioning and two signed but not functioning bilateral LBT agreements will be analysed below<sup>1</sup> (table 1).

Table 1

**Current LBT agreements in the transnational Baltic Sea region<sup>2</sup>**

| Countries         | Date of agreement | Date of LBT introduction | Length of the state border between the countries (km) | Population of the LBT area (EU/Norway, thousand people, as of 01.01.2015) | Population of the LBT area (country, bordering on the EU/Norway, thousand people, as of 01.01.2015) |
|-------------------|-------------------|--------------------------|---|---|---|
| Latvia/Belarus    | 23.08.2010        | 01.12.2011               | 141   | 166   | 65  |
| Norway/Russia     | 02.10.2010        | 29.05.2012               | 196   | 10  | 32  |
| Latvia/Russia     | 20.12.2010        | 06.06.2013               | 214   | 84  | 88  |
| Poland/Russia     | 14.12.2011        | 27.07.2012               | 232   | 1 400   | 950   |
| Lithuania/Belarus | 20.10.2010        | —                        | —   | 800   | 700   |
| Poland/Belarus    | 12.02.2010        | —                        | —   | 600   | 920   |

Source: drawn up by the authors based on [36; 16].

An up-to-date description of each mechanism mentioned in table 1 is given below. The article also presents forecasts for the LBT regime in view of the general socioeconomic situation and foreign policies pursued by Russia, Belarus, and the EU/Norway.

**Local border traffic between the Republic of Belarus (RB) and the Republic of Latvia (RL)**

The agreement between the Republic of Belarus and the Republic of Latvia on mutual travel of border area residents was signed on August 23, 2010, making it the first of the examined LBT agreements to be signed. This agreement is functioning in the border areas of the two countries on the either side of a 172 km border (fig. 1).

<sup>1</sup> The Republic of Belarus has signed LBT agreements with not only Latvia but also Lithuania and Poland. However, only the agreement with Latvia is functioning. Belarusian experts believe that Belarus has been deliberately delaying the entry into force of the other signed agreements. All legal procedures have been fulfilled except for one — Belarus has not presented a relevant diplomatic note. [9]

<sup>2</sup> Technically, the LBT agreement between Norway and Russia covers an area beyond the Baltic region. However, it is examined in this study for the purposes of comparative analysis and building a comprehensive picture of the LBT functioning in the border areas of the Russian Federation.



Fig. 1. Local border traffic area at the border of the Republic Belarus and the neighbouring countries

Source: drawn up by the authors.

A total of 220 thousand people — 65 thousand citizens of Belarus (0.7 % of the country’s total population and 5.4 % of that of the border Vitebsk region) and 166 thousand citizens of Latvia (8.3 % of the country’s population) — are eligible to enjoy the benefits of the LBT mechanism. This considerable dif-

ference in the size of eligible population is explained by the fact that the Latvian LBT area includes the city of Daugavpils with a population of 89 thousand people — the second largest Latvian city. However, the rural population of Latvian border districts (77 thousand people) is comparable to that of the Belarusian border areas. There are no open data on the number of individuals using the LBT mechanism. The most recent data from 2012 suggest that 1.6 thousand people from the Republic of Belarus and 9.5 thousand people from the Republic of Latvia used the LBT mechanism (according to the number of permits issued). [17]

Seven checkpoints — one railway, two highway, and four simplified regime crossings — ensure the functioning of the LBT mechanism at the Belarusian-Latvian border. The difference between simplified regime and highway crossings is that the former carry out only border control functions, whereas the latter are also responsible for quarantine, veterinary, phytosanitary, and motor vehicle control.

In general, LBT between the Republic of Belarus and the Republic of Latvia is a good example of the functioning of such agreements. On the one hand, the LBT mechanism does not complicate the general situation at the border (due to the small number of individuals using LBT permits); on the other, it facilitates personal and social contacts between the residents of the border districts. Belarusian experts emphasise the need for such contacts, since a significant number of Belarusian emigrants, who have families and relations in Belarus, live in the Latvian borderlands. [21]

Against the backdrop of positive opinions about the Latvian-Belarusian LBT given by both the expert community and officials in Belarus, many of the country's nationals wonder why Belarus abandoned the plans to launch a similar mechanism with Lithuania and Poland. Relevant bilateral agreements were signed by the Republic of Belarus with the Republic of Lithuania and the Republic of Poland in 2010 (table 1). All necessary legal procedures were performed, except for the last one — Belarus has not sent a diplomatic note stating the preparedness to launch the agreement. Some think that the reason is political and interpret this situation as a response of Belarusian officials to the 'anti-Belarusian' position of Lithuania and Poland. Others explain it as the unwillingness of Belarusian authorities to encourage the economic development of the Polish and Lithuanian border areas and money outflow. By different estimates, citizens of Belarus spend approximately USD 0.6-1 billion in Poland, using the Schengen visa mechanism (in 2013, 700,000 Schengen visas were issued to Belarusians, including 250,000 by Poland). If one adds 920 thousand people — residents of the Belarusian border areas potentially covered by the LBT with Poland, the annual Belarusian 'investment' in the Polish economy (and therefore, the lost profit of Belarusian businesses) will reach USD 3 billion.

The suspended launch of LBT between Belarus, Lithuania, and Poland can relate to the technical problems of state border functioning. The Belarusian-Lithuanian and Belarusian-Polish borders are much longer than the Belarusian-Latvian one, reaching 679 and 398 km respectively. Launching the LBT mechanism at such a long border requires significant human and finan-

cial resources. Moreover, checkpoints at these borders are already heavily loaded, especially, the highway crossings. The launch of LBT can lead to a technical collapse.

The agreement between the Republic of Belarus and the Republic of Lithuania covers the border districts of the Grodno and Vitebsk regions — home to approximately 700 thousand people (7.4 % of the country's population). In Lithuania, the LBT area includes districts of three counties (Alytus, Vilnius, and Utena) with a population of approximately 800 thousand people (27.5 % of the country's total population). The LBT area also includes the country's capital — Vilnius with a population of 553 thousand people. In Belarus, the benefits of LBT will be available to 360 thousand people living in the city of Grodno. Two railway and four highway crossings sustain border traffic at the Belarusian-Lithuania border. The Decree of the President of the Republic of Belarus No. 313 of May 10, 2006 lists simplified crossing checkpoints set up to ensure the functioning of the LBT regime. The Decree mentions 11 checkpoints. However, there is no reliable information on their technical condition and infrastructure. Probably, these checkpoints exist only on paper, just as the LBT mechanism between the Republic of Belarus and the Republic of Lithuania.

More than 1.5 million people are potentially eligible to enjoy the benefits of the LBT agreement between the Republic of Belarus and the Republic of Poland, including approximately 920 thousand people (9.8 % of the country's total population) living in the border districts of the Grodno and Brest regions of Belarus. The number of potential users of the LBT mechanisms in Belarus is so considerable, since the relevant area includes not only Grodno with a population of 360 thousand people, but also Brest with a population of 338 thousand people. In Poland, 600,000 people (1.5 % of the country's population) living in the Podlaskie and Lublin voivodeships are eligible to apply for LBT permits. However, on the Polish side, the potential LBT area does not contain any large cities. The most populated Polish city in the LBT area is Augustów with a population of slightly over 30 thousand people. The Polish city of Białystok with 300 thousand people can also become part of the LBT area, which is not the case today, since it lies at a distance of 54 km from the border. However, this is not an insurmountable obstacle to launching the LBT mechanism. This has been demonstrated by the Russian-Polish agreement. There are 12 checkpoints at the Belarusian-Polish border, including four railway, six highway, and two simplified regime crossings, which seems to be insufficient for sustaining the LBT regime between the Republic of Belarus and the Republic of Poland.

The prospects of LBT at the border between Belarus and the European Union cannot be analysed without considering the internal situation in the country. This article will focus on the spatial aspects of this situation, leaving forecasts to the specialists from the mentioned countries. In more detail, the problems of forecasting and assessing the prospects of LBT development will be considered as part of the examination of the mechanism's functioning at the borders of the EU/Norway with the Russian Federation.

## Local border traffic between the Russian Federation (RF) and the Kingdom of Norway (KN)

The agreement between the Government of the Russian Federation and the Government of the Kingdom of Norway on mutual travel of residents of Russian and Norwegian borderlands was signed on November 2, 2010. [31] It came into force only in May 29, 2012. This agreement covers border territories on either side of a 196 km border. In Russia, it includes municipalities of the Pechenga district of the Murmansk region within a 30 km border area (Nikel, Pechenga, Zapolyarny, and Korzunovo). In Norway, it is the border municipalities of the Finnmark fylke<sup>3</sup> (its Sør-Varanger municipality borders on Russia) (fig. 2).

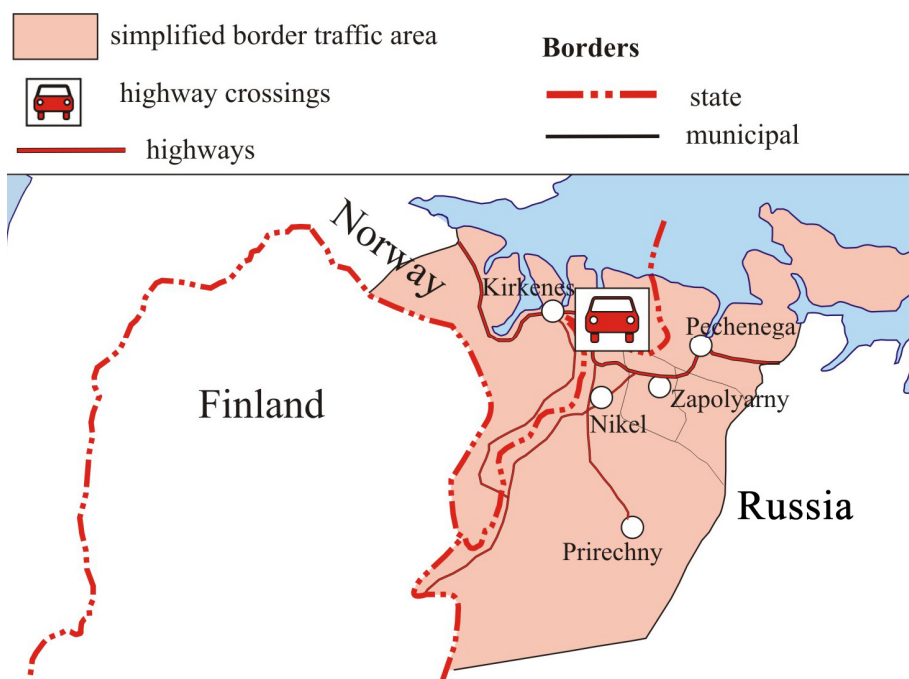


Fig. 2. The local border traffic area between the Russian Federation and the Kingdom of Norway

Source: drawn up by the authors.

According to the Agreement, 42 thousand people have the right to use the LBT regime, which makes this agreement the smallest in terms of eligible population. Ten thousand people are citizens of Norway (the population of the Sør-Varanger municipality — 13.5 % of that of the Finnmark fylke and 0.2 % of the country) and 32 thousand people are Russian citizens (86 % of

<sup>3</sup> A fylke is an administrative unit in Norway. Its Russian counterpart is a region.



the Pechenga district — 4 % of the population of the Murmansk region or 0.02 % of the country). In Norway, the LBT area includes only one large settlement — the town of Kirkenes with a population of 3.5 thousand people, the administrative centre of the border municipality. On the Russian side, the area includes two large settlements — the towns of Zapolyarny (approximately 15 thousand people) and Nikel (11.8 thousand people). Local border traffic is handled by the only Russian-Norwegian highway checkpoint Borisoglebsk-Storskog.

In 2014, out of 318,000 crossings of the Russian-Norwegian border, a total of 66,000 were performed using the LBT regime, including 24,000 by Russians and 42,500 by Norwegians. The difference is explained by the petrol prices in Norway, which are three times higher than those in Russia. This circumstance accounts for the popularity of Russian border districts among the residents of Norwegian borderlands. [5] A comparison of 2014 and 2013 figures shows a reduction in the total number of crossings using a visa and an increase in those using LBT permits.

The 2014 results of the LBT functioning demonstrate that the agreement has a potential for further development, mainly, through extending it to a greater number of residents of Russian borderlands. In 2014, one Norwegian citizen eligible to use the LBT mechanism accounted for 4.2 crossings, whereas one Russian citizen only for 0.75. On the one hand, it is explained by lower incomes of Russian citizens, on the other — by the popularity of Schengen visas, which permit travel across the EU and Norway, among Russians. Experts and regional officials are optimistic about the prospects of LBT at the Russian-Norwegian border, which is indicated by the plans to increase the capacity of the Borisoglebsk-Storskog checkpoint [33], which worked at 200 % of its capacity (150,000 crossings per year) in 2014. Moreover, on May 6, 2015, Russia approved the idea of extending the LBT area to the Norwegian village of Neiden at the Norwegian-Finnish border. [29]

### **Local border traffic between the Russian Federation and the Republic of Latvia**

The agreement between the Government of the Russian Federation and the Government of the Republic of Latvia on simplified mutual travel of residents of Russian and Latvian borderlands [32] was also signed in 2010 (table 1). The mechanism was launched only in summer 2013, i. e. a year later than those with Norway and Poland, although the agreement with the latter was signed in 2011.

The LBT area includes border districts located on either side of a 214 km border. In Russia, it is seven municipalities of the Pskov region. In Latvia, it is the territory of 11 *novadi*. 170 thousand people are eligible to use the LBT mechanism. The population of border areas is almost equal on either side of the border. On the Russian side, the area includes large settlements — the towns of Ostrov (20.7 thousand people) and Pechery (10.2 thousand people), whereas the largest settlements on the Latvian side are Alūksne (8.8 thousand people) and Ludza (9.5 thousand people).

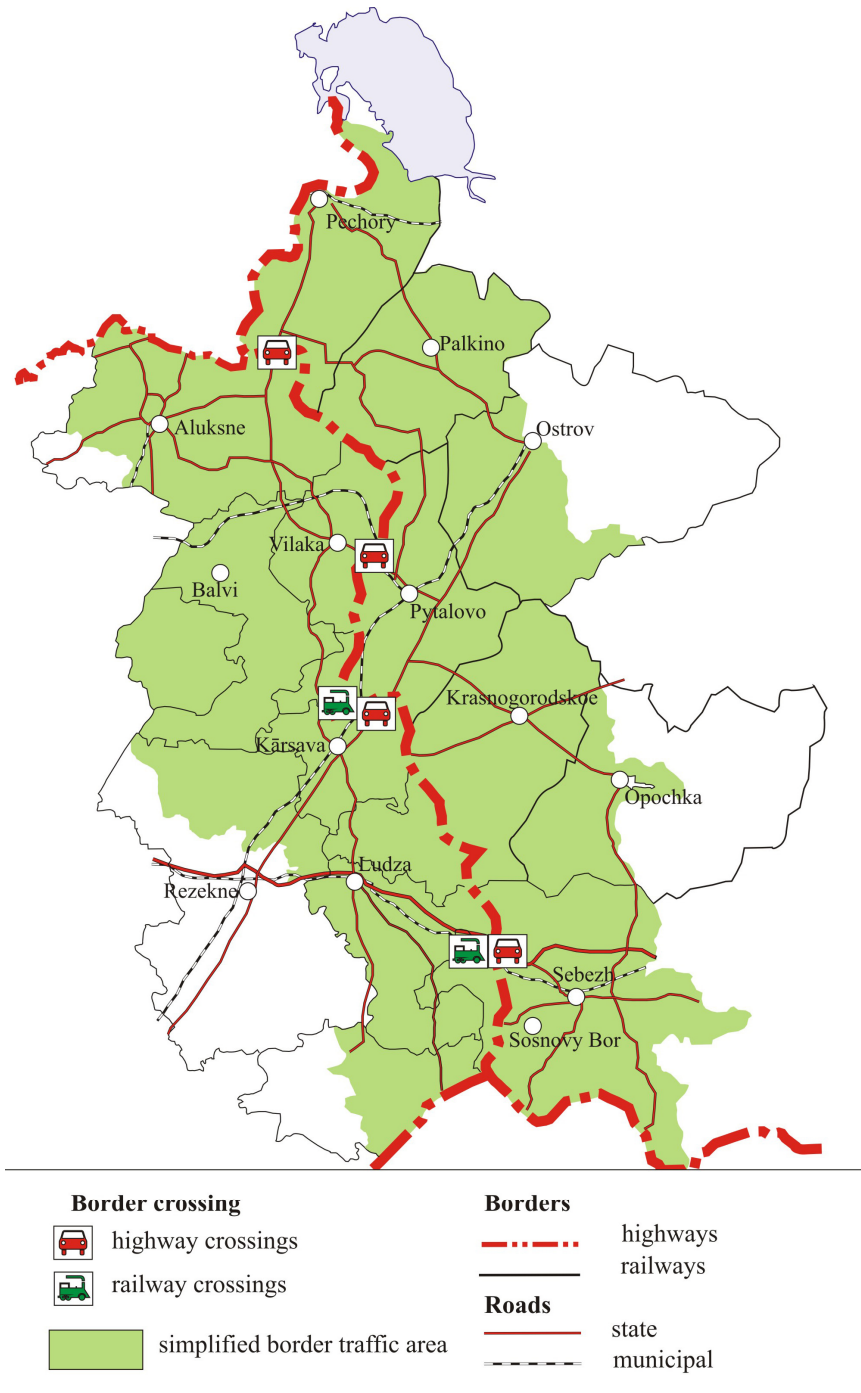


Fig. 3. Local border traffic areas between the Russian Federation and the Republic of Latvia

Source: drawn up by the authors.

A specific feature of this agreement is that an LBT permit can be obtained free of charge by both Russian and Latvian citizens. All other agreements examined in this article suggest that the applicant pay a consular fee of 20 euros. If LBT permits are issued by visa centres (they are usually commercial organisations), the applicant may be required to pay a service fee ranging from 10 to 15 euros. For Norwegian applicants, the service fee is 150 kroner, approximately 15 euros. For Kaliningraders applying for a permit at the Polish visa centre, the fee is an equivalent of 10 euros at the current exchange rate. Residents of the border districts of Russia and Latvia are not required to pay service fees. Applicants pay only for an insurance policy for the permit period and necessary documents (photographs, copies).

Six checkpoints — two railway and four highway crossings — function at the Russian-Latvian border. Highway crossings ensure the functioning of the LBT mechanism at the Russian-Latvian border. Unfortunately, open sources do not contain data on the number of individuals using this mechanism on either side of the border. Therefore, it is difficult to estimate the efficiency and popularity of local border traffic among borderland residents in either country.

### **Local border traffic between the Russian Federation and the Republic of Poland (RP)**

The agreement between the Government of the Republic of Poland and the Government of the Russian Federation on local border traffic, signed on December 14, 2011, came into force on July 27, 2012. This agreement was unprecedented for the EU. The EU Regulation No. 1931/2206 [25], which was in effect at the time, authorised the member states to sign agreements with their non-EU neighbours and limited the LBT area to a 30 (or 50) km area on either side of the border. The agreement between the Russian Federation and the Republic of Poland required amending this regulation, since the parties had reached an agreement to extend the LBT area to the whole territory of the Kaliningrad region and a comparable territory of Polish border voivodeships<sup>4</sup> (fig. 4). Many Russians saw the LBT mechanism as an attempt of the EU to alleviate the problem of the Kaliningrad region's isolation from mainland Russia, without changing the visa mechanism functioning between Russia and the EU. The proposal to abolish the visa regime between Russia and the EU was put forward by the Russian party as early as 2002. [22] The issue became a traditional topic on the agenda of negotiations between Russia and the EU (the only achievement was the agreement of simplified visa issuance, which came into force on June 1, 2007 [30]).

<sup>4</sup> On the Polish side, the LBT area includes powiats of two voivodeships — the Warmian-Masurian voivodeship (cities of Elbląg and Olsztyn, and the Elbląg, Braniewo, Lidzbark, Bartoszyce, Olsztyn, Kętrzyn, Mrągowo, Węgorzewo, Giżycko, Gołdap, and Olecko powiats) and the Pomeranian voivodeship (the cities of Gdansk, Gdynia, and Sopot, and the Nowy Dwór Gdański and Malbork powiats).



Fig. 4. Local border traffic area between the Russian Federation and the Republic of Poland

Source: drawn up by the authors.

Over the past five years, the bilateral traffic has been increasing at the Russian-Polish border. The introduction of LBT in 2012 contributed to this process. In 2010, 1451.5 thousand people crossed the border, in 2012, it was 4073.1 thousand people, and, in 2014, 6565.3 thousand people. Although number of crossings using a visa did not change, the LBT regime accounted for an increase in the bilateral traffic. If only 53.9 thousand people (107.8 instances of border crossing) crossed the border in 2012, the number of border-crossing movements using the LBT regime increased to 4.7 million in 2014 (table 2).

Table 2

**Number of border-crossing movements using the LBT regime between Russia and Poland in 2013—2014, thousand people**

| Year | Total | Residents of the Republic of Poland | Residents of Russia’s Kaliningrad region |
|------|-------|-------------------------------------|--|
| 2012 | 107.8 | 80.5                                | 27.2                                     |
| 2013 | 3500  | 2342                                | 1158                                     |
| 2014 | 4700  | 3025                                | 1675.1                                   |

Source: based on [20; 24].

The LBT regime is used more often by Poles but its popularity with Kaliningraders is also steadily increasing (in 2012, the ratio was 80 to 20 in fa-

avour of Poles; in 2014, it was 65 to 35). The popularity of LBT with the residents of the Polish and Russian border regions is supported by the fact that, out of 2.8 people with LBT permits (941,500 Russians and 1,900,000 Polish citizens), over 2.3 million people<sup>5</sup> used the opportunities offered by LBT.

Nine international checkpoints are functioning at the Russian-Polish border (three railway and six highway crossings). Three of them have been officially set up but they are not operating. These are the Zheleznodorozhny railway checkpoint, and the Zheleznodorozhny and Krylovo highway crossings. [34] Local border traffic is handled by four highway checkpoints (Mamonovo, Mamonovo II, Bagrationovsk, Gusev), the first three crossings account for the vast bulk of border-crossing movements. The total design capacity of highway checkpoints is 6,700 vehicles. In effect, they processed 10,406 vehicles per day in 2013 (155 % of the design capacity). [10] The Mamonovo checkpoint works at 507 % of its design capacity, the Bagrationovsk at 327 %, the Mamonovo II at 132 %, and the Gusev at 174 %.

In general, most Russian and Polish experts agree that the LBT mechanism, which has been functioning for over three years, has a positive effect on the development of social contacts between the countries and brings economic benefits to both parties. At the same time, the negative economic effect for regional economic entities is not significant. Therefore, LBT cannot be viewed as a major threat to their effective functioning in the region. The prospects of LBT between Russia and Poland largely depend on the current political dialogue between Russia and the European Union. In March 2014, then Minister of Foreign Affairs of Poland Radosław Sikorski stressed that Poland could suspend local border traffic with the Kaliningrad region as a restrictive measure against Russia. [15] A number of Polish authors supported this idea, although it faced strong opposition in Poland. [1] Moreover, regional officials from both the Kaliningrad region and the border voivodeships of Poland give positive opinions of the local border traffic mechanism, stress the benefits associated with its functioning and are ready to discuss the prospects of its development (including the expansion of the Polish LBT area). [11, 25] We believe that the most reasonable step would be the extending of the Russian-Polish LBT mechanism to waterway crossings. Since the countries share a transboundary water object — the Kaliningrad/Vistula Lagoon — this solution would contribute to the further development of bilateral traffic and thus facilitate the socioeconomic development of the countries' border territories.

## Conclusions

The spatial analysis of the local border traffic mechanism functioning at the borders of Russia and Belarus, on the one side, and the EU countries and Norway, on the other, suggests that there is a need to estimate the prospects of introducing such a mechanism between Russia and other EU countries. In the context of current Russia — EU relations, one cannot expect that new

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<sup>5</sup> This number takes into account the total number of people rather than unique users.

agreements will be signed soon. However, the example of Russian-Polish cooperation gives room for hope that, as soon as the situation improves, Russia and the EU will return to a constructive dialogue on cooperation and the new LBT agreements follow.

In our opinion, one can expect an agreement between Russia and Lithuania. Firstly, Lithuania can witness the positive experience of Poland and the Kaliningrad region. Secondly, Lithuania and Russia approved the initial agreement in 2009. However, the Russian party was not content with the 30 km area of LBT functioning. The Lithuanian party did not want to initiate changes to the common European regulation on local border traffic (later, they were initiated by Poland and supported by the EU). So far, Lithuanian officials did not express their position on the issue (nor did Russian federal officials). However, regional leaders of the Kaliningrad region and the bordering districts of the Republic of Lithuania would undoubtedly welcome such an agreement.

Moreover, there is a good chance that the LBT mechanism will function at the Russian-Finnish state border. Finland is observing the implementation of agreements between Russia and Poland very carefully. Representatives of the country's Ministry of Foreign Affairs visited Poland to hold consultations with colleagues from the Polish Office for Foreigners, Ministry of the Interior, and the Customs Service. [13]

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