

**EXPERT INSIGHT** | Center for Homeland Security & Immigration

# PANAMA ELECTS PRESIDENT MULINO, WHO VOWS TO CLOSE THE DEADLY DARIÉN GAP

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## TOPLINE POINTS

- ★ On May 5, 2024, the citizens of Panama elected President José Raúl Mulino, who has promised to shut down his country's Darién Gap and end the migrant crisis on its borders.
- ★ Mulino's victory reflects the Panamanian people's frustrations with unchecked illegal immigration and being a transit area for migrants heading to the U.S.
- ★ Closing the Darién Gap would have a significant impact on stopping the exploitation of millions of migrants, reducing illegal immigration in the U.S., and protecting the citizens of Panama.

On May 5, 2024, the citizens of Panama elected José Raúl Mulino as their next president. As the pro-business candidate representing Panama's right-wing Realizing Goals political party, Mulino took 34 percent of the vote. In the wake of his victory, Mulino [reiterated](#) his historic campaign pledge of shutting down the Darién Gap migrant transit zone and ending the migrant crisis on his borders. He has also [vowed](#) to get tougher on crime, fight corruption, and launch a “full-frontal assault” on drug trafficking in Panama. President-elect Mulino's five-year term begins on July 1, 2024.

Panama's Darién Gap plays a significant role in facilitating the mass illegal immigration crisis at the U.S.-Mexico border. Located in Northern Colombia and the southernmost part of Panama, the Darién is the only overland path that connects Central America to South America. The journey through the Darién Gap is one of the most dangerous migration routes in the world. It is a highly forested

60-mile stretch of treacherous terrain, violent criminal cartels, and exposure to disease. Migrants who survive its passage tell harrowing stories of robbery, sexual assault, kidnapping, killings, child trafficking, and other terrible crimes against them and their families. Despite these horrific conditions, in 2023 more than half a million migrants crossed through the Darién on their way to the U.S. southern border, double the amount recorded in 2022 and quintuple the [number](#) in 2021.

With the Biden Administration refusing to change its border strategy, the American people need action from our regional neighbors to reduce the flow of illegal aliens coming to our southern border. Mulino's promise to shut down the Darién Gap clearly struck a chord with the voters in Panama, who deal with the consequences of millions of migrants traversing through their country every day. In some parts of Panama, residents have reported increased crime and that their sanitation systems are overwhelmed.

Mulino's presidency has the potential to cut off the Darién Gap pipeline and make it more difficult for migrants to reach the U.S. southern border. Mulino correctly recognizes Panama is a passthrough country, saying "the U.S. border instead of Texas has moved to Panama. So, we have to do trilateral work [among the United States, Colombia, and Panama] and they have to understand that Panama is not a country of transit for immigrants." Mulino also promised to "repatriate all these people as appropriate, respecting human rights."

What is the lesson from Mulino's victory? The people of Panama sent a clear message that they are tired of being a transit area for migrants and that they want their elected leadership to stop the negative impacts of the crisis in their neighborhoods. The election of Mulino reflects a desire to have secure borders and a rejection of unchecked illegal migration. The sentiment in Panama is similar to trends in Europe, where the people of [Hungary](#), [Slovakia](#), and [Poland](#) do not want to be a passthrough country for migrants trying to reach Western European countries like Germany and France.

Closing the passageway through the Darién Gap would mean that millions of migrants would be spared the violence, sexual assault, disease, and death that comes from traversing one of the most treacherous jungles in the world. It would also mean less business for the cartels and bad actors who extort and exploit those migrants along their journey and are fueling one of the worst humanitarian tragedies of our lifetime. When our regional partners step up to do their part to stop



mass illegal migration, the positive consequences have the potential to reach far beyond their borders.

