

The Wider Implications of the Tensions at the Belarus-Polish Border

Quick Comment - insights from SCEEUS's experts on breaking news and hot topics

Andreas Umland, Research Fellow SCEEUS

We do not know for certain whether Minsk's actions were merely approved by, jointly designed together with or even masterminded in Moscow. There are, however, two aspects of this crisis that point towards the Kremlin. First, Lukashenka's actions seem to follow the logic of a so-called reflexive control operation, as we know it from the Soviet tradition of subversion of political enemies by the former Eastern Bloc's special services. These operations are designed to weaken and drive the enemy to behave in a way that suits the operator of the reflexive control. As Edward Lucas puts it well in a recent CEPA piece: "If Poland looks callous and hypocritical in its treatment of migrants, that is great. If Poland is weak and fails to defend its border, that is great too. Best of all, debilitating, polarizing rows pitting values against self-interest make life easier for kleptocrats and bullies."

Second, there is a suspicion that this operation is part of a larger Russian concert of simultaneous hybrid attacks that are meant to increase tensions within the West in general, and perhaps also in particular to divert attention from other malign activities by Moscow. There seems to be a larger pattern of the tense situation on the Belarusian-Polish border, Gazprom's recent gas export policy vis-a-vis the EU, and the new large Russian troop movements along the Russian-Ukrainian border, to name but the three most visible recent escalations. As one of Russia's most famous TV propagandists, Dmitry Kiselev, would say with his well-known phrase: "Sovpadenie? Ne dumai!" ("A coincidence? I don't think so!").

Hugo von Essen, analyst SCEEUS

One of many alarming aspects of the current border crisis is the potential indirect threat it poses to an already beleaguered Ukraine. The most straightforward way this threatens Ukraine is of course the diversion of international attention from the ongoing massive Russian troop build-up near Ukraine, but there are other, less obvious potential means for the Kremlin to instrumentalize this situation into yet another weapon against Ukraine. Ukraine has a long and exposed shared border with Belarus of over 1000 km, and it is not unthinkable that Minsk could start redirecting migrants towards the Ukrainian border after the closure of the Polish border. On November 9, Polish Prime Minister Morawiecki suggested as much, and Polish and Ukrainian authorities have already started cooperating to prepare for this scenario. Moreover, the recent deployment of two Russian nuclear-

capable aircraft near to the Polish-Belarusian border, along with Lukashenka's request of Russia to deploy Iskander missiles near the Ukrainian-Belarusian border, suggests that we could see an increase in Russian military capabilities in Belarus, thus potentially threatening Ukraine from the north.

John Zachau, analyst SCEEUS

Thirty years after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Europe is still not whole, free, democratic and at peace. The increasingly harsh repression in Belarus following last year's rigged presidential elections spilled over to the international domain already as Belarusians started to leave the country and even more so when Ryanair Flight 4978 was diverted to Minsk on its way from Athens to Vilnius in May earlier this year. By cynically luring migrants from the Middle East, Afghanistan and Africa to Belarus and pushing them towards the EU's borders, the Lukashenka regime is further intensifying the international dimension of the crisis.

While money is being squeezed from the migrants, the regime's primary goal is presumably to put pressure on the EU and its member states in order to get rid of sanctions or achieve other concessions. The instrumentalisation of migrants hits one of the EU's most sensitive spots since the Polish authorities, already in a tense relationship with Brussels, risk being criticised for their actions along the border regardless of what they do and since larger number of new migrants arriving in Germany and elsewhere would be likely to turn up the heat in domestic political debates, possibly with consequences for the whole EU project.

To what extent Russia is involved in the border crisis is unclear, as are the direct links to other developments, such as Russia's amassing of troops near its border with Ukraine and issues relating to Russian gas exports, including the German certification process for Nord Stream 2. Still, Moscow has at least some overlapping interests with Minsk and has backed it up through statements and the dispatchment of Russian strategic bomber planes. The overall Russian support for Lukashenka also remains essential, despite some friction in their bilateral relation (and Lukashenka perhaps looking for ways to increase his room for manoeuvre). One may also note that the method used towards the neighbours of Belarus was likely tested by Russia towards Finland and Norway already in 2015-2016.

While there are some different views on the need for re-established direct contacts with Lukashenka and his regime, the EU has so far held together well, not given in to the blackmailing and agreed on additional sanctions. This approach should continue. The risk for internal divisions within the EU remains, however, especially since the Belarusian regime has not yet backed down. Moreover, the humanitarian aspects of the crisis will become even more acute as the winter approaches. The risk for a more security-related escalation following some incident or deliberate provocation should also not be forgotten. In fact, we may already be in the early phase of "the next European security crisis".