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## THE WEAPONIZATION OF MIGRATION - NEW TOOL OF RUSSIAN HYBRID WAR: CRISIS ON THE POLISH-BELARUSIAN BORDER

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# 172

EXPERT OPINION





საქართველოს სტრატეგიისა და საერთაშორისო ურთიერთობათა კვლევის ფონდი  
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## Short description of the crisis:

Migrants began appearing en-masse on the Polish-Belarusian border in July 2021, and their number is still growing.<sup>1</sup> According to the Polish Border Guard, on 07.10.2021 more than 500 attempts were made to cross the border illegally, which is relatively more than the annual statistics for 2020 (according to the 2021 data, the total figure for August-November was 30,000 attempts).<sup>2</sup>



### *Official Twitter account of the Polish Border Guard*

According to Adam Eberhardt, director of the Centre for Eastern Studies (Ośrodek Studiów Wschodnich), Lukashenko's government gets up to \$10,000 from each migrant and in return receives hundreds of them in Minsk from the Baghdad, Basra, Irbil, and Istanbul airports.<sup>3</sup> Those wanting

to try and cross the EU border illegally also come from Beirut, Dubai, and Antalya.<sup>4</sup>



*Official Twitter account of Adam Eberhardt*

Then, through a special corridor, the migrants are taken to the EU border, where they are left without even basic living conditions, hoping to cross into Poland, Lithuania, or Latvia. The situation has become so tense that at the request of the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Poland, President Andrzej Duda declared a state of emergency on 2 September 2021. This covered 183 localities (along the 418-kilometer border between Poland and Belarus): 115 in Podlaskie Voivodeship and 68 in Lublin Voivodeship.<sup>5</sup> According to the latest information, the State Security Committee of Belarus (Комитет государственной безопасности Республики Беларусь, КГБ) is sending migrants to the Polish border and supplying them with tear gas, rubber bullets, and wire cutters.<sup>6</sup> In addition, the Belarusian soldiers are blinding Polish troops with lasers, which causes temporary paralysis of the eye muscles and increases the chances for migrants to cross the border without being seen.<sup>7</sup> The situation on the Polish-Belarusian border became so dire that Official Warsaw had to mobilize 15,000 soldiers, 2,000 policemen, and 4,000 officers from the Border Guard Department.<sup>8</sup>

## **Crisis motives:**

Of course, such unprecedented mobility on the EU-Belarus border does not come from a tourist boom in the Middle East; the reason is much more profound and complex. In this context, everything started in August 2020, after rigged presidential elections in Belarus, which were followed by mass repressions of citizens, the entire opposition spectrum, and the non-governmental sector critical to Lukashenko. In response, the European Union imposed sectoral sanctions on Official Minsk, seeking to hurt the ruling elite, but which also made life more difficult for ordinary citizens. Yes, the sanctions affected Lukashenko, but Belarussian citizens suffered most. For example, restrictions on air traffic, tightened border control, and the closure of diplomatic missions have forced many people to stay in Belarus who might have left.

In response to the sanctions, Lukashenko took immediate action. After consulting with Vladimir Putin, he threatened the EU by saying he would set up transit corridors for illegal migrants. He kept his promise. After the EU adopted a fourth package of sanctions against Minsk, Lukashenko began to weaponize migration. Flights from the Middle East to Belarus have risen sharply, while so-called “Travel” companies have prepared special offers for “sightseeing” along the country’s western border, initially targeting Lithuania, which hosted the first wave of refugees in special camps set up in its territory.

Iraqis, Afghans, and representatives of various countries of the Middle East and Africa suddenly started to turn up in Belarus. However, this massive influx into the country went unnoticed by local inhabitants. You will not see migrants on the streets, or even in the border towns. They neither go to the shops nor to the restaurants: they are “escorted” straight from the Minsk National Airport to the Polish-Belarusian border. Even Belarusian taxi drivers are involved in this “smuggling” process. In exchange for transporting migrants to the Polish border, they receive a considerable amount of money. It is unknown whether this money is paid by the migrants themselves or by the Belarusian government.

## **Analysis of the financial-political dimension of the crisis:**

On the one hand, it is a “business” for the local ruling elite. Financial income from migrants helps reduce the damage caused by the EU

sanctions imposed on the Lukashenko regime for mass violation of civil rights in Belarus. This approach allows local authorities to maintain Minsk National Airport and the state-owned Belavia Airlines. Money received from migrants is also used to support the President and his administration. The latter coordinates the Centrkurort/ЦЭНТРАКУРТОРТ - a local travel agency that plans «migrant tours» from the Middle East/Africa to Belarus.<sup>9</sup>

On the other hand, the weaponization of migration is part of the hybrid warfare being waged by Minsk, and above all Moscow, against the West. Pro-Russian media outlets, agents of influence, and “useful idiots” keep repeating that Polish and Lithuanian border guards beat migrants, humiliate and treat them harshly, and, above all, blame US foreign policy, the EU, and Poland (Warsaw was one the main supporters of the anti-Lukashenko sanctions). In fact, almost all humanitarian convoys sent to migrants from Poland and other EU member states have been blocked by the State Border Committee of Belarus and the KGB.<sup>10 11</sup>

According to Piotr Żochowski, an expert of the Center for Eastern Studies, statements made by Kremlin officials show that Moscow is not going to give up political support for the Lukashenko regime. Russia is doing its best to present the steps it has taken as justified and in line with international law. In addition, Moscow is trying not to appear as a major actor in order to absolve itself of any responsibility. The Kremlin is deeply interested in a controlled escalation of the crisis, which will offer possibilities for political-kinetic pressure on the West. Lukashenko’s current actions are very favorable for Russia, as it increases the pressure on Poland and the EU as a whole. In addition, by doing so, Putin is testing Poland’s security system, its armed forces, and NATO’s resilience. At the same time, the current situation deepens Lukashenko’s international isolation, which makes him even more tied to Russia. In this context, Moscow can even serve as a kind of mediator between Minsk and Brussels.<sup>12</sup>

As Marek Budzisz, an expert on Russia, points out, Vladimir Putin has become a major player in the crisis: “Putin’s tasks are quite clear, and most of them have already been fulfilled. First of all, an agreement on a new military doctrine (between Russia and Belarus) has been signed. The presence of two Russian military bases in Belarus has been prolonged for 25 years (Russian Navy Communication Center Vileika and the Volga Radar Station). Finally, a program of cooperation and integration has been launched, significantly increasing Lukashenko’s and the country’s dependence on Russia.”<sup>13</sup>

Just two years ago, the situation was radically different, with Lukashenko trying to keep balance in the policy between the West and Russia.

However, should there be an escalation in this political crisis (for example, an armed confrontation), Moscow may distance itself from Lukashenko's radical methods, because:

Military confrontation will harm the interests of Russian companies;

- The war will create political risks for the implementation of Nord Stream 2;
- The resources of modern Russia are much more limited than those of the Soviet Union. Consequently, the Kremlin is not able to operate on several expensive fronts at once, especially against a powerful state like Poland (and, of course, we cannot ignore the NATO factor, which, if necessary, will invoke the collective defense principle of the Alliance).<sup>14</sup>

We must also bear in mind that the Kremlin's support for Lukashenko is not unconditional. Moscow does not want to follow a scenario that would pose a direct threat to Russia (for example, if migrants return to their countries via the Russian territory, it may lead to socio-political tensions). Therefore, the FSB staff will appear together with the Belarusian border guards at the Polish-Lithuanian-Latvian border to "settle" the situation.

As Emil Avdalani, an analyst for the Center for European Policy Analysis points out, Russia's strategic goal is to hold onto its influence in neighboring countries. This means distancing target states from the West and causing political instability there. The Kremlin is trying to be present in Belarus, Ukraine, Moldova, Armenia, and Georgia. In some cases, Putin uses military pressure, sometimes he just sits and waits for new opportunities to emerge. In recent years, Russia has been enjoying the passivity of the West and seizing free spaces without hesitation.<sup>15</sup> We have the same scenario in the case of Belarus. As a result of close coordination with Moscow, Lukashenko is left alone with a strong player (Putin) who is slowly "swallowing" Belarus, and at the same time, unlike in the previous crises (Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine), is not an official actor/side.



## **Moscow-Minsk tactics and the Western response:**

Military expert Marcin Gawęda, in the context of this crisis, outlines the tasks of the Belarusian KGB:

- Operate in combat readiness mode;
- Facilitate, control, and supervise the movement of migrants across the border;
- Logistical security of the operation;
- Supporting actions (disinformation and propaganda);
- Perform tasks aimed at escalating the situation;
- Continuous monitoring of Polish units deployed at the border (for example, by drone).

Each action is strictly confidential. Soldiers and officers have no identification marks.

In this large-scale operation, a particular role is played by the Belarusian border guards. The reason is pragmatic: they are very familiar with the border area and send groups of migrants to the least protected areas.

Makarov pistols are the main weapon of Belarusian border guards, so the appearance of sniper and automatic rifles in their arsenal has become a cause for concern. The head of the Latvian Border Service said on August 27: “The risk is very high, and we see that the Belarusian border service is no longer working normally. The units are equipped with machine guns, sniper rifles, and large-caliber weapons, which is a very dangerous and alarming signal for the EU and NATO member states.” Soon after, the Polish side also noticed non-standard weapons and additional forces at the border.<sup>16</sup>

Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki called the critical situation on the border a test of European security, state terrorism<sup>17</sup>, and “silent revenge” from Lukashenko,<sup>18</sup> while President Andrzej Duda defined the issue as “an attack on the borders of Poland and the European Union.”<sup>19</sup>

Despite the dispute between Warsaw and Brussels over judicial reform and the rule of law, the European Union and each of its member states have expressed support for Poland, a fact confirmed by the statement of Ursula von der Leyen<sup>20</sup> and the visit of Charles Michel to Warsaw.<sup>21</sup>

No less important is the position of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, which has expressed its readiness to respond to the crisis if necessary. At the level of individual member states, the statements of the United States Secretary of State, Antony Blinken,<sup>22</sup> and the British Foreign Secretary, Elizabeth Truss,<sup>23</sup> are noteworthy.

A separate topic of discussion is the information field surrounding this crisis. From the very first day the migrants appeared at the border, Russian propaganda sought to gain a psychological advantage. The narrative is easy to remember and overwhelming in emotion:

- “The United States of America is responsible for the crisis.”
- “This is an immigration crisis and not an attack on the EU.”
- “The reckless policy of the European Union has brought the worst results.”
- “Belarus is trying to help the migrants.”
- “Polish border guards apply inhumane methods towards immigrants.”

To be more convincing, the Kremlin uses banal methods of factual disinformation: Falsifying photos, spreading false news without citing a source, fabricating video footage, instrumentalizing pseudo-news agencies, using public figures to demonize Poland and the Baltic states, etc.<sup>24</sup>

### **Conclusions for Georgia:**

Although the crisis has no direct impact on Georgia, one important fact should be noted: three of Tbilisi’s strategic partners are the target of a direct hybrid attack - Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia.

In such a situation, cooperation with Belarus, and the implementation of trade or economic projects with it, will greatly damage the country’s foreign policy and overall image.

In the context of security, Tbilisi needs to analyze the phenomenon of using a new mechanism of hybrid warfare, weaponization of migration, which may directly or indirectly affect it in the future. However, the utilization of this mechanism is still unlikely in this case, as the Kremlin has much more powerful leverage in Georgia than in NATO and EU Member States.

The control of Georgian airports is no less important. There are direct flights to Minsk from all three international airports of Georgia (Tbilisi, Kutaisi, Batumi). Due to its location, Georgia may be used as a migrant corridor from the Middle East to Belarus, which the State should not allow under any circumstances.

Finally, it is fundamentally important to declare support to Georgia's strategic partners and the EU. Yes, this will partly spoil relations with Belarus, but it will be a very strong signal for the West. Let's not forget Georgia's main supporters and lobbyists live in Vilnius, Riga, Tallinn, Warsaw, and the capitals of other Eastern European countries.

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