



## Lukashenka is the problem, not the migrants

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**The crisis on the Belarusian-Polish border is artificially manufactured. Europe needs to focus on the cause of the problem – Alyaksandr Lukashenka’s desire to strike back at the EU.**

It is wrong to call what is happening at the border between Poland and Belarus a migration crisis, or to compare it to Europe’s situation in 2015 and 2016. Back then, over a million people entered Europe irregularly, mostly by sea. The 2015 crisis was driven by the conflicts in Syria and Afghanistan, and instability in parts of Africa. Neighbouring countries such as Libya, Morocco and Turkey tried, then and subsequently, to use their ability to stop the flow of migrants to extract concessions from the EU, but they themselves were not responsible for the initial surge in migration. By contrast, Alyaksandr Lukashenka, the Belarusian dictator, has deliberately transported large numbers of migrants to the border between Belarus and its EU neighbours Latvia, Lithuania and Poland. That is a new phenomenon. Europe therefore needs to concentrate on the root of the problem, rather than the arrival of non-European migrants.

The current situation is the latest phase in a confrontation between the EU and Belarus that began with the rigged re-election of Lukashenka in August 2020. The EU refused to recognise Lukashenka’s new presidential term as legitimate. In response to Lukashenka’s electoral malpractice and violent suppression of peaceful protests by his security forces, the Union has so far imposed sanctions on more than 100 individuals as well as a number of key state-owned enterprises. Several member-states have imposed visa bans on additional individuals associated with the regime.

Lukashenka gave the EU advance notice in June 2021 of how he planned to retaliate for these measures: in a [speech](#) marking the Nazi attack on the Soviet Union in 1941, he said that European countries expect Belarus to assist in combating illegal migration, but “you are strangling us, systematically and collectively, ruining us, trying to kill our economy”. The regime then suspended all migration co-operation with the EU. That month, several hundred migrants, mostly from Iraq, Afghanistan and Syria, crossed from Belarus into Lithuania; 2,900 people followed in July, according to the EU border agency Frontex. Smaller numbers crossed into Latvia. Both Latvia and Lithuania imposed states of emergency as they tried to deal with a problem neither had previously had much experience of, and both sought and received assistance from Frontex. In September, Lithuania reported only 20 irregular crossings from Belarus.

The main pressure, however, has fallen on Poland. From January to September 2021, some 1,400 Iraqi, Afghan and Russian migrants tried to cross the border. By mid-October, the Polish authorities said that there had been more than 15,000 attempts to cross the border illegally since early August (with many migrants trying repeatedly). The Polish authorities have responded by sending thousands of troops and police to the border. They have also done their best to ensure that there is no scrutiny of what they are doing there, banning journalists, aid workers and others from the border area.

The Polish authorities are systematically pushing migrants back across the border – in violation of both EU and international laws prohibiting countries from sending people back to dangerous places. Belarus may not be considered as dangerous as Afghanistan, for example, but the problem is that once they have ferried migrants from Minsk airport to the EU's Eastern border, Belarusian border guards (or the military, reports are unclear) force them to stay there, without food or shelter, and prevent them from returning to Minsk or travelling elsewhere in Belarus. Because Poland does not offer them the chance to apply for asylum, or provide them with at least temporary accommodation and food, some migrants have died. Many others remain stranded in the Białowieża/Belavezha forest between the two countries, where temperatures are already falling below zero degrees Celsius at night.

The response of the EU and its member-states to events has been incoherent. The Polish prime minister, Mateusz Morawiecki, has accused Lukashenka of “state terrorism”; he has also alleged, without producing evidence, that Russian President Vladimir Putin is behind Lukashenka's actions. German Chancellor Angela Merkel, by contrast, has asked Putin to use his influence with Lukashenka. There is no question that the Russian authorities are enjoying the EU's discomfort: Putin told Merkel that the EU should talk directly to Belarus, while the Russian foreign minister, Sergei Lavrov, said that the crisis was the West's fault for intervening in the Middle East. The French government has accused Lukashenka of seeking to destabilise the EU.

Both Putin and Lukashenka know that migration is a thorny question for the EU and its leaders, some of whom have won elections on anti-migration platforms. It is a tricky situation for the EU: the Union should defend its borders, but should also protect the rights of those trying to cross from Belarus, no matter how they may have arrived there. Neither Poland nor the EU institutions can stand by idly while people freeze to death on their border. But they cannot completely open the border either – this would only further encourage Lukashenka's illegal human trafficking business, increase the feeling of chaos and stir divisions between EU countries. The current chaos at the border is not the EU's fault, but Moscow and Minsk are hard at work trying to convince the world, and European publics, otherwise.

Instead of fuelling the migration crisis narrative, the European authorities should start by asking themselves what Lukashenka's objectives are, and seeking to ensure that he cannot achieve them. First and foremost, he wants to force the EU to revoke the economic sanctions against Belarus, which according to one [estimate](#) may cost the country 6 per cent of its GDP in the first two to three quarters once they take full effect over the next two years, subsequently rising to 10 per cent. He also wants to show that he is a strong leader whom the West should reckon with and therefore accept as the legitimate president. By the same token, Lukashenka wants the EU to stop supporting the wider Belarusian democratic movement, whose leaders continue political activity from their refuges in Poland and Lithuania. Lastly, reports indicate that the regime has found a lucrative source of revenue from trafficking migrants: an [investigation](#) by Lithuanian journalists found that migrants are paying from \$6,000 to \$15,000 per person to get from Iraqi Kurdistan to the EU border.

The EU and the member-states should target the business side of the operation. They should focus on penalising any individual or entity involved in trafficking migrants – that is, deceiving or coercing them into taking passage. Human trafficking is a criminal offence throughout the EU (on the basis of EU law), so member-states can prosecute individuals or entities on their territory who commit or assist in the commission of the crime. The EU itself can impose sanctions such as asset freezes. The scope of sanctions should be broad: airlines, travel companies, bodies and individuals arranging travel. The EU should put pressure on EU-based firms that provide services to the airlines involved – those who lease the aircraft, insure them or supply fuel could be vulnerable to sanctions, for example. It should not make an exception for existing contracts.

At the same time, the EU institutions and other member-states should support the authorities in receiving countries with border control and asylum application processing – something which Frontex and the European Asylum Support Office (EASO) are already doing in Latvia and Lithuania. So far, Poland has not asked for help. Instead, it is trying to leverage its efforts to keep migrants out as a means of putting pressure on the rest of the EU to drop its criticism of the Polish government's violations of the rule of law: as former Polish Prime Minister and current MEP Beata Szydło [put](#) it, "Suddenly, European politicians see that Poland is defending the EU and European values".

It is also using the crisis for domestic political reasons: a judge on the Polish Constitutional Tribunal (which is packed with the current government's appointees) [accused](#) the Polish opposition of being traitors who had attacked Poland's border, together with Lukashenka and Putin. European leaders should make clear to the Polish government that it has international obligations towards migrants (including as a part of Schengen), and encourage it to seek help from Frontex and EASO in meeting them.

The EU is already talking to source and transit countries for migrants: Commission Vice-President Margaritis Schinas is scheduled to visit Iraq (including Iraqi Kurdistan), Lebanon, Turkey and the UAE. Together with member-states, the Commission should continue to put more pressure on countries and airlines which have been willing to let large groups transit their airports en route to Minsk. The EU has already been successful in persuading Turkish Airlines to stop. But the EU cannot expect this strategy to cut the number of people flying to Belarus to zero. Persuading airlines and countries that have decent relations with the EU, like Lebanon or Iraq, should be relatively easy. But it will be impossible to persuade Syria to do the EU any favours, and new routes with countries like Afghanistan, Iran or Pakistan could open up. Moreover, Lukashenka could potentially try to bring migrants to Belarus by flying them through Russia.

There are also a number of things that the EU should not do. First, it should not over-react. The numbers are large by comparison with those normally crossing from Belarus. But they are insignificant compared with the numbers that entered the EU via the Central Mediterranean or the Aegean in 2015 and in the years since then – and the EU did not collapse. In any case, the migrants are only a symptom of the problem – which is the EU's relationship with Lukashenka.

Second, Europeans should not try to solve the crisis by treating migrants brutally. Migrants are human beings; they should be treated fairly and with respect. Poland and other border states are highly likely to try to address the crisis by further strengthening their borders and continuing to carry out large-scale pushbacks, because this tactic has worked well for other member-states on the EU's external border. The EU and other member-states may not be able to stop this, but they should do their utmost to improve conditions for people stuck at the border.



Third, the EU should not give Lukashenka any hint of weakness. If he believes that he can wriggle out of sanctions or force the EU to do a deal with him to stop the flow of migrants, he will have every incentive to continue to weaponise migrants. The EU should make clear that Lukashenka's problems with the EU will only get worse if he escalates the crisis; the Union has not exhausted the list of sanctions it could impose. Belarus may do much more trade with Russia than it does with the EU, but the Union is still Minsk's second largest trading partner. Lukashenka's latest threat, to cut off gas transit from Russia to Europe via Belarus, is unlikely to be carried out: the pipeline belongs to Gazprom, which could demand compensation if he interrupted the flow of gas. Putin might see some tactical advantage in Lukashenka's threat – Russia could use it as further evidence of the need for Germany to allow the Nord Stream 2 pipeline to operate, bypassing 'unreliable' transit countries. But the first [reaction](#) from the Kremlin was to stress that Russia was the country that guaranteed Europe's energy security and always fulfilled its supply obligations.

Fourth, EU and NATO members should not militarise this crisis. The threat from Belarus is not an armed attack. It is reasonable for the NATO Secretary General, Jens Stoltenberg, to stay in touch with the Polish authorities and express solidarity; but moving NATO forces to the border would not solve the crisis, and would risk making a bad situation worse. The Polish defence minister has [announced](#) that British engineering troops will help Poland strengthen the border fence. That will not solve the problem Poland faces, and may increase the tension at the border. NATO should, however, keep a close eye on what Russia is doing militarily – not only in Belarus, but on the border with Ukraine, where it has been massing forces in recent weeks. Russia may not have created this crisis, but if it sees an opportunity to exploit Western distraction to strengthen its position in Ukraine, it is very likely to take it.

This crisis is likely to last for some time: even with resolute EU action against Belarus and outreach to source and transit countries, people will keep trying to come to the EU for a while. It is not clear that Lukashenka has thought through the internal consequences for Belarus if large numbers of migrants become trapped in the country. For now, Belarusian border guards seem to be successful in keeping most close to the border, but new arrivals may end up stuck in Minsk. In recent days, there has been heated debate on social media in Belarus about public attitudes towards migrants. Belarusian society is overwhelmingly white, homogeneous and lacking experience of living in multicultural communities. For some members of the public, the presence of visible migrants in Belarus evokes feelings of fear and hostility, especially against the backdrop of continuous state media propaganda designed to stir up hatred. These feelings create further tension within an increasingly polarised society. The regime has suppressed channels for the public to express discontent peacefully; the risk now is that fear and hostility towards migrants might run out of control.

The EU should be patient. It should not betray its values by mistreating migrants; nor should it give in to Lukashenka's blackmail. It can help Poland with the immediate problem, as long as Poland allows itself to be helped. But European governments – including those in Central Europe that have so far seen few migrants – also need to get over their fear of immigration. Rogue regimes like Lukashenka's will keep weaponising migrants as long as the issue remains politically toxic in so many countries. Europe will remain vulnerable to such pressure until it recognises that its problem with migration is not the migrants themselves but the frightening image of them that unscrupulous politicians create.

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