

Belarusian President Escalates Ongoing Migrant Crisis on Polish Border to Undermine the European Union



Featuring Mason Clark

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Thousands of migrants from the Middle East have become stranded on the border between Belarus and Poland, creating a dangerous stand-off between the two countries. With the European Union behind Poland and Russia supporting Belarus's authoritarian president, Alexander Lukashenko, the situation has ramifications for stability far beyond the frigid forests of this Eastern European border region. On this episode of Overwatch, ISW Lead Russia Analyst Mason Clark discusses the origins of this crisis and its ramifications for the European Union, Russia, and beyond.

Jacob Taylor:

This is Overwatch, a podcast presented by the Institute for the Study of War. I'm Jacob Taylor. Thousands of migrants from the Middle East have become stranded on the border between Belarus and Poland, creating a dangerous standoff between the two countries. With the European Union behind Poland and Russia supporting Belarus's authoritarian president Alexander Lukashenko, the situation has ramifications for stability far beyond the frigid forests of this Eastern European border region. ISW's lead Russia analyst Mason Clark is with us today to talk about the origins of this crisis and its ramifications for the European Union, Russia, and beyond. Mason, thank you so much for being with us today.

Mason Clark:

Thanks for having me, Jacob.

Jacob Taylor:

So, my first question is just: can you give us a basic rundown on recent events at the border?

Mason Clark:

Sure. So, in the last two weeks, specifically since November 8th, we've seen a large escalation in a campaign that's actually been going on since June where Belarusian President Lukashenko tries to exploit Middle Eastern migrants to destabilize the European Union by transporting them to Belarus and then ushering them across the borders of neighboring states.

Most recently we have seen the largest single-day crossings into Poland out of this entire crisis since June. This is not necessarily Kremlin directed. Russia is supporting it to a certain extent, but Belarusian President Lukashenko is driving it and has a lot of agency in the crisis. It's both a reaction by Lukashenko to EU sanctions for his authoritarian rule in Belarus as well as an attempt to destabilize the EU and reverse his isolation. He's actually had mixed results and gotten German engagement just on November 17th, which was a victory. This is likely to be a simmering crisis for a long time, however, as likely ten to twenty thousand migrants remain in Belarus and could be directed towards the borders at any time.

Jacob Taylor:

You mentioned that this has been going on for some time. What's the background? Belarus is pretty far away from any overland route to the EU, at least as far as I'm aware. How did these migrants get here?

Mason Clark:

Sure. So, as I mentioned, this has been an ongoing Belarusian effort against Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia since around June, 2021. For a little bit of further back context, Lukashenko very fraudulently stole his last presidential election in Belarus in August of 2020 and immediately faced strong street protests. Following that, he carried out

a pretty harsh crackdown and has been an international pariah with several EU sanctions applied to him and he's become increasingly reliant on Russia.

The core of this is Belarus is exploiting migrants—as you mentioned, primarily from the Middle East—that want to get to the EU to destabilize its neighbors and try and coerce the EU to removing sanctions on Belarus. That's a really, really awful situation for the migrants on the ground. What the Belarusian government has been doing is going to these folks, primarily Iraqis, but we've also seen some Syrians and migrants from other states, that Belarus can get them into the EU, specifically Germany.

They give them one-way tickets to Belarus and tourist visas, and then when they ushered them to the border of Belarus and its neighboring states, most recently Poland, rather than try and get them across the border legally, they simply tell them, "Okay, now cross the fence." Oftentimes forcing them towards the Polish or Lithuanian border rather than giving them humanitarian living conditions.

We've also seen Belarusian border guards escorting them and oftentimes even aiding them with dismantling fences. And there's been terrible treatment of these migrants. They've been left on the border with no food and are not allowed to turn back into Belarus, and there's already in the last two weeks been around 12 deaths that have been confirmed of these migrants, not from any actions by the Polish or Belarusian border guards, but from simple exposure as they're stuck in this forest.

Jacob Taylor:

How did this start? What prompted the Belarusian government to start doing this?

Mason Clark:

So, it's a tricky thing where the Belarusian government is denying that it's supporting these migrants and is blaming the EU for the crisis but at the same time is barely trying to hide their support and intent, which is to punish the EU for imposing sanctions on Belarus. More specifically, the EU imposed a crippling round of sanctions on Belarus following Lukashenko's grounding of an international flight in June, 2021, to detain opposition journalist Roman Protasevich. In retaliation, we began to see Lukashenko doing this financing and support of these migrants to get them across the border into Poland and the Baltic states.

Over the summer, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland began a suite of responses, such as states of emergency at the border and plans to build various border fences. Interestingly enough, Lukashenko tacitly admitted that Belarus is behind the campaign in early August, denying that Belarus is blackmailing Europe with illegal immigration but stating that Belarus is reacting to EU sanctions, "according to its capabilities," and blaming the EU for the migrants wanting to enter Germany in the first place.

Jacob Taylor:

And what then is, Lukashenko or the Belarusian government, what's their long term goal here? What are they seeking to accomplish?

Mason Clark:

So, I'd say that Lukashenko is trying to achieve three objectives here, which are actually kind of contradictory. One, he's simply lashing out against the EU for sanctions. Two, he's trying to coerce it into removing those sanctions. And three, he's trying to end Belarus's isolation.

In terms of lashing out at the EU and attempting to undermine it, frankly, he's succeeding. Poland, Lithuania,

and Latvia have clashed with the EU as a whole throughout the summer on their responses to this Belarusian support for migrants. They've had a mix of requesting further EU support and pushing back on EU criticism of how they're handling the crisis.

This has been particularly touchy for the current Polish government, which has long called migrants a threat to Polish culture and sovereignty, and is in the midst of a separate disagreement with the EU over Poland's willingness to follow EU laws, in this case about appointments to its Supreme Court. And this crisis is creating further divides as the Polish government feels somewhat unsupported in the face of these Belarusian actions.

In terms of removing sanctions, that's been more of a failure for Lukashenko. His most recent actions since November 8th have actually prompted the EU to impose a new round of sanctions, which I'll discuss here in a little while. But he has succeeded in the recognition and sort of ending Belarus's international isolation by holding two calls with German Chancellor Angela Merkel on November 15th and November 17th.

Finally, in a more parallel effort, Lukashenko might be trying to get further Russian support, paradoxically, by drawing it into bailing out Belarus of this crisis of its own creation, while still maintaining the ability for Lukashenko to carry out independent action. Because it's important to remember that even though Lukashenko is supported by the Kremlin, he takes actions without Putin's approval, which is somewhat of a misunderstanding of the relationship that's been emerging in Western media.

Jacob Taylor:

Gotcha. And can you walk us through in a bit more detail the way the migrants are actually getting to Belarus and the border with Poland. Specifically, is there anything Europeans can do to stop that from happening? The Europeans or anyone else?

Mason Clark:

It's been a number of methods which has actually impeded the EU efforts to restrict travel, though they have tried throughout the summer. Primarily, the migrants are coming from Iraq, Syria, and since August, Afghanistan, mainly on Belavia, which is the Belarusian national airline. But they've also been coming from other states and through other airlines, most notably Iraqi airlines, Turkish airlines, as well as Russian to a certain extent. Back in August, EU officials pressured Iraq into halting all direct flights on the Iraqi national airline to Belarus. And most recently Turkey tried to halt flights from citizens of several of these states in response to this most recent escalation on November 8th.

However, there's no real way to completely clamp down on this, and there's been a steady flood of migrants into Belarus enabled by, as I mentioned earlier, these sort of predatory Belarusian policies of giving these folks one-way visas and plane tickets and telling them that they can help them into the EU.

Jacob Taylor:

Going back to the November 8th date that you mentioned, what is different about this latest effort? And why is it getting media attention where a lot of the other machinations and crises that have occurred in this part of the world, many of them involving Russia, many of which we've talked about on this podcast, often do not get significant media attention? What is different about this particular crisis?

Mason Clark:

On November 8th, Belarusian security forces directed around 2,000 migrants to a single border crossing with Poland, providing them directions and tools to destroy fences. This is not the first time that Belarus has directed

migrants to the Polish border, but it is the single largest single-day and single location attempt. Previous efforts we've seen over the summer have capped out in the low hundreds at most. Thousands of migrants, likely 4,000, but it's a bit difficult to estimate numbers, there aren't too many journalists on the ground, remain in makeshift camps as of November 17th and isolated crossing attempts continue. We haven't seen a mass crossing attempt like on that first day, November 8th, but the Belarusian security forces are still enabling migrants, providing them directions and some weapons to attack the Polish border guards.

The migrants are getting increasingly desperate, understandably, and there's an unknown number of deaths due to cold and exposure at the border here, and many of them are still stuck in essentially no man's land in the forest on the Belarusian side. Belarus is trying to coerce the EU into removing sanctions on Belarus and resuming contact, which frankly has succeeded with this most recent escalation. The EU is responding with a mix of sanctions and outreach, but it's struggling to cohere a unitary policy.

Jacob Taylor:

How is the European Union responding to this?

Mason Clark:

So, the biggest EU response so far has been by German Chancellor Angela Merkel. She called Belarusian President Lukashenko on November 15th and then again on November 17th, which is huge. This is Lukashenko's first contact with a Western leader since openly fraudulent reelection in August 2020, and his subsequent crackdown on protests, which ISW has previously covered in depth.

Lukashenko has made a point in his framing of the Belarusian-created crisis of this being Germany directed, sort of bypassing Poland. And it was actually one of his demands that he wanted to speak with the German government directly, not the Polish government. After the second call on November 17th, Belarus announced that negotiations between Belarus and the EU will begin, framed on getting the refugees to Germany.

Of course, the German readouts are not as victorious, frankly, as how the Belarusian presidency is reporting it, but do say that Belarus and the EU will work together to help end the migrant crisis. This is frankly a big deal in that it removes Lukashenko's culpability and gets him exactly what he wanted. His sort of pariah status for over a year has been ended through a contact with Germany, which was his aim of this most recent escalation. And there's a good chance that even though he has suffered some EU sanctions, which I'll discuss in a second, he's reopened this communication and may get actual EU support to deal with this migrant crisis that he has created.

On the sanctions, EU foreign ministers met on November 15th, and all we've seen publicly is that they agreed to impose sanctions. They're still debating on what, but a number of leaks to various European newspapers indicate the sanctions will target individuals and companies or organizations related to travel, including travel agencies, airlines, that sort of thing. Trying to, once again, cut off the migrant flow to Belarus. On the other hand, on November 16th, French President Macron called Russian President Putin, asking Putin to "use his influence" over Lukashenko to stop the crisis.

Jacob Taylor:

Which I think brings us to the part of the podcast that we often end up at with this part of the world, which is what is Russia's role in this crisis?

Mason Clark:

Yeah, that's been an interesting one here and a big part of a lot of the media coverage. Many have seemingly as-

sumed that Russia must be directing this, which frankly, a lot of times, as you said, is true. A lot of the stuff we talk about is Kremlin directed. But in this case, Lukashenko has his own agency, even though he's very reliant on Russian support, especially since the crippling effect of EU sanctions. The Kremlin has rhetorically supported Lukashenko, stating that the European Union should help settle these migrants since it had a role in the wars in Iraq and Syria that led them to travel to the EU, and has falsely claimed that Belarus is not responsible to the crisis.

However, there's no evidence that this escalation was explicitly Kremlin-directed. And in fact, there was a major disagreement between Lukashenko and Putin a few days in to this most recent escalation. On November 11th, Lukashenko threatened to cut off gas transit through Belarus to the European Union if the EU did not let migrants through to Germany. Russian President Putin immediately responded that Lukashenko did not clear that with him and that cutting Russian gas transit to Europe, much of which goes through Belarus, would harm Russian-Belarusian relations, and Lukashenko immediately backed down on this demand.

Lukashenko and Putin have held several calls over the last two weeks around this crisis, and the Kremlin is not full-throatedly supporting his efforts. The Kremlin may seek to exploit Lukashenko's use of migrants to further destabilize the EU, always something Russia is interested in, but is not necessarily leading it and may not want Lukashenko to destabilize the situation too far and provoke too harsh of an EU response.

Jacob Taylor:

So where do you see this going, Mason?

Mason Clark:

This is unfortunately likely to be a simmering crisis. The legitimization, in a way, of Lukashenko through the EU talks that Merkel is coordinating is big. It's unfortunate for these poor migrants, but Lukashenko has essentially succeeded in what he was probably setting out to do of beginning these talks that he has not been able to have with the EU for over a year.

We'll be keeping a very close eye on what exact sanctions the EU applies on Belarus as well as if we see sort of direct EU financial support for these migrants, but this is likely going to be ongoing for some time. Lukashenko shows no signs of necessarily backing down, trying to pull the migrants back into Belarus and send them back to Iraq or their various origin countries, and they'll likely be stuck there for some time until the EU and Belarus reach some form of agreement. Or it simply becomes too much and the migrants try and return on their own. Either way, it's a building humanitarian catastrophe and a pretty awful effort by the Belarusian president to try and exploit these migrants for his own ends and destabilize the EU.

Jacob Taylor:

Well, Mason, thank you so much for being here today and sharing your expertise with us.

Mason Clark:

Thanks for having me, Jacob.

Kimberly Kagan:

Thank you for listening to this episode of *Overwatch*. We look forward to your feedback on this episode and previous ones. Visit www.understandingwar.org to learn about ISW's work and to sign up for our mailing list

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