The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Minsk Is Teetering on the Brink of a Dangerous Escalation

Lukashenko's reputation as a global outcast means that in any conflict or contentious situation, he is no longer given the benefit of the doubt. That, in turn, only makes Lukashenko even more inclined to escalate conflict.

By Artyom Shraibman

August 12, 2021



Group of illegal migrants detained in Vorzova, Latvia **VALDA KALNINA / EPA / TASS**

In the year since the contested Belarusian presidential election, Alexander Lukashenko has crushed his opponents at home and repeatedly stoked up the threat from abroad in order to mobilize his state apparatus and remaining supporters.

Now Minsk has created a migrant crisis on its borders with its western neighbors in response to their support for the Belarusian opposition and Western sanctions. Given the propensity to

escalation on all sides, the situation could easily get out of hand.

Minsk has made no secret of the fact that it deliberately opened the floodgates into neighboring Lithuania for refugees coming from Iraq and other Middle Eastern countries. Its reasoning was that previously, it had protected the EU from migrant flows, but now, when the West has imposed harsh sanctions on Belarus, there is no reason for it to keep offering that protection.

For several months, Vilnius accepted the migrants, until problems arose: unrest in the refugee camps and protests by local people. At the start of August, Lithuanian border guards changed tactic and started sending migrants back into Belarus.

Minsk accused the Lithuanians of using force to send people back, shooting at them with rubber bullets, and beating one Iraqi so badly that he allegedly died in the arms of Belarusian border guards.

Lithuania denies all of this, and insists that shots can instead be heard from the Belarusian side of the border. Vilnius has also released a video showing Belarusian border guards escorting groups of migrants to the border using official transport, and directing them toward the Lithuanian side.

There are also plenty of online videos showing security officials from both sides approaching one another, leaving the groups of migrants in between them not knowing which way to turn.

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Thanks to international diplomatic efforts, Iraq has now canceled flights to Minsk and started taking back Iraqis stranded in Belarus, and the flow of migrants into Lithuania has stopped. But the crisis isn't over: Poland and Latvia are now also reporting increased numbers of people illegally crossing their borders.

Nor is it over for the Belarusian authorities, it seems. In his eight-hour press conference held on the anniversary of the contested election on August 9, Lukashenko suggested several times and in no uncertain terms that he could raise the stakes. He accused Lithuanian border guards of trespassing onto the Belarusian side and threatened to retaliate "with both barrels."

Lukashenko has long been known for his melodramatic language, of course, but these are no ordinary times. He began threatening the EU with an influx of migrants via Belarusian territory many years ago, but no one took it seriously— until now. Just like no one, even among the Belarusian opposition in exile, could have believed that it was not safe simply to fly over their homeland — until the Ryanair plane carrying Roman Protasevich was forced down over Belarus and the opposition activist promptly arrested.

The Belarusian regime's already tattered image has taken a new battering in recent weeks. First the Belarusian athlete Kristina Timanovskaya refused to return to Minsk from the Tokyo Olympics, fearing reprisals after speaking out against sporting officials. With the world watching, she subsequently sought refuge at the Polish embassy under the protection of

Japanese police to prevent her forcible repatriation.

Then, on August 3, Vitaly Shishov, the head of a Belarusian diaspora organization, was found dead in Kyiv. Belarusian journalists were quick to report that he had links to the Ukrainian far right, which has been linked to a long trail of suspicious and unsolved deaths. But mainstream Western media presented only one version: that Belarus must be behind it, and that sanctions against Lukashenko should be toughened accordingly.

A couple of days later, journalists from CNN reported that a former missile storage facility outside Minsk had been refurbished into a "possible prison camp for political dissidents," on the grounds that it had a military guard, new security cameras, and that CNN's film crew were unable to access the interior. This, apparently, is now enough for a major U.S. media outlet to suspect the Belarusian government of building concentration camps.

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Lukashenko's reputation as a global outcast means that in any conflict or contentious situation, he is no longer given the benefit of the doubt. Western officials have openly described him as an international terrorist, and Minsk's actions on the border with Lithuania as "hybrid warfare." Accordingly, no influential Western politician would now risk any other approach to dealing with Lukashenko than toughening sanctions.

That, in turn, only makes Lukashenko even more inclined to escalate conflict. After all, when everyone regards you as a pariah whether you have done something or not, why hold back? No hostile action must go unpunished, so as not to appear weak.

On the anniversary of the outbreak of the Belarusian protests, the United States, Canada, and the UK slapped new sanctions on Minsk. The Canadian and British measures were similar to the EU's sectoral sanctions, plus London targeted Lukashenko's old friend, the Russian oligarch Mikhail Gutseriev, whose family has assets in the UK.

The U.S. sanctions look set to be the most painful for Minsk. Following on from the recent restrictions on a large part of the Belarusian petrochemical industry, the new sanctions target the major exporters Belaruskali (a state-owned potash fertilizer producer) and the Neman tobacco factory, as well as businessmen close to Lukashenko and their oil trading companies.

Now the migrant crisis may prompt further sanctions. Following on from the incident with the Ryanair plane, Lukashenko is once again not only violating human rights, but posing a threat to regional security. EU interior ministers are holding a crisis meeting on August 18 to discuss the issue.

If the crisis is not resolved by the end of the summer, Brussels will take action. Lithuania plans to initiate the expansion of EU sectoral sanctions against Minsk, and has already discussed with NATO the possibility of deploying a Counter Hybrid Support Team to Lithuania. That's a more radical move than any previously on the table, such as completely banning the transit of Belarusian potash — one of the country's main exports— through the Lithuanian port of Klaipeda.

To add to the tension, Belarus and Russia are due to hold their Zapad 2021 quadrennial joint military exercises in September. Every time the drills are held, there are fears that they could be used as cover for Russian troops to launch an attack on a neighbouring country or refuse to leave Belarus after the exercises are over.

But unlike the relatively peaceful years of 2013 and 2017, this time, the exercises come at a time of conflict between Minsk and its neighbors, and at a time when Lukashenko has a vested interest in maintaining the atmosphere of a country at war for his own domestic purposes.

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For the first time, there is a real risk of unintended armed incidents on the Belarusian border: not because either side plans to attack the other, but because of expectations of mutual provocations, and tendencies to interpret each other's actions in the most hostile light possible.

The new status quo in Eastern Europe is best reflected by the fact that until 2020, Minsk scored foreign policy points by positioning itself as a pragmatic partner for the West, contributing to regional stability and acting as a counterbalance to an aggressive Russia. Today, Moscow's unwillingness to get embroiled in conflicts with NATO at the whim of its ally could just be the only factor exercising any restraint on Lukashenko's notorious impulsivity.

This article was first published by the Carnegie Moscow Center.

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Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2021/08/12/minsk-is-teetering-on-the-brink-of-a-dangerous-escalation-a74770