The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Belarus Warns Against New EU Sanctions, Says Could Cut Gas

By Dario Thuburn and Michael Mainville for AFP

November 11, 2021



Alexander Lukashenko. **president.gov.by**

Belarus's strongman leader Alexander Lukashenko vowed Thursday to respond to any new sanctions imposed over the migrant crisis on his country's border with Poland, including by potentially cutting off the transit of natural gas to Europe.

"If they impose additional sanctions on us... we must respond," Lukashenko said in comments to officials in Minsk released by the presidency.

"We are warming Europe, and they are threatening us," he said, pointing out that Russia's Yamal-Europe gas pipeline transits through Belarus to Poland.

"And what if we halt natural gas supplies?"

Related article: Poland Sees Migrant Surge at Border, Accuses Belarus of 'State Terrorism'

Pressure is building to address the plight of hundreds of migrants, mainly Kurds from the Middle East, who are stuck at the Belarus-Poland border in freezing weather.

The UN Security Council was to meet later Thursday for emergency talks on the crisis, after international appeals to deal with the refugees' plight.

The West accuses Lukashenko of luring the migrants to Belarus to send them across the border, in revenge for sanctions imposed last year after a heavy crackdown on the opposition.

EU officials say they expect to approve new sanctions over the migrant crisis next week.

'New kind of war'

Poland has deployed 15,000 troops along the border, put up a fence topped with barbed wire and approved construction of a wall on the frontier with Belarus.

In a statement released for Poland's Independence Day on Thursday, Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki said his country was facing a "new kind of war" whose "ammunition is civilians."

Poland accuses Belarus of using intimidation to force migrants to breach the frontier and refusing to allow them to leave border areas.

Belarus has in turn accused Poland of violating international norms by blocking the migrants and violently beating them back.

Migrants have been trying to cross the border for months but the crisis came to a head when hundreds made a concerted effort on Monday and were pushed back by Polish border guards.

They set up a camp on the border, sheltering in tents and burning wood from local forests to keep warm, blocked by Polish guards behind razor-wire. Belarus says some 2,000 people are living at the camp.

Teams from the UN refugee agency, the International Organization for Migration and the Red Cross visited the camp on Thursday to check on conditions and deliver aid, including hygiene kits and diapers.

"Priorities now are to prevent loss of life and move people to safer locations in Belarus," UNHCR chief Filippo Grandi said on Twitter.

Lithuanian Foreign Minister Gabrielius Landsbergis told reporters his country was pushing for an evacuation corridor from the border to the Belarusian city of Grodno, which has an airport that could be used to send people back to their home countries.

The migrants have been making sporadic attempts to cross, with Polish border guards reporting 468 attempts overnight Thursday.

At least 10 migrants have died on the border, seven of them on the Polish side, according to Polish newspaper Gazeta Wyborcza.

Journalists and charity workers have been banned from the immediate border area by Polish

authorities under state of emergency rules.

Fear in Polish town

Residents in the Polish town of Sokolka near the border said they were worried by the growing tensions but voiced support for the Polish government's tough stance.

"I'm afraid of the migrants getting through and what the consequences would be," said Henryk Lenkiewicz, a 67-year-old pensioner walking by a community noticeboard in the town center.

European leaders have been putting pressure on Lukashenko's main backer, Russian President Vladimir Putin.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel telephoned Putin on Wednesday to ask him "to use his influence" to stop what she called an "inhumane" instrumentalization of migrants.

Poland has accused Putin of masterminding the crisis, a claim the Kremlin has dismissed as "irresponsible."

France's Europe Minister Clement Beaune said Thursday there was no evidence that Russia was involved in trafficking migrants, adding it should be "part of the solution because Belarus is more and more dependent on Moscow."

Moscow and Minsk have close economic, political and military ties and Russian air force planes have been flying patrols over Belarus this week, including two Tu-160 strategic bombers on Thursday that were accompanied by Belarusian Su-30S fighter jets.

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2021/11/11/belarus-warns-against-new-eu-sanctions-says-could-cut-gas-a75532