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# Russia's Aeroflot Denies Transporting Migrants to Belarus

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Hundreds of migrants have gathered on Belarus' border with Poland, seeking to cross into the EU and claim asylum. **EPA / TASS**

Russia's flagship airline Aeroflot has denied helping migrants and refugees from the Middle East travel to Belarus as European leaders scramble to deal with a migrant crisis on the Polish border.

A Bloomberg report that the European Commission was considering sanctioning the state-controlled airline for participating in what Commission chief Ursula von der Leyen has called "human trafficking" triggered a furious response in Moscow and saw shares in the airline fall by as much as 2% at the start of trading Thursday.

"Information about the participation or assistance of Aeroflot in the organization of mass transportation of migrants to the territory of Belarus does not correspond to reality," the airline said in a statement sent to The Moscow Times.

"Our airline does not operate regular flights to the cities of Iraq and Syria, or flights on the

Istanbul-Minsk route. Charter flights to these destinations are also not carried out."

The company said it carried only 19 official transit passengers from Beirut, Lebanon to Minsk via Moscow during the first 10 days of November. It added that no citizens of Syria or Iraq transited through Moscow or those traveling from other major transport hubs in the region, such as Istanbul or Dubai.

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The situation on the border between Belarus and Poland has escalated dramatically in recent days, with thousands having traveled from the Middle East to the ex-Soviet country amassing at the Polish border hopes of crossing into the EU and claiming asylum.

The EU and Poland accuse Lukashenko of orchestrating a crisis on the bloc's border as retribution for Western sanctions over his harsh crackdown on Belarus' opposition and Poland's role as a refuge for fleeing opposition figures and independent journalists.

Lukashenko on Thursday threatened to cut off gas supplies to Europe should Brussels press ahead with new sanctions against Minsk.

Dozens of special flights are departing from Middle Eastern countries to Minsk every week, and Belarus has designated special tour operators to process visa applications for citizens of Iraq and Syria.

The Kremlin has also denied having a role in the current crisis following Polish accusations of Moscow's involvement.

"Russia has nothing to do with what is happening on the border of Belarus and Poland. Russia, like all other countries, is trying to make efforts to resolve this situation," Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov told reporters Thursday.

He also blasted the reported plans to sanction Aeroflot as a "crazy idea."

"The company has said that it is not transporting migrants to Minsk. Besides, even if some companies were, it would in no way contradict international rules — this needs to be clearly understood," he said.

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German Chancellor Angela Merkel urged Russian President Vladimir Putin to press Lukashenko to back down in a phone call Wednesday.

The EU has levied multiple rounds of sanctions against Belarus and its key industries following last year's disputed presidential election, which saw Lukashenko claim victory and a brutal crackdown on protesters who took to the streets to oppose the official results.

Lukashenko has grown increasingly isolated over the last 18 months, and Moscow has strengthened its position as the country's largest political and financial backer.

He has vowed to respond to any new sanctions imposed over the migrant crisis, Belarusian state media reported Thursday.

“If they impose additional sanctions on us... we must respond,” Lukashenko said in comments carried by state news agency Belta, suggesting Belarus could shut off gas transiting from Russia to the European Union through the Yamal-Europe pipeline.

*AFP contributed reporting.*

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