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The West's Response to Lukashenko's Migrant Gambit Might Seal Belarus' Fate

Moscow's problem is that having thrown their weight behind Lukashenko, they are now stuck with him.

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Migrants on the Belarusian-Polish border. **@podlaskaPolicja / twitter**

Is what is happening on the Belarus-Poland border a hybrid war or a human tragedy? Clearly, it is both. However, it is also an excuse for dangerous wider polemics, not least about a supposed "Putin connection," that not only devalues the calamity on the ground and Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko's personal responsibility, but also risks escalating the crisis further.

Back in May, when Lukashenko was flailing around for ways to punish the European Union for the temerity to criticise his gratuitously brutal crackdown at home and impose sanctions after he forced down a Ryanair flight to arrest an opposition journalist, he threatened to open the

floodgates to a variety of threats. "We stopped drugs and migrants" coming to the EU, he claimed, but "now you will eat them and catch them yourselves."

Soon thereafter, Belarusian tourist agencies operating in the Middle East began making it clear that they were in a position to facilitate the issue of individual and group tourist visas, ostensibly for everything from hunting trips to attending sporting fixtures, to those eager to claim asylum or refugee status in the EU.

The role of the Belarusian state in this operation is as obvious as it is extensive. Migrants arriving in Minsk were bussed first to the Lithuanian and later the Polish border. Belarusian border guards advised them on how and where to cross the border. Now that Polish police and military have been deployed to seal the frontier, Belarusian security personnel have been trying to breach their border fences.

An escalating crisis

On the other hand, this seems also to have spiralled beyond Lukashenko's original intent. On the one hand, he seems — characteristically — to have instinctively upped the ante when first Lithuania and then Poland instituted measures to block the flow of migrants.

What was presumably originally conceived as a limited act of malicious blackmail – back off or else you can expect more of the same — has become a major incident involving thousands of increasingly desperate men, women and children, currently trapped inside Belarus.

At the same time, as Tadeusz Giczan has observed, the migrants themselves appear to have begun organising themselves, in ways presumably known to the authorities, but not necessarily under their control.

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It is hard to see how this ends well. The Poles are disinclined to let in thousands of migrants, even if most appear to want to pass through to Germany. Locked into its own political tussle with Brussels, Warsaw is also happy to amplify the crisis to present itself as the strong-willed and essential defender of Europe. Besides, to let in some would only encourage Minsk to bring in more and keep up the pressure.

Lukashenko also has his own perverse reasons to magnify the situation. Not only is he hoping to scare other European countries into making some kind of deal to defuse the situation; he presumably also fears the consequences if he is seen to back down. Shorn of any legitimacy, his regime depends on its reputation for ruthlessness and remorselessness.

For such a dictator, an admission of failure may encourage renewed protests on the street but, rather more probably, may leave him open to challenge within his own elite.

Like Macbeth, he is "in blood stepped in so far that, should [he] wade no more, returning were as tedious as go o'er." He has gone so far, he can only escalate.

The hand of Putin?

All this can be explained by the internal dynamics of Lukashenko's regime and his own pattern of thuggish behaviour. To many, though, that is not enough. Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki has accused Vladimir Putin of being the "mastermind" behind it the crisis, for example. He seems to have to be the Blofeld of their global dramas.

There is no evidence of any Russian role so far. Organising the migrant flows largely was done by opportunistic businesspeople — both legal travel firms and illegal migrant smuggling rings — and supported by the KGB. The airlines which flew them may well have known what was going on, but the migrants had legal visas and had paid for their tickets, meaning that the carriers had at least plausible deniability and at most a legal duty to fly them.

Related article: In Minsk, Migrants Have Become Part of Daily Life. And a Business Opportunity for Some.

Instead, this interpretation appears based on little beyond rumour and assumption. In particular, there is the belief that because Belarus is now dependent on Russian political and economic support, that Lukashenko would have to have Putin sign off on any such venture.

This is a deeply problematic argument. First of all, it is foolish to underestimate Lukashenko's personal agency. This is the man who still refuses to give formal recognition of Russia's annexation of Crimea and engages in continued trade disputes with Moscow. He recently even threatened to cut off gas supplies flowing to Europe, something that earned him a slapdown from Putin.

Moscow's problem is that having thrown their weight behind Lukashenko (something some in policy circles now regret), they are stuck with him. If he falls, they will be considered to have suffered a defeat and will have to choose between direct intervention and the likely rise of a pro-Western successor regime. Lukashenko thus has considerable room for manoeuvre.

According to Franak Viacorka, a Belarusian journalist and adviser to opposition leader Svetlana Tikhanovskaya, "it's like a small boy hiding behind the older brother… Lukashenko is trying to use the Kremlin and to threaten the West with the Kremlin, [but] very often not consulting [over] his statements with it."

Ironically, many who argue he is now simply Putin's puppet because Moscow pays the bills also excuse America's failure in Afghanistan because the Kabul regime was too wilful, too corrupt, even though Washington bankrolled it. Empires rarely have the kind of control over their notional subjects as they might like.

Pushing Moscow into Minsk

Secondly, this assumption can lead to bad policy. Of course Moscow is neither going to do the EU any favours, nor pass up on any opportunities to use the situation to its advantage. Lavrov's disingenuous suggestion that the EU should pay Belarus to stop the migrants and the 'heavy metal diplomacy' of sending paratroopers to exercise in Belarus and a couple of bombers into its skies represent a bid to put pressure on Europe.

However, this is not a good crisis for the Kremlin. Those hoping for an eleventh-hour reversal

of German policy over Nord Stream 2 are again pressing their case, framing it as some kind of rebuke over Belarus.

Likewise, British Foreign Secretary Liz Truss has affirmed that "Russia has a responsibility to end the migrant crisis in Belarus."

To an extent that is true, in that every country has a responsibility to do its bit to end the cynical use of migrants as political weapons. Furthermore, even if it is not the boss of Lukashenko, clearly Moscow has more leverage on Minsk than Berlin or Brussels, Warsaw or Vilnius.

However, there are two dangerous corollaries. The first is — as some are already asserting — that the only way to hit Lukashenko is to bring pressure to bear on Putin.

There is no solid evidence that the Kremlin really wants to take over Belarus; even the much-touted new common military doctrine has still not been published. However, there may come a point at which they decide that if they are having to pay for the country, and being punished for Lukashenko's misdeeds, they might at least extract the maximum advantage.

That would presumably mean using the Russia-Belarus Union Treaty as the pretext for some kind of leveraged take-over and the replacement of the toxic and wilful Lukashenko with a genuine Russian proxy. And that, ironically, is something no one wants, not Putin, not Lukashenko, and not the West, yet which may acquire an inexorable momentum of its own, if people are not careful.

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