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EU Border Migrant Crisis Complicates Russia-Belarus Alliance

An already carefully balanced and contradictory relationship is now even more complex.

By Felix Light

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Migrants gather on the Belarusian-Polish border near Poland's Kuznica crossing. **Leonid Shcheglov / BELTA / AFP**

Russia's role in the migrant crisis reflects conflicting goals in relations with its embattled ally Belarus, Russian and Belarusian experts told The Moscow Times this week.

The EU has accused the Belarusian government of shipping Middle Eastern migrants toward Poland to force the bloc to drop sanctions imposed after the disputed victory of longtime leader Alexander Lukashenko in presidential elections. Poland, in turn, says Russia, Belarus's only major ally and key political and economic backer, orchestrated the crisis.

But despite ongoing Russian support for Lukashenko, who faced down unprecedented

protests against his 27-year rule over Belarus last year, analysts from the two countries cast doubt on the idea that Russia has contrived the migration crisis, saying Moscow's position on its neighbor is complex and often contradictory.

"I don't think Lukashenko needed any push from Russia to act in this way," said Artyom Shraibman, a Belarusian political analyst based in Ukraine. "He has been threatening to unleash the flow of migrants for many years before 2021."

"But then, if Moscow had wanted to stop Lukashenko, it could have done so," added Shraibman.

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The roots of the present crisis go back to August 2020.

When Lukashenko claimed a landslide victory in his bid for a sixth term in office, the opposition cried foul and Belarus was plunged into uproar.

As security forces resorted to vicious violence to put down unprecedentedly large protests, the EU — in particular Belarus's neighbors Poland and Lithuania — threw their weight behind Svetlana Tikhanovskaya, the opposition candidate who said she defeated Lukashenko at the polls.

The aftermath of the election, which saw sanctions imposed on Belarus and Lukashenko rendered persona non grata in Europe, spelled the end of Minsk's decades-long policy of balancing relations between Russia and Europe to extract concessions from both.

Instead, Russian President Vladimir Putin, seeing in Lukashenko a guarantee that Belarus would not follow Ukraine in aligning with the West, stepped in offering economic and political support that proved crucial in thwarting the Belarusian protest movement.

The result, however, was to leave Lukashenko, who had always jealously guarded his country's independence, profoundly reliant on Putin, with whom he has reportedly had difficult personal relations.

Among Russian experts, there is broad agreement that the migration crisis is Lukashenko's bid to force Europe to talk to him, and therefore to lessen his dependence on Russia.

"Throughout this crisis, Lukashenko has been trying to force the West into dialogue," said Andrei Kortunov, head of the Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC), a Kremlin-aligned think tank.

Russia's contradictory moves throughout the crisis — signaling support for Lukashenko with military drills in Belarus while also coordinating with European leaders to defuse the crisis — point to the Kremlin's complex position on Belarus, which aims to keep Lukashenko in office while preventing him from resuming his traditional independence.

"Lukashenko wants to put some distance between Minsk and Moscow and to increase his

freedom for maneuver independent of Russia," said Kortunov.

"It would be strange if Putin supported him in that."

Pariah status

For some experts, Russia's guarded support for Lukashenko reflects the Belarusian president's own weakness, and the improbability of his scheme bearing fruit.

"Russia doesn't need to publicly abandon Lukashenko because the chances of him actually managing to force the EU to restore relations were always very minimal," said Maxim Samorukov, a scholar of post-Communist Eastern Europe at the Moscow Carnegie Center.

For Samorukov, Lukashenko's continued pariah status in Europe means his migration gambit was never likely to achieve his goals.

"It's quite clear that a phone call with Merkel isn't the same as sanctions relief, or a reset in relations," he added, referring to Lukashenko's call with the outgoing German chancellor this week, the first since his disputed re-election.

With the EU unanimous in its support for Poland's actions despite Warsaw's strained relations with Brussels, and Middle Eastern countries shutting down flights to Minsk under EU pressure, some conclude that Lukashenko's bid to force his neighbours into dealing with him has failed.

"Lukashenko wanted the Europeans to realize what good relations with Belarus had given them in terms of border security," said political analyst Shraibman.

"I don't think it has worked in the way he intended."

Becoming a liability

However, regardless of Lukashenko's isolation, some Russian experts feel that the Belarusian strongman is becoming a liability for Moscow's interests.

"The main goal of Russian policy in Belarus isn't to annex Belarus, but to make sure Belarus doesn't move toward the West," said Carnegie's Samorukov.

"On the one hand, Lukashenko is an iron-cast guarantee that won't happen. But on the other, Russia also understands that Lukashenko's behavior is itself becoming a risk factor."

It has not gone unnoticed in Moscow that the migration standoff is Lukashenko's second self-inflicted crisis in a year.

In May, the forced grounding of a Ryanair jet flying over Belarus and the arrest of an opposition journalist onboard provoked international outrage and led to Belarus's transport links with the outside world being almost entirely severed.

In the last week, experts have pointed to Lukashenko's threat to shut off the Yamal pipeline, which carries Russian gas through Belarus to Europe, as particularly disturbing for Moscow at

a time when gas supplies to the EU are a sensitive issue.

Putin, in an interview with Russian state TV, publicly rebuked Lukashenko for the pipeline threat, dismissing his Belarusian ally as "overly emotional."

According to Samorukov, Lukashenko's increasingly erratic conduct has the Kremlin set on a gradual, stage-managed transition of power in Minsk ahead of presidential elections scheduled for 2025.

"There's no need for him to go imminently, but everyone now understands that Lukashenko shouldn't run for another term," said Samorukov.

"That would be the single biggest risk to Russian interests in Belarus."

With Lukashenko having publicly committed himself — with Russian endorsement — to an as-yet vague program of constitutional reform to be approved by referendum, some see a mechanism by which Belarus's first and so far only president could formally retire, even while maintaining a degree of control over his country.

"Every time you hear a Russian official talk about constitutional reform in Belarus, they're saying that Lukashenko has to go," said Samorukov.

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