

Russia strengthens its border with Belarus

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On 7 February, an order from the head of the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) Aleksandr Bortnikov came into force, establishing a border security zone along the border with Belarus. Such a zone had existed until 1995, and was abolished as a result of the integration of the two countries, crowned by the creation of the Union State of Russia and Belarus. According to Moscow, the purpose of restoring the zone, in which the movement of people will be subject to restriction and supervision, is to prevent illegal migration in connection with Belarus's liberalisation of its visa policy (a decree by President Aleksandr Lukashenko will be implemented on 12 February, thanks to which citizens of 80 countries who fly to Minsk by plane will be able to stay for five days in Belarus without a visa). Russian has insisted that the decision does not mean the introduction of border controls, and will not affect citizens of Belarus and Russia, who will travel between the two countries on the basis of the existing system. President Lukashenko strongly criticised the establishment of the zone; he described the decision as politically motivated, and said it has violated already existing bilateral agreements.

Commentary

- The decision by the head of the FSB effectively eliminates the opportunity for third-country nationals to travel to Russia via Belarus (with the continued exception of passengers on international trains). Moscow has already limited such transit for several months, citing the fact that no international border crossing points have been formally set up along the Russian/Belarusian border. The aim of the Russian action is to force Belarus to introduce a common visa policy, and ideally a common visa; Minsk has consistently rejected this, considering sufficient the existence of a common database of undesirable persons, as well as the requirement that any foreigner entering the territory of the Union State must complete a uniform migration card.
- The status of the common border is another field of growing conflict between Russia and Belarus. Other areas of dispute include the following: energy issues (since January 2016 Belarus has paid less for Russian gas than the amount of US\$132/bcm provided for in the contract with Gazprom, and according to Russia its debt now amounts to US\$550 million; in order to force Belarus to settle its debts, Russia has reduced its oil deliveries by about a quarter); the Russian phytosanitary service's prevention of Belarusian foodstuffs from entering the Russian market (according to this body, food from countries subject to Russian sanctions has entered the country via Belarus); the failed attempt to

establish a Russian military aviation base in Bobruysk (on 3 February, President Lukashenko once again stated that there is no reason for it to be established); and the withholding of payment of the next tranche of the stabilisation loan granted Belarus by the Russian-controlled Eurasian Development and Stabilisation Fund.

- Despite media noise (for example, the Russian press agency Regnum reported that Belarus is considering leaving the Eurasian Economic Union and the Collective Security Treaty Organisation, which Minsk denies), at its current stage the Russian/Belarusian conflict has not yet moved beyond the established nature of the relationship between both countries, in which harsh public statements and unilateral decisions may be part of the negotiations. If the conflict escalates further, however, it is possible that Moscow will increase the pressure on the Belarusian leader and make attempts to limit Belarus's room for manoeuvre on the international stage.