Analyses OSW

CENTRE FOR EASTERN STUDIES 27.10.2021 www.osw.waw.pl

Belarus: an escalation of the migration crisis

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Despite worsening weather conditions the regime in Belarus continues to gather migrants on its territory. After Iraq suspended direct flights to Belarus in August the migration routes have changed. There are regular flight connections from Istanbul (four times a day) and Dubai (twice a day) and they in great part service the transit from Iraq. There are also irregular charter flights linking Damascus and Minsk (between 8 and 26 October there were nine of them). There are many pictures posted on Belarusian social media of migrants in Minsk (most probably mainly from Iraq and Syria), from where they are gradually driven up to the Polish border under the control of Belarusian border guards and the State Security Committee of the Republic of Belarus (KGB). There, while awaiting transfer it is believed they are placed in makeshift tent cities. The growing scale of the problem is indicated by the fact that between 1 and 26 October 14,000 attempted illegal border crossings into Poland were recorded (compared to 7,535 in September and 3,500 in August). These measures undertaken by Belarus are accompanied by an information campaign in which the Polish government is accused of cynically provoking a humanitarian disaster at the border. The migration pressure on the Belarusian-Lithuanian border has also re-intensified after it died down at the beginning of August. In September the Lithuanian border guards recorded 981 attempted illegal border crossings into Lithuania but the figure reached 1,739 between 1 and 25 October. In the case of the Belarusian-Latvian border, the Latvian government reports 20-30 illegal border crossings a day.

Commentary

- Belarus's stance on the migration issue has not shifted since the beginning of the current crisis. The Belarusian government claims that the involvement of the Polish Army in the protection of the border area is a sign of an alleged growing military threat on the part of NATO. The provocative actions taken by Belarusian border guards reveal that the Belarusian regime is trying to provoke as many tragedies at the border as possible, including incidents with the use of weapons, to prove to the West that only by abandoning the sanctions and making concessions to Belarus can an end be put to the present crisis. On the other hand, the openness to engage in dialogue about how to stave off a crisis which Belarus has been declaring is rather a propaganda ploy, not a serious offer for negotiation. The Belarusian regime believes that only a significant deterioration of the situation could force the EU to begin talks.
- The Belarusian government assumes that exerting migration pressure is an effective means of politically destabilising Poland and it also hopes that it will affect Poland's position in the international arena as a country which has contributed to the creation of

an instability zone in Europe by “barricading” the border. The fact that migrants are continually arriving at the border demonstrates that the Lukashenka regime has no plans to stop using them as an instrument of aggression. The number of migrants arriving at the border may seasonally decrease due to winter approaching; which will deter part of those interested in illegal transfers. However, this does not mean that the situation at the border will calm down since the services subordinated to Belarus will not abandon the practice of pushing the migrants who are already in Belarus (estimated at 10,000-15,000 people) back towards Poland.

- Russia is officially supporting Lukashenka, claiming that neither Belarus nor Russia should be held accountable for the migration crisis at the Belarusian-Polish border. Russia’s accusations against Poland that it is responsible for the military escalation of the situation at its border with its ally Belarus are aligned with the Kremlin’s propaganda about aggressive measures being taken by the West. This is confirmed by the statements made by the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in which the Western countries are blamed for provoking consecutive arrivals of migrants by pursuing an irresponsible policy towards the Middle East, West Africa and Afghanistan. At the operational level, the issues linked to the migration crisis were discussed during the meeting of the heads of the Russian and Belarussian Border Guards in Sochi at the end of September.
- It seems possible that Lukashenka could open migration ‘corridors’ into Ukraine, even though at present it seems very unlikely due to the two countries’ interdependence in the area of the trade in fuels. Nevertheless, this scenario would be likely if the costs of controlling and maintaining many thousands of migrants were to start causing internal problems, for example deepening society’s aversion to the government. If this scenario unfolded, it would finally lead to freezing relations with Ukraine and worsening the economic situation of Belarus. At present there is little to indicate that the Belarusian regime takes the internal implications, such as the necessity to organise surveillance of the migrants residing in its territory, seriously.