Analyses OSW

CENTRE FOR EASTERN STUDIES 9.11.2021 www.osw.waw.pl

Support for Lukashenka. Russia's response to the migration crisis

Piotr Żochowski

Since the beginning of the rise in tension on the Polish-Belarusian border and the escalation of the migration crisis, Moscow has taken a position that unequivocally justifies the actions taken by Alyaksandr Lukashenka's regime. On 1 November, Russia's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Sergei Lavrov, stated that he did not see the government in Minsk breaching its obligations under international law. He stressed that any pressure on Lukashenka to stop the wave of migration to the EU was groundless. He also said that Poland and Lithuania had proven their helplessness and lack of will to adhere to the principles of humanitarianism by pushing the migrants back into Belarus. He also added that Moscow would not mediate in any talks intended to change Minsk's behaviour. According to Lavrov, the cause of the migration crisis is "disruptive US policy" towards the countries of the Middle East, including Syria and Afghanistan.

The migration issue was also raised during Lukashenka's telephone conversations with Vladimir Putin on 4 and 9 November, during the situation on the Polish-Belarusian border was one of the questions discussed. Moreover, on 8 November, the Kremlin's spokesman Dmitri Peskov confirmed that Russia was following the events closely. He also said that the current state of affairs was a heavy burden for Minsk, and there was no doubt that Belarus was doing everything to keep the situation within the law. He further added that the Kremlin was aware of the risk that the migrants might infiltrate into the territory of the Russian Federation. On the same day Maria Zakharova, the spokeswoman of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, stated that instead of criticising Lukashenka, Polish politicians should recall how over 2000 Polish soldiers had participated in the war in Iraq and contributed to the wave of migration from that country. On 9 November, Minister Lavrov called on the EU to take responsibility for resolving the crisis, and suggested the need to accept refugees and provide financial aid to Belarus. He also referred to the precedent of the EU-Turkish agreement concerning refugees from Syria.

Commentary

- The statements by official government representatives show that Moscow does not intend to withdraw its political support for the Lukashenka regime. It justifies the steps he has taken and claims that they are in accordance with international law. However, at the same time, it has maintained some distance from these moves in order to be able to refute the accusations that the Kremlin is in any way jointly responsible for Minsk exacerbating the migration crisis and organising the incidents on the Polish border. The

Russian Federation has taken this stance because it fears that if the West recognises that it is actively engaged in the moves Belarus has made, this may lead to disruption in economic relations with the EU and hinder dialogue with the US.

- Moscow is interested in a controlled escalation of the crisis in order to use it as a form of political and kinetic pressure on Western states, without formally bearing any responsibility for it. Lukashenka's continuation of the current actions serves the Kremlin's interests, as this fuels the political dispute in Poland over how to respond to the threat, aggravates the situation on the EU border, generates discussion inside the EU on how to deal with the humanitarian problem, and tests the resilience of the Polish security system, Poland's armed forces and NATO as a whole. At the same time, however, the current situation is deepening Lukashenka's isolation in the international community, makes him permanently dependent on Russia, and creates yet another basis for the West to initiate a potential dialogue with the Kremlin. If such a dialogue begins, Moscow is unlikely to formulate a specific list of demands, but will rather attempt to shift the initiative to the West.
- However, it cannot be ruled out that if the situation on the border suddenly deteriorates, for example, if incidents involving the use of weapons occur, Moscow will distance itself from the most radical of Lukashenka's actions. A serious, especially uncontrolled, escalation of the crisis that might, for example, lead to local armed conflict between Poland and Belarus, would be risky for it. Firstly, Russia is most concerned that the movement of goods on the EU-Belarusian border might be blocked (its key corridor runs through Belarus). Secondly, a significant tightening of sanctions against Minsk would also have negative consequences for the Russian Federation, one of which would be that Moscow's economic support for Belarus would become more costly; the interests of Russian companies might also suffer. Thirdly, there would probably be additional political risks affecting the launch of the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline, which at present is a top priority for the Kremlin. Fourthly, it could hinder the political and security dialogue initiated between the Biden administration in the US and Russia, in a situation where Moscow seems to have some hopes of benefiting from the dialogue.
- The Kremlin's support for Lukashenka is not entirely unconditional. Moscow does not want a scenario in which the migration crisis in Belarus poses an immediate threat to its own security, and in particular one which could lead the migrants to attempt to return to their countries of origin via Russian territory, as this could create social tensions within Russia itself. Therefore, it expects Belarusian law enforcement agencies to keep full control of the migrants' movements. FSB border guards are likely to strengthen the protection of the border with Belarus. It is also possible that a contingent of Russian troops will appear on the borders between Russia and Poland & the Baltic states, which will help 'regulate' the situation.
- This crisis is a focus point in the Russian information operation. In addition to discrediting the Polish government's actions, Moscow is repeating the notion that the West is responsible for causing the migration because it supported the US's actions in the Middle East. It has also been indirectly suggested that Belarus may open up a migration channel from Afghanistan. Another element of this operation is the emphasis on close military co-operation between Russia and Belarus, as part of which nuclear

weapons may appear in its territory. The activity of the Russian media is another tool of this psychological warfare; the dissemination of alarmist and manipulative reporting is intended to cause panic in the EU countries and undermine the rationale of taking any decisive steps to block the border. In this way, Moscow is trying to suggest that the West should accept the migrants and set up a dialogue with Minsk in order to deal with the crisis effectively.