

The Baltic states' reaction to Lukashenka's threats

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The meeting of the Security Council of the Republic of Belarus held on 31 August 2023 was devoted to the "tense international situation", and included an assessment of threats present on the border with Poland and the Baltic states. Alyaksandr Lukashenka accused NATO states of consistently promoting an expansionist policy, building up their military presence around Belarus and carrying out provocative exercises in the vicinity of the border, and claimed that their military personnel have violated this border. He added that Warsaw and Vilnius were fuelling the hysteria linked with the presence of Wagner fighters in Belarus, and stated that the two capitals' demands to immediately expel them were "nonsensical and stupid". In an attempt to substantiate the view that it is Poland which was pursuing the aggressive policy, he said that Warsaw had unilaterally suspended the validity of selected articles of the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe and ceased to report information on the state of its army. He also said that Belarusian citizens who are planning to organise a coup d'état are undergoing training in Poland, Lithuania and Ukraine. At the same time, Lukashenka declared that Minsk is ready to restore favourable relations with its neighbours, although "for the time being they are not interested in any normalisation". As an example of Belarus's "good will" he cited the invitation extended to Poland's representatives to take part as observers in the Combat Brotherhood-2023 exercise carried out by the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) member states, which began on 1 September.

The governments of the Baltic states have offered no reaction to Lukashenka's provocative statements. Nor have the Latvian and Lithuanian media analysed them (in Estonia these utterances went entirely unremarked), and have limited themselves to just reporting the statements offered by the unrecognised Belarusian leader. Similarly, there are no signs in either Lithuania or Latvia of any major concern about the presence of Wagner Group mercenaries in Belarus.

Commentary

- Lukashenka convened the recent meeting of the Security Council of the Republic of Belarus in response to a statement by the ministers of internal affairs of Poland, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia which they adopted at a consultative meeting in Warsaw on 28 August. It should be assumed that the meeting was devoted to the consequences of the potential decision by Poland, Lithuania and Latvia to close all their border crossing points with Belarus. However Lukashenka's statement, which contained conciliatory elements and did not rule out the intention to 'normalise' relations with Belarus's EU neighbours, should not be viewed as credible. His consistent accusations that Poland is

pursuing an aggressive policy are intended to divert attention away from the regime's responsibility for its hybrid activities on the borders with NATO states (such as supporting illegal migration, air incidents and acts of aggression targeting the border guards) and for repressing the Polish minority in Belarus. However, it cannot be ruled out that out of fear that transport routes from the EU may be closed, Lukashenka will pretend to deescalate the tension by temporarily reducing the intensity of his hybrid activities and acts of provocation. However, the regime in Minsk will probably continue to fuel the migration crisis on the border with the EU because Minsk views this crisis as an effective instrument to destabilise the situation.

- The tactic adopted by the Baltic states, which involves refraining from commenting on Lukashenka's statements, is intended to prevent the public in those countries from falling prey to fear, which both the Belarusian regime and the Kremlin want to disseminate by the use of aggressive rhetoric. At the same time, the Baltic governments (principally those of Lithuania and Latvia) are not disregarding the threats linked, for example, with the transfer of Wagner mercenaries to Belarus, the possible Belarusian-Russian joint military exercises and the deployment of Russian nuclear warheads on Belarusian territory. Nevertheless, they have told their societies that the threat posed by Russia and Belarus (which is now a *de facto* part of Russia, according to Lithuanian experts and politicians) has been in place for a long time. The pressure resulting from the deployment of nuclear weapons is nothing new either because, according to a statement by the Lithuanian Chief of Defence General Valdemaras Rupšys, it has been present in the vicinity of Lithuania's borders for many years, in the form of the nuclear warheads stationed in Kaliningrad oblast. The Lithuanian government has also emphasised that at present there are no indications suggesting that Wagner fighters may be involved in transporting migrants through the border or in any other activity targeting Lithuania and Latvia.
- A policy of deterrence continues to be the response of the Baltic governments to the permanent threat posed by Russia and Belarus, including to the migration pressure they have exerted on the EU's borders since mid-2021. The decisions adopted on 28 August by the interior ministers of the Baltic states and Poland regarding their plan to simultaneously close their borders should a serious incident happen in the vicinity of the Belarusian border in Poland, Lithuania or Latvia should be viewed as a political manifestation of the region's unity and solidarity.
- During the meeting of interior ministers of Poland and the Baltic states, the Lithuanian minister Agnė Bilotaitė drew attention to instances of the citizens of Poland and the Baltic states travelling to Belarus on the basis of the visa-free regime introduced by Lukashenka. She said that these instances are a source of concern to Lithuania and need to be monitored. Since April 2022, when Belarus lifted the visa requirement, more than 400,000 Lithuanian citizens have travelled visa-free to that country, including 170,000 in 2023 alone (on average 52,000 Lithuanians cross the Lithuanian-Belarusian border every month). Latvia, for its part, has reported that in the first half of 2023 42,000 Latvian citizens travelled to Belarus. While most of these travels involve family visits and shopping trips to buy cheaper goods, the Baltic governments are worried that the Belarusian special services, which are most likely preparing new hostile acts targeting

the Baltic states and Poland, may show interest in their citizens. According to the Lithuanian authorities, the decision to close two out of the six border crossing points between Lithuania and Belarus and to deploy soldiers to assist the border guards is intended to step up control at the border crossing points, where queues mainly consisting of Belarusian cargo carriers have formed. Stepping up the controls is intended to prevent private companies from attempting to circumvent EU sanctions. The Latvian authorities have recorded a minor increase in the number of individuals crossing the Latvian-Belarusian border, most likely due to the measures Lithuania has implemented.