

Belarusian balloons prompt emergency situation in Lithuania

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On 9 December, the Lithuanian government declared a nationwide emergency due to the threat to civil security posed by Belarusian smuggling balloons, which have been active for the past two months. These balloons are being directed into Lithuanian civil and military aviation zones, which Vilnius regards not merely as smuggling attempts but primarily as a hybrid attack by the regime of Alyaksandr Lukashenka. Air traffic at the airports in Vilnius and Kaunas is regularly disrupted – this year alone, 613 balloon incursions into Lithuanian airspace have been recorded. They have affected 320 flights and caused inconvenience to 47,000 passengers.

The introduction of the emergency situation (which is not equivalent to a state of emergency) marks the latest step by the Lithuanian authorities in their efforts to counter the Belarusian balloons. A blockade of border crossings with Belarus, imposed in October and maintained for three weeks as a retaliatory measure, failed to achieve the desired outcome. In response, the authorities in Minsk banned Lithuanian lorries located in Belarus from returning home. Vilnius maintains that Belarus is holding around 280 vehicles, even though the Lithuanian–Belarusian border crossings at Šalčininkai and Medininkai were reopened on 20 October.

The authorities in Minsk have made resolving the issue conditional upon Vilnius's willingness to engage in broader talks on normalising bilateral relations. On 9 December, Lukashenka demanded that Lithuania 'compensate for the losses' Belarus has incurred as a result of sanctions imposed after 2020. He also accused the Lithuanian government of supporting the Belarusian exile community, including paramilitary volunteer formations. Belarusian Foreign Minister Maksim Ryzhenkov has also spoken out on several occasions in an aggressive tone, suggesting that Vilnius is escalating the conflict solely to secure 'additional funding for border protection' from Brussels.

The Lithuanian government is currently pursuing a dual-track strategy in response to the crisis. Domestically, it is intensifying efforts to intercept smuggled goods, although these measures will not prevent further balloon launches from Belarusian territory. Vilnius is therefore also seeking to persuade its Western allies to increase pressure on Minsk by tightening sanctions.

Commentary

- **The introduction of the emergency situation will improve the effectiveness of police and border guard operations, with both receiving additional support from the military.** This will enable more efficient interception of balloons and the detention of individuals

collaborating with Belarusian smugglers. Lithuania's Ministry of the Interior (with Minister Vladislav Kondratovič appointed as coordinator of the emergency situation) intends to urgently request that the Seimas grant additional powers to the armed forces – a request that is likely to be approved. The most important of these powers include the right to check personal and vehicle documents, the authority to issue orders to individuals, legal entities and organisations, and the power to pursue and detain those who disobey orders or are suspected of committing an offence.

- **The government led by Inga Ruginienė is seeking to rebuild public trust following decisions that failed to contain the crisis caused by smuggling balloons.** Lithuania's temporary closure of the border provoked a response from the regime in Minsk that Vilnius had not anticipated. The seizure of Lithuanian lorries, coupled with unsuccessful attempts to recover them through negotiations with Belarusian officials, has sparked protests from Lithuanian transport companies, which are now threatening the government with road blockades – the first demonstration is scheduled for 10 December. Tensions within the ruling coalition have also become apparent, revealing that the government lacks a coherent strategy towards Minsk, which has been targeting the EU's eastern border since 2021.
- **The Lithuanian government is focusing on securing support from its allies in the EU and NATO to increase international pressure on Belarus.** Vilnius refuses to engage in any form of dialogue with the Lukashenka regime, as it does not want to legitimise it. However, it lacks the means to address the balloon-driven crisis independently and is appealing to its Western allies to impose tougher sanctions on Belarus. Foreign Minister Kęstutis Budrys, with the backing of President Gitanas Nausėda, is advocating the inclusion of sectoral restrictions against Belarus in the upcoming 20th sanctions package targeting Russia. Lithuania is also consulting its allies on the possibility of employing kinetic measures to shoot down the balloons – a capability it does not currently possess.
- **Minsk is deliberately escalating tensions in its dealings with Lithuania, and the Lukashenka regime's professed willingness to reach an agreement is purely superficial.** Belarus – likely supported by Russia – aims to destabilise the border region with Lithuania, discredit its government, and inflame tensions and divisions within the country's political elite by provoking a dispute over the appropriate strategy towards Minsk. Belarus is also attempting to drive Lithuanian hauliers out of the lucrative road transport market between Asia and Europe – their operations along this route have been virtually paralysed in recent weeks.