Commentary
November 3, 2025

Lithuanian-Belarusian Border and Tragedy as the Central Theme of International Relations

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Originally published by Caliber.az

Summary

The situation at the borders between Belarus and the European Union highlights a central theme of international relations – tragedy.

Contents

1 Border on lockdown
2 A central theme of international relations
3 Catching every opportunity for dialogue

On 28-29 October, the Minsk International Conference on Eurasian Security was held in the Belarusian capital. This major annual event brought together, for the third time, a large number of officials and experts to discuss the current state and future of relations across the Eurasian space. From the outset, the conference, along with other expert dialogue formats in Minsk, was designed as a platform for difficult conversations—not merely among like-minded participants, but among individuals with differing perspectives on global developments. The events unfolding at the Belarus-Lithuania border during the conference once again emphasised why such dialogue is urgently needed today.

Border on lockdown

One day before the start of the 3rd Minsk International Conference on Eurasian Security, the government of neighbouring Lithuania announced the closure of all border crossings on its land border with Belarus. In doing so, Vilnius followed the example of Poland, which in mid-September also closed its entire border with Belarus for nearly two weeks. At that time, Warsaw cited threats to its national security stemming from the Belarus-Russia military exercises “Zapad-2025” (West-2025). However, it was clear to everyone

that closing the border did not actually affect the level of these threats, suggesting that the border shutdown was motivated by other objectives. Currently, Vilnius justified its decision by citing the problem of weather balloons (radiosondes), which smugglers regularly use to transport cheaper Belarusian cigarettes into the European Union.

Such smuggling has always existed in various forms. In the past, cigarettes were transported illegally by car, with smugglers seeking less-guarded sections of the border. In recent years, however, Lithuania has erected fences along its border, and officials have even discussed the possibility of mining certain areas. Under these circumstances, organised criminal groups in both countries have increasingly turned to drones to transport cigarettes. In October, Belarus significantly toughened penalties for the illegal use of unmanned aerial vehicles, which automatically raised the risks for smugglers. As a result, they have increasingly relied on weather balloons for their operations. This likely explains the recent surge in balloons observed in Lithuanian skies over the past few weeks.

However, according to statistics from the Lithuanian government itself, as of 6 October, 544 weather balloons from Belarus had been recorded, compared with 966 over the entire previous year. In other words, these smuggling balloons are neither a sudden novelty nor an unprecedented phenomenon, and their numbers remain broadly within predictable statistical limits. Closing land border crossings, in any case, could not have any meaningful impact on these figures.

Lithuania, however, emphasises not so much the sheer number of weather balloons as the fact that they increasingly pose a security threat to Vilnius airport, located relatively close to the Belarusian border. This is indeed a serious issue. Yet, closing the land border does nothing to address it. Vilnius is using the “border lever” to pressure the Belarusian government, demanding a more active crackdown on smugglers.

> Clearly, by closing the border and framing the situation not merely as a cross-border grey-market tobacco problem but as a “hybrid attack” from Minsk, Lithuania is pursuing additional objectives.

For now, however, we will set that topic aside.

A central theme of international relations

The situation at the Lithuanian-Belarusian border set both the context and the backdrop for the Minsk Conference on Eurasian Security—both practically and symbolically.

Most Western participants planned to reach Minsk via Vilnius airport, since as early as 2021, EU countries effectively imposed an air blockade on Belarus, closing their skies to Belarusian aircraft and prohibiting Western carriers from flying to Minsk. As a result, travelling to Belarus from Europe or North America now requires either a "round-the-world" route through hubs like Istanbul or Dubai, or arriving in Vilnius and then crossing into Minsk via the land border. In practice, many Western participants thus confronted the realities of a blockade. While all eventually made it to Minsk, for some, the journey involved adventures they will likely recount for years as something out of a thriller.

The border context was even more significant in a symbolic sense. It is clear that Vilnius insists on the correctness of its actions and presents corresponding arguments. Meanwhile, Minsk sees no reason to apologise and generally struggles to understand why the Belarusian side should be held responsible for the actions of international smugglers—or how a unilateral border closure could possibly solve the problem. This entire mosaic of circumstances carries considerable symbolic weight.

In the context of growing military and political tensions in the region, all the events surrounding the Minsk Security Conference echo the words of the eminent American political scientist Robert Jervis. Analysing typical patterns of escalation between states, he concluded that "the central theme of international relations is not evil, but tragedy."

> In other words, when we focus solely on the intentions of one side or another and try to explain world events purely through those intentions, we overlook the broader mechanics of relations between states—mechanics that have so often, throughout history, led to tragedies, massive destruction, and loss of human life. And that, in itself, is a tragedy.

What this means in practice was well described by the Austrian historian Christopher Clark. In 2012, he published the bestselling book *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914*. The central thesis of Clark's research on the real causes and mechanics of World War I can be summarised as follows:

No single country, politician, or government official can be blamed for starting the war. Caught in a web of complex circumstances, events, processes, mutual perceptions, and decisions based on them, all the actors involved were inadvertently drawn into a catastrophe of global proportions. And, of course, millions of innocent people around the world were caught up in that catastrophe alongside them.

Catching every opportunity for dialogue

Just a decade ago, it seemed that nothing like this could happen again in the modern world. After all, history has delivered so many bloody lessons that, having endured immense suffering and tragedy, humanity would become wiser. As we see today, unfortunately, this is not the case. People do not change much with technological progress or scientific development, and relations between nations continue to follow the same mechanics that have led to catastrophes for centuries.

> Events around Belarus over the past week symbolically show that Europe has come very close to a reality reminiscent of the dynamics and mechanics on the eve of World War I.

Only now, at the centre of this volatile mix, it is not the Balkans, as it was a century ago, but Eastern Europe.

There is, however, some good news. If there is a certain mechanical logic that drives state-level conflicts toward tragedies—even when no one desires them—then understanding this logic should help us prevent the worst.

Numerous researchers around the world studying this issue have repeatedly reached the same conclusion: the only way to halt the mechanical slide toward unwanted catastrophes and wars is to maintain dialogue and cooperation. Never miss a single opportunity to do so, even if the other side is someone deeply unpleasant and unapproachable. Only in this way can cross-border smuggling be addressed—and only in this way can we stop sleepwalking toward guaranteed mutual destruction.

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