Commentary
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Logistical Semi-Blockade Undermines Strategic Foundations of Belarusian Statehood

Yauheni Preiherman

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Summary

Western states could use the opportunity to stabilize essential logistical cooperation with Minsk in the interest of Belarusian statehood and regional security, given that businesses will push for the expansion of the “Northern Corridor”.

Two diametrically opposed trends are affecting Belarus’s ability to sustain its role as a logistical link between Asia and Europe. In a longer-term perspective, these trends affect Belarus’s ability to preserve the geostrategic foundations of its statehood. Both have made recent headlines in international media.

First, instability in the Red Sea, caused by Houthi attacks on commercial vessels, is disrupting global transport networks and reorienting trade flows. One specific consequence is the surge of rail transport from Asia to Europe via Russia and Belarus, as major container shipping lines are looking for alternatives to sailings via the Suez Canal. According to Germany’s DHL logistics company, requests for an overland route have soared by about 40 percent since last December. The Dutch Rail Bridge Cargo company reports a 31 percent increase in cargo rail traffic through the Russia-Belarus path compared to last year.

The route—the so-called “Northern Corridor”—seems advantageous compared to the more expensive alternative of air freight and the much slower option of ocean transportation by circumnavigating Africa via the Cape of Good Hope. Even the “Middle Corridor” from China through Kazakhstan to Türkiye via the Caspian Sea, which some shippers use to avoid Russian territory, appears less attractive due to highly complex

logistics and extended waiting periods. Whereas transporting goods through Russia and Belarus takes between 14 and 25 days, the transit time for the Middle Corridor is about 20 to 25 days.

Demand for the overland Northern Corridor is skyrocketing even though its bookings by logistical companies significantly decreased after the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine war in 2022. Notably, EU sanctions, which have severely restricted freight to and from Russia, do not apply to the rail transit of goods between third countries via the Russian and Belarusian territories. Thus, the longer the conflicts in the Middle East persist, the more international logistics companies will likely prefer the latter route as more secure and efficient, even though it lacks sufficient capacity to fully replace maritime transport.

> Other recent developments, however, undermine Belarus's critical geostrategic role as a transit link between Asia and Europe.

On March 1, the Lithuanian authorities closed two more checkpoints on the border with Belarus. Only two of the six border crossings between the countries remain operational. In mid-August 2023, Vilnius shut down the first two checkpoints, considerably limiting the flow of cargo trucks and passenger vehicles. The State Border Committee of Belarus forecasts that the latest closures will result in a further 40 percent decrease in cargo carriers that can pass the border. The movement of people will also be affected as Vilnius has cut the number of permits for Belarusian and Lithuanian bus companies to carry passengers between the countries—the only means of travel remaining besides automobiles.

Lithuania's decision is the latest in a series of unilateral restrictions imposed by EU member states bordering Belarus. Poland has also closed four of its six border checkpoints, leaving just one open for the transit of goods and the other for the movement of people. With Latvia, only one of the two border crossings continues to function. Even the remaining checkpoints on the three borders, however, do not work at total capacity. Belarusian border guards have reported that since at least 2021, their European counterparts have consistently failed to meet the standard requirements for processing carrier applications. For example, a day before the latest closure of the two crossings, Lithuanian border guards and customs officers allowed only 32 percent of the average number of trucks into their territory.

Consequently, extremely long lines of trucks have become standard on Belarus's EU borders, creating permanent supply chain risks and headaches for international businesses that depend on transit between these states. Air traffic between Belarus and

the EU has been suspended since mid-2021. Commenting on both of these problems, Belarusian analyst Siarhei Bohdan concluded that the existing situation amounts to a semi-blockade of Belarus.

The governments of neighboring EU states routinely cite national security concerns to explain away their restrictive decisions regarding border cooperation and transport communication with Belarus. Officials in Vilnius, for instance, openly declare that they aim to reduce the number of Belarusian nationals entering Lithuania, as they are perceived as a potential security threat. Latvia argues that with only one functioning border crossing, fighting illegal migration, which the European Union claims Minsk has helped orchestrate as a form of hybrid warfare, becomes easier. Also, many politicians in the Baltic states and Poland simply no longer distinguish between Belarus and Russia and, therefore, consider any restrictive measure against Minsk as a way to weaken Moscow.

National security is a matter of utmost priority, and any sovereign state should have complete freedom of action to protect itself from perceived threats, especially now that military-political tensions in Eastern Europe have so dramatically increased. However, the mainstream national security discourse in the Baltic states and Poland in favor of nearly blockading Belarus focuses entirely on present-day concerns and misses a crucial strategic development.

> The ability to serve as a logistical link between Russia/Asia and Europe is the most foundational factor in the political economy of Belarusian statehood.

Since late 2020, Western sanctions, particularly the logistical semi-blockade, have led to an unprecedented reorientation of Belarus's economy, external trade, and logistical routes toward Russia and away from the European Union. If the process continues, the foundation of business and people-to-people ties that have historically united Belarusians and their Western and Baltic neighbors will be broken. Simultaneously, Belarus's growing reliance on Russia could become irreversible. This will have even more dramatic ramifications for security in Eastern Europe and further undermine Western interests.

This perspective offers a different way of looking at the current skyrocketing in demand for rail transit through the Northern Corridor within the context of instability in the Middle East. Given that businesses will push for the expansion of this route, Western states could use the opportunity to stabilize essential logistical cooperation with Minsk in the strategic interest of Belarusian statehood and regional security.

Yauheni Preiherman
Director, Minsk Dialogue Council on International Relations