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Migration Crisis on Belarus's Border: Diplomatic and military dimensions

Yauheni Preiherman

Summary

A dramatic aggravation of the migration crisis on the Belarus–Poland border was reported on 8 November. Several thousand migrants had gathered near the Bruzgi–Kuznica border crossing, causing a concentrated hotbed of tension to emerge. The crisis made the headlines of the world's leading media.

The developments at the border have generated increasing numbers of news stories for three weeks now. However, longer-term consequences of the migration crisis for international relations and security in Eastern Europe have remained beyond media reports on the Belarus-Poland border situation. These repercussions appear to have both diplomatic and military dimensions and will for the most part be associated with the progress of the relationship between Belarus and the EU, as well as further militarization of the region.

Diplomatic dimension

The political and diplomatic reaction of the European Union to the situation at the border was reduced to two tracks, which are typical of and inevitable for the EU, considering its internal structure.

The *first track* focuses on increasing pressure on Minsk and redoubling diplomatic efforts to work with the countries of origin of the migrants. For example, on 15 November, the European Council broadened the listing criteria based on which specific restrictions can be imposed on Belarusian individuals and entities, which will now empower the EU to impose sanctions based on accusations of involvement in the organization of migration flows. A policy decision was taken to adopt a new, already the 5th, package of sanctions against Belarus, which is expected to be finalized in early December. Prior to that, the EU had partially suspended the visa facilitation agreement, limiting its application to Belarusian officials.

On 23 November, the European Commission and the High Representative proposed a legal framework for the adoption of sanctions against transport operators whose vehicles are used to carry migrants, referring to it as "a new instrument to the EU's toolbox for supporting member states affected by hybrid attacks." Its application will go beyond Belarus and is designed to undermine the entire international system of migration logistics. In parallel, Brussels and individual EU member states have been making active diplomatic efforts for several months now seeking to have their partners in Asia (especially in the Middle East) and Africa contribute to limiting transport relations with Belarus and side with the EU in the conflict with Minsk.

The *second track* of the EU's response was shaped mainly as a result of the attempts by the incumbent German leadership to slacken tensions by talking directly to official Minsk and Moscow. Immediately after the escalation of 8 November, acting German Chancellor Angela Merkel had several telephone conversations with Russian President Vladimir Putin (French President Emmanuel Macron and President of the European Council also spoke to Putin about the migration issue). The Russian president recommended that his European counterparts should talk directly with the leadership of Belarus in order to find a quick solution to the situation. On 15 and 17 November, direct contacts took the form of telephone conversations between Merkel and Aliaksandr Lukashenka.

The EU was divided on Berlin's endeavour, as reactions ranged from harsh criticism to cautious support. Overall (i.e. not only in the context of the migration crisis), there is no unanimity in the EU concerning direct dialogue with Minsk. Before the sharp escalation of the situation on the Belarus-Poland border (just as before the incident with the *Ryanair* aircraft), a slight increase in demand for de-escalation of the conflict with Belarus and recovery of direct communication could be observed in non-public space. The migration crisis, however, once again brought about a media and political backdrop, against which the rhetoric about the need for a tough response to Lukashenka inevitably prevails in the EU.

First, European politicians fear that another case might appear, where a third state successfully exerts political pressure on Brussels and individual member states by instrumentalizing migrants. *Second*, the birth injury of the EU's foreign policy structure is becoming increasingly conspicuous. In the current institutional framework, no full-value strategically aligned diplomacy on behalf of the entire EU will ever be possible by definition (one reason being the interstate principle of foreign policy decision-making). Therefore, the ever-present fear of looking divided and weak in the minds and consciousness of European politicians automatically moulds their decision-making,

which is meant to demonstrate the EU's unity, power and determination here and now. This is what normally happens even if it is easy to predict that in the longer term, such resolves will have exactly the opposite effect.

Nevertheless, even in these circumstances, Merkel's diplomatic efforts might as well have been enough to alleviate tensions. None of the stakeholders would have been fully satisfied, but this would have brought them all to the lowest common denominator. At least some kind of communication to resolve the crisis started on a working level, as people in Brussels tend to emphasize. However, the adoption of a new package of restrictions announced by the EU is capable of freezing the situation and making its resolution a matter of few additional months, if not bringing it back to square one. It may as well have potential to provoke the emergence of new sources of tension, at least if official Minsk treats the 5th package of sanctions as something other than a mere formality, and unless the parties benefit from the onset of diplomatic communication and contrive to reach an understanding about a realistic possibility to put an end to further widening of the sanctions spiral.

Military dimension

Some of the news reports covering the migration crisis on Belarusian and Polish television might suggest to viewers that media preparation is underway on both sides for an imminent military conflict. At any rate, some journalists went all the way to such a level of verbal aggression that it seemed too much even amid the regular verbal incontinence in social media. Those unrestrained statements probably imply some degree of confidence that a real armed conflict is impossible, although both Minsk and Warsaw, as well as their allies, voice increasing concerns over such risks. Incidentally, most Poles do not believe that military escalation is a possibility, either.

Even if we assume that a military clash between a NATO member and a CSTO member is currently unlikely, one cannot but observe a larger-scale process that is gaining momentum. It is in regional security that the ramifications of the migration crisis will be most serious and hazardous. They are manifested in the snowballing militarization of Eastern Europe and the de facto dismantling of the regional system of confidence- and security-building measures. Apparently, it will be impossible to undo these consequences in the foreseeable future.

Militarization of the region

During the year and a half since the Belarusian presidential election, each new issue of the *Minsk Barometer*, a regular monitoring of developments and processes in Belarusian foreign policy and regional security, has recorded increasing militarization of Eastern Europe. The escalation of the migration crisis has already served as a powerful catalyst of this process, and the crisis itself has acquired a distinct military dimension. Enhanced military activities are observed on both sides of the border between the CSTO and NATO. Impressive military contingents and armaments, which are clearly superfluous to effectively address the migration challenge alone, are being brought closer to the line of contact.

Both Warsaw and Minsk are calling on their military and political allies seeking to get them to increase their presence in the context of the crisis. For example, Poland (together with Lithuania and Latvia) voiced the need to actively involve NATO in the situation invoking Article 4 of the North Atlantic Treaty immediately after the escalation of the migration crisis. On 26 November, Polish President Andrzej Duda called for more NATO jets and troops in the region: "We should ask ourselves a question whether this is not the right time for NATO to again show the adequate response by at least temporarily strengthening its [...] presence." NATO, for its part, claims that Warsaw has its full support.

Minsk and Moscow behave in a similar fashion. Specifically, they started regular joint flights of strategic bombers in Belarusian airspace. On 25 November, the Belarusian Defence Ministry said that "in connection with the increasing number of flights of various types of aircraft near the state border of the Republic of Belarus and in order to prevent violations of the state border in airspace, it was decided to augment air defence forces on duty and conduct joint patrols of the state border in airspace by the Belarusian Air Force and the Air Defence Forces of the Armed Forces of the Republic of Belarus and the Russian Aerospace Forces." On the same day, a mixed tactical group of SU-30 SM multirole fighters performed a flight to patrol the airspace along the Belarusian border.

It is hard to imagine that this sort of surge of militarization (especially the build-up of the ground infrastructure of military presence) can easily and quickly drop all the way to the pre-crisis levels, even if the migration predicament should be resolved relatively quickly. Therefore, a new, game-changing, leap toward regional militarization will inevitably become one of the implications of the border crisis. This makes massively reinforced military presence a new long-term reality in Eastern Europe.

Dismantling of the regional system of confidence- and security-building measures

Perhaps even more dangerous in the long term is the de facto wrecking of the regional system of confidence- and security-building measures (CSBM). The build-up of militarization ignores both multilateral CSBMs commitments under the Vienna Document and effective bilateral agreements that Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, and Ukraine have with Belarus.

The particular strategic risk of this process results from at least two circumstances. *First*, the CSBMs system in Eastern Europe used to be a unique security resource in the region amidst the demolition of the European and global arms control and strategic stability architectures, as well as the growing dysfunction of the OSCE and the marginalization of the international law as the foundation of international stability. The practical value of Belarus's bilateral CSBMs with its neighbouring countries became especially prominent after the start of the Donbass conflict in 2014. *Second*, the erosion of this system would require no additional triggers to encourage further militarization of the region (arms drive and military infrastructure build-up) and unwind the "security dilemma" that would automatically escalate military risks should any new crisis erupt.

Yauheni Preiherman
Director, Minsk Dialogue Council on International Relations