Commentary
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Tensions Rise between Minsk and Warsaw on the Eve of Polish Elections

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Summary

On September 28, the Belarusian Ministry of Defense claimed that a Polish helicopter had violated Belarus's airspace. According to the statement, the helicopter first crossed 1.5 kilometers into Belarus's airspace, then passed 300 meters over the border again an hour later.

Minsk said that a recording of the incident corroborated these claims and that in response, a military aircraft had been deployed to intercept the helicopter. The Belarusian Foreign Ministry summoned the Polish *chargé d'affaires, Marc*in Wojciechowski, to protest and demand that Warsaw "immediately conduct an objective investigation" and "take comprehensive measures to prevent the recurrence of similar incidents in the future". The Polish government has denied Minsk's accusations.

This was not the first such incident between Poland and Belarus in recent months. On August 1, Warsaw claimed that two Belarusian helicopters had performed low-level flights about 3 kilometers into Polish airspace and remained there for several minutes. Minsk denied the allegations and urged Warsaw to refrain from "using the situation as a pretext for militarizing the border". On September 1, a "mirror" incident occurred, when the Belarusian State Border Committee reported a breach of Belarus's airspace by a Polish military helicopter flying at an "extremely low altitude". This time, the Polish government accused Belarus of stoking border provocations and dismissed Minsk's previous warning.

These incidents reflect the mounting tensions between Belarus and Poland. After a period of promising rapprochement from 2016 to 2020, bilateral ties began to deteriorate in late 2020, when Poland joined the Western sanctions regime against Belarus following the August 2020 presidential elections and subsequent protests. Minsk responded by announcing that it would no longer prevent third-country nationals from entering

Poland and other EU member states from Belarusian territory. As a result, in late 2021, a major migration crisis erupted, leading to violent clashes between thousands of migrants and Polish soldiers and riot police.

> The migrant crisis, in turn, triggered two developments that have been highly detrimental to Belarusian-Polish relations.

First, the crisis gave Warsaw a pretext for cementing barriers to the movement of people, goods, and even animals across the two countries' shared border. Poland began constructing a border wall and closed several checkpoints. Of the formerly six operational checkpoints, only two remain open—one for the movement of people and the other for the transit of goods. Travel by rail has not been restored since the COVID-19 restrictions were first introduced. Such barriers have caused the myriad of business and interpersonal connections that have traditionally undergirded cooperation between the Belarusian and Polish populations to break.

Second, the migration crisis provided an impetus for regional militarization. Warsaw doubled down on the program of equipping and expanding its armed forces on a scale not seen elsewhere across Europe. In response to the growing imbalance in conventional military capabilities with Poland, Minsk initiated the process of deploying Russian tactical nuclear weapons on its territory.

Harsh public statements from Polish and Belarusian officials have accompanied this deterioration in relations. Yet, with the helicopter incidents, both sides demonstrated a degree of restraint in their responses. Belarusian Defense Minister Viktor Khrenin stated that he considered the incident on September 1 a result of the pilots' "poor training" rather than malign intentions. Minsk has also signaled its willingness to reduce military risks and de-escalate tensions. Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka declared that he does not want the Poles to see Belarusians as enemies nor the continued breakdown in their bilateral ties.

In an attempt to ameliorate tensions, Belarus maintains a visa-free travel regime for Polish citizens (and other EU nationals). In early September 2023, Minsk invited Polish, Lithuanian, and other Western observers to monitor the military drills being held in Belarus within the framework of the Collective Security Treaty Organization. It would be wrong, however, to assert that this move marks a major policy shift by Minsk. The Belarusian government previously extended similar invitations for resuming military dialogue with the West. For example, in June 2022, Belarus offered to resume verification activities within existing arms control instruments. The West did not reciprocate those actions.

> All eyes in Minsk are now on Poland's upcoming October 15 parliamentary elections.

The outcome of the polls notwithstanding, little evidence suggests a major change in Poland's policy toward Belarus. There is a chance though that, once off the campaign trail, Polish officials may be more open to talks and compromise with Minsk. Lukashenka would prefer to deal with a new Polish government led by opposition leader Donald Tusk, as Tusk's pro-European stance seems more conducive to cooperation with Belarus.

The election may provide an opening to calm Belarusian-Polish relations. Since the fall of the Soviet Union, Warsaw has consistently stressed that Poland is effectively the only Western country vitally interested in maintaining and strengthening Belarusian sovereignty. Polish officials often argue that Minsk should prioritize relations with Poland over those with other Western nations, including Germany and the United States. Minsk has not accepted this argument wholesale. But prior to 2020, this narrative resonated positively across the Belarusian government and population.

> Nevertheless, Poland's actions since 2020 have led Minsk to conclude that Warsaw's talk about Belarus's sovereignty was merely political rhetoric.

The Polish government now propagates a sanctions-only approach, which undercuts Belarus economically and ultimately pushes the Lukashenka government into Moscow's increasingly tight embrace. Polish diplomats have provided an understandable explanation for this tough line, namely, the arrest of several leaders of the Polish minority in Belarus in 2020. This point sounds reasonable in diplomatic terms. However, if such attitudes persist, it will be nearly impossible for Warsaw to convince Minsk that its actions are aimed at strengthening Belarus's sovereignty, then merely pursuing its own geopolitical goals.

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