



INSIGHTS

POLAND-BELARUS BORDER- THE NEW GEOPOLITICAL CONUNDRUM FOR EU

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1. INTRODUCTION

The European mainland is facing another major border crisis. On 09 Nov, the tension between Poland and Belarus escalated after 3000-4000 migrants from Belarus and Polish guards faced each other at Poland's Kuźnica border crossing. The 'political war' between the perceived authoritarian regime of Alexander Lukashenko and the European Union is addressing another geopolitical tension in the eastern corridor of the continent.



Facts & Dimensions	For refugees and migrants from the MENA region, Belarus is the safest route to enter the EU than the dangerous sea crossings from Turkey or North Africa.
	Permission to enter countries in Europe is usually hard to obtain, Belarus has made visas available on arrival.
	Over the past months, the attempted border crossing from Belarus to Poland has increased exponentially.
	Poland recently passed laws that have allowed police to ignore asylum requests and summarily expel the migrants back into Belarus.
	EU-Belarus relations worsened after the 'falsified election' of 2020 in Belarus that allowed President Alexander Lukashenko for the 6th time in office.
	EU-Lukashenko fight escalated after the bloc called for more sanctions on Belarus on 08 Nov. The current crisis at the Poland-Belarus border is throwing light on this issue.

The plot for fifth round of EU sanctions on Belarus is the reason for the current crisis at Polish border. The EU appears to be balancing its humanitarian values against its political considerations, including a difficult relationship with the right-wing government of Poland.

Poland deployed over 12,000 Polish soldiers on its Belarussian border after it accused Lukashenko of using refugees as 'Political Pawns' to fight the EU. The Baltic neighbours of Belarus, Latvia, and Lithuania also supported the plot for fresh EU sanctions. Hence, they are also facing the 'migration' threat from Belarus.



2. DIRECT & INDIRECT ACTORS INVOLVED

The European Union and Alexander Lukashenko are the major contenders of this 'war-like' situation. Although, there are traces of Russia in the narrative after Kremlin backed the Lukashenko regime against the EU sanctions. Also, the criticism extends to Lithuania and Poland in handling the migration issue under EU.

The Election of 2020 and Sanction War

Alexander Lukashenko defended his power on the 09 Aug 2020 presidential election by his brutal crackdown on the opposition. EU and the West rejected the election results and criticised the authoritarian regime with a poor human rights record. Lukashenko is yet to be recognized as the President of Belarus by the West.

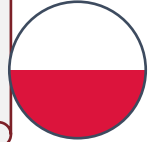
The arrest of Belarusian opposition activist and journalist Roman Protasevich by diverting a passenger jet flying from Greece to Lithuania attracted more criticism to the Lukashenko regime. The EU called it air piracy and barred Belarusian carriers from its skies and cut imports of the country's top commodities, including petroleum products.

Since Oct 2020, the EU has progressively imposed restrictive measures against Belarus. A total of 166 individuals and 15 entities are now designated under the sanctions regime on Belarus.


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Poland

Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki- "From a distance, these events on the Polish-Belarusian border may look like a migration crisis, but this is not a migration crisis, it is a political crisis triggered with the special purpose of destabilizing the situation in the European Union".



Latvia

Prime Minister Krisjanis- "It is what I would call a state-sponsored human trafficking, which is affecting directly my country, Lithuania and Poland."

Russia

President Vladimir Putin- "I want everyone to know. We have nothing to do with it"

Putin's spokesman Dmitri S. Peskov- "The rise in tensions on this border where highly armed people, meaning the military are present on both sides is a matter of utmost concern to all sober-thinking people in Europe".



Lithuania

Government declared a state of emergency for one month. Access for non-residents restricted to the 5-kilometre-wide strip along the Belarusian border.

Ukraine

Ukraine announced drills and the deployment of 8,500 additional troops and police officers to the country's long northern border with Belarus.



Germany

Angela Merkel- "I asked Russian President to exert his influence on President Lukashenko, because people are being used here. They are victims of an inhuman policy, and something must be done against this"

Finance Minister Olaf Scholz-"Lukashenko is making an inhumane power play with people,"

France

French Secretary of State for European Affairs Clement Beaune- "As for Russia, we don't have data that would point to its involvement in the matter".



U.S.

Secretary of State Antony Blinken- "The idea that Belarus would weaponize migration is profoundly objectionable. We will continue to pressure Lukashenko and the regime, and we will not lessen our calls for accountability".

3. BEYOND THE GEOPOLITICAL ANGLE



On 11 Nov, President of Belarus Alexander Lukashenko threatened to cut off the transit of gas to Europe (via the transnational Yamal - Europe gas pipeline) if the European Union expands sanctions. The pipeline owned by Gazprom carries Russian natural gas to Germany passes through Belarus. Kremlin distanced itself from Lukashenko's

threat as Russia already boosted its

supply by 170 million cubic meters of gas per day. Even though, causing disruptions to the energy market is an easy game for Lukashenko on behalf of the current energy crisis in Europe. **The price of gas in Europe grew by almost 2% following the statements of Lukashenko about the possible shutdown of gas transit to Europe. Belarus oil operator Gomeltransneft Druzhba restricted supplies to Poland on 17 Nov in the name of an unscheduled maintenance, a day after Germany suspended the certification process of Nord 2 project over legal concerns.**

Migrants as 'Political Pawns'

Humanitarian ground of the current Poland-Belarus crisis is posing questions over the political and economic concerns. 11 migrants have been lost their lives trying to cross the Polish border. Human rights groups, including Amnesty International and the Helsinki Foundation of Human Rights, have accused Poland of illegally pushing migrants who had crossed the border back into Belarusian territory. Polish authorities imposed a state of emergency that prevents aid from reaching those trapped in the border area. On the other end,



Polish soldiers watching migrants at the Poland/Belarus border near Kuznica, Poland

Migrants were reportedly threatened by Belarusian forces to cross the border to the EU. After the pressure from the neighboring countries, Belarus sheltered the migrants from the freezing cold weather at the border.

UN Human rights office on 12 Nov urged all parties involved in the crisis to respect human rights and refrain from using them for political ends.

4. ASSESSMENT & CONCLUSION

The geopolitical dispute raging between Belarus and the West is awaiting a resolution from European Union. The regional security and stability are bargaining on the human rights concerns of the 27-member bloc. The issue is not a directive for Poland, it targets Brussels. The common friend of both parties involved, Russia can have an influential role in the resolution process and can help to untangle the crisis.


But the 'sanction war' will again cause damages to the EU-Belarus relations. The new set of sanctions approved by EU foreign ministers on 15 Nov targeting the parties facilitating the illegal crossing of the EU's external borders will open up more cracks to the event at the Poland-Belarus border. Putting a ban on third-country airlines flying into Belarus will only help to reduce the pace of current escalation. But then alternative methods will be explored by the authoritarian regime of Belarus to destabilize the EU by heating up its border, at the cost of refugees and migrants. The Eastern border of the EU is mounted with tension after Latvia deployed more forces as a part of a military drill.

G7 nations has called for the de-escalation of Poland-Belarus migrant crisis. Another international institution NATO defended Poland by accusing Lukashenko of his hybrid tactics. Member states including Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland are seeking NATO's intervention to secure the Eastern border of the EU. Such a situation will attract the attention of Kremlin as the nuclear bombers of Russia have already shown hazy support to Belarus by flying above its territory. NATO has warned Russia over its recent military build-up across the Ukraine border. The European Council negotiation table is the ideal stage for the de-escalation of the current crisis. Role of Russia is key to the process, but the energy equations around the Nord 2 stream project and Germany's response to it will define Kremlin's interest in the de-escalation process. Thousands of migrants stuck at the Poland-Belarus border need immediate anticipation from the EU as it is the 'advocate of human rights' in the West. However, as long as the 'sanction battle' continues, there's no quit to the EU-Belarus standoff.




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