



Belarus and Russia's Use of Migrants to Escalate Military Tensions: Conclusions for NATO

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Belarus has forced migrants to the border with Poland, Lithuania and Latvia to trigger a security crisis and, together with Russia, tries to raise the threat of military escalation. These actions are hybrid warfare-like elements employed not only against EU border states but also NATO. The Alliance's new strategy should stimulate the development of additional tools to respond to hybrid threats in a flexible and graduated manner that will help strengthen deterrence and control the risk of military escalation.

In mid-November, Belarus sparked an escalation of tension on the border with Poland, forcing migrants to the area to try to enter the territory of Poland and the EU. The Belarusian security services directed a few small groups, followed by a large group of 2,000-4,000 migrants, mainly from the Middle East towards one of the border crossings where they tried to break through a border fence. Polish services stopped these attempts. After a few days, the migrants, supported by the Belarusian services, changed tactics and attempted to cross the border with smaller groups in many places simultaneously.

Strategic, Political, and Military Context. The migration route through Belarus to Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia has been used for many years, but in 2021 the number of attempts to cross the border increased significantly. Belarusian soldiers and officers without insignia began to openly assist the migrants to the border before forcing them to try to cross it. They have also undertaken provocations targeting Polish border guards by detonating stun grenades, firing blanks, and dazzling their eyes with a laser. These actions were accompanied by an increase in Russian military activity at NATO's borders in connection with the *Zapad* exercises in September in which Russia and Belarus (as the Union State) practiced fighting a war with a foreign alliance (NATO). This made it possible for Belarusian leader Alexander Lukashenka to combine migration pressure with the threat of military escalation.

He accused Poland of aggressive intentions, violations of the border, and threatened to increase the Russian military presence in Belarus. He warned, among other things, that he would seek the deployment of Iskander ballistic missile launchers and even nuclear weapons on Belarusian territory. Lukashenka also indicated that Belarus would back Russia if war escalated in Ukraine. By threatening these actions, Lukashenka is trying to reduce Western political pressure in response to human rights violations after the rigged elections, achieve recognition as the legitimate leader of the country, as well as lift sanctions, and halt any further restrictions.

Although the Belarusian regime has its own political goals, its actions are in line with Russia's strategic goals to fully integrate Belarus (including its military), fuel divisions in NATO and the EU, stop Alliance enlargement and limit its ability to conduct defensive operations on its Eastern Flank (implement what Russia calls security guarantees), and subjugate Ukraine by forcing political concessions (special status of its eastern regions and limiting the state's sovereignty). The Russian authorities have supported Belarus, falsely accusing NATO and the EU of provoking the border crisis, and warned that it could pose a threat to Russia's security. At the peak of the crisis in November, Russian airborne troops carried out joint manoeuvres in Belarus and Russian strategic bombers flew over its territory. At the same time, Russia concentrated significant

forces (around 100,000 troops) along the borders with Ukraine and signalled the possibility of further military aggression against that country. Taking advantage of the crisis on the Polish-Belarusian border, the Kremlin uses the opportunity to threaten military escalation towards the EU and NATO. From Russia's point of view, Lukashenka's threats to cut gas supplies to Europe were also beneficial. Since the Belarusian regime alone does not have that capability because the transmission network is controlled by Russia, Lukashenka's statements are rather elements of Russian energy blackmail, which aims to pressure NATO and the EU to give in to Russian demands for the security guarantees without undermining Russia's image as a reliable supplier.

Reaction of the Allies. In response to the actions of the Belarusian regime, the three EU and NATO states on its border—Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia—declared a state of emergency in the immediate areas and strengthened border protection to minimise irregular migration. They have also taken actions both individually as well as through the EU and Alliance to limit the arrival of migrants to Belarus, including threats of sanctions against airlines and bilateral contacts with the authorities where the migrants are coming from, whether origin or host state.

The EU and NATO have both recognised the incidents at the border as hybrid activities, undertaken to obtain political benefits. At the same time, the military activity of Belarus and Russia has required NATO and the EU border states to factor in the risk that the crisis could escalate to a military level. Although the presence of NATO battalion battlegroups strengthens the sense of security in Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia, these countries each perceive the threat of a rapid military escalation differently due to the differences in their defensive potential. That required them to turn to other instruments to strengthen the sense of security and increase the probability of a collective response of the Allies to the crisis. Lithuania was the only one of the three, though, to invite NATO Counter Hybrid Support Teams. The Polish authorities tried to strengthen protection of the border through its bilateral cooperation with allies. The UK deployed an engineering company to Poland (about 100 soldiers), and Estonia sent a company composed of engineers, military police, and a reconnaissance unit (also about 100 soldiers). These actions increased the ability to protect the border, but most of all were a signal of solidarity with Poland. Their defensive nature weakened the effectiveness of the Russian and Belarusian propaganda that Poland was militarising the conflict. At the same time, Poland increased the likelihood of support from NATO by presenting its assessment of the threat at a meeting of the North Atlantic Council (NAC). The Polish authorities also suggested the possibility of invoking Art. 4 of the North Atlantic Treaty, which, in the event of a threat below the threshold of military aggression, allows

for the convening of consultations and obtaining support from the allies as part of coordinated activities within the Alliance. Importantly, Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia agreed that any possible decision on Art. 4 would be taken together.

In response to the security crisis, NATO used strategic communication instruments—North Atlantic Council communiqué, statements by the Secretary General, talks and meetings with leaders—to signal support for the threatened allies. The Alliance and individual states also began to intensify strategic communication regarding the threat of Russian aggression against Ukraine. The mechanisms of political cooperation between NATO and the EU have been effective in the coordination of the actions of both organisations in the face of the hybrid actions and Russia's military threat towards Ukraine. NATO, the EU, and partner countries (Georgia, Ukraine, Sweden, and Finland) demonstrated unity during a meeting of Alliance foreign ministers in Riga (30 November to 1 December). These actions increased the likelihood of a joint response to a possible escalation by Belarus and Russia.

Conclusions and Recommendations. Russian military doctrine obliges the country not only to defend Belarus but also claims the right to counterattack or even pre-emptive attacks against a perceived potential aggressor. Exercise scenarios from 1999 indicate that an alleged threat to Belarus may be used by Russia as a pretext for aggression against NATO and the EU. The security crisis triggered by Belarus should therefore be perceived as a hybrid operation that could increase the risk of military escalation and influence the threat perception of NATO and/or EU members. In case of further aggression against Ukraine, Russia may use the threat of the escalation of the border crisis into a military crisis to sow division among western allies to weaken their support for Ukraine. It also is likely to use the threat of military escalation to force its desired security guarantees. This creates a challenge for NATO member states, which, due to their varied potential and different political conditions, have various perceptions of such threats and differently assess the risks associated with escalation and the need to refer to NATO support. Therefore, the Alliance should update its graduated response plans for the Eastern Flank. Its new strategy, to be adopted in mid-2022, should facilitate the development of tools necessary to respond to threats below the threshold of open conflict. The Alliance should be able to take flexible and graduated actions that will provide reassurance for its members, strengthen political cohesion, and enable strengthening deterrence, while controlling the risk of escalation. The new NATO strategy should also indicate the relationship between the ability to conduct a collective mission and the ability to resist energy blackmail and other forms of it.