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The crisis on the Polish-Belarusian border in the context of rising tensions in Eastern Europe (part 2)

The situation on the Polish-Belarusian border remains tense due to Lukashenko's regime, which, by driving refugees and migrants from its territory, aims to escalate tensions with Poland and the European Union in order to force a decision to raise sanctions imposed on the regime for its repression towards Belarusian civic society. As happened after the presidential elections in 2020, Lukashenko has the support of the Russian Federation, which is attempting to exploit the desperation of the Belarusian authorities so as to realise its own geostrategic interests in the region. In this way, it is trying to increase its influence on Ukraine and Moldova and speed up the certification of Nord Stream 2.

The Russian political offensive in Eastern Europe. For several weeks, we have been observing intensified activity by the Russian Federation aimed at exerting pressure on the West with regard to settling the conflict in Eastern Ukraine. At a session of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Vladimir Putin emphasised that "the internal Ukrainian crisis is far from settled. Ukraine is ostentatiously failing to meet its obligations arising from the Minsk Agreements and those under the Normandy Format." Putin additionally accused the West of aiming to escalate the conflict through deliveries of weapons to Ukraine as well as manoeuvres on the Black Sea. However, when accusing the North Atlantic Alliance of raising the potential on the eastern flank, the Russian President stressed that Russia's "threats had made themselves clear and achieved the desired effect. We know that tension has arisen there, so I see two issues. Firstly, that tension should be maintained as long as possible, so that it doesn't occur to them to cause any unnecessary conflict on our western frontiers." It is difficult to determine exactly what "tension" Putin had in mind. Does this refer to Russia's increased military presence in Belarus or the mobilisation of the Russian army on the Ukrainian border? It can, however, be clearly seen from the statements cited that the tension between the West and Russia is an element of the Russian Federation's geopolitical gameplay.

The Russian Federation's attitude towards Ukraine has remained unchanged for years. The rulers in the Kremlin continue to take the position that the conflict in Eastern Ukraine is by nature a civil war. Since the second half of 2019, Russia has been making intensive efforts to force Ukraine to accept its interpretation of the Minsk Agreements and is using the terms of the Normandy Four summit of 9 December 2019 in Paris to exert pressure on Ukraine. The Russian Federation is striving to acquire the status of mediator in the conflict, rejecting accusations of provoking the conflict and controlling the pro-Russian separatists.

The past two years have been a time of intensive efforts by the Russians to "freeze" the conflict in eastern Ukraine and to transform the parts of Donbas controlled by the separatists into a second Transnistria or Nagorny Karabakh. These actions on the Russian side were coordinated by Dmitry Kozak, the deputy head of the administration of the Russian Federation's President and a well-known Russian specialist on frozen conflicts. He is also one of the key figures negotiating deeper integration between Belarus and Russia as a Union State. It was he who was, among other things, the initiator of the 12-step plan to settle the conflict in Eastern Ukraine, presented at the annual Munich Security Conference in February 2020 – a plan which was extremely unfavourable for Ukraine and was unambiguously rejected by President Volodymyr Zelensky (["Komentarze IEŚ", nr 126](#)). He also initiated the unrealised idea to appoint a Consultative Council to enable negotiations between Ukraine and the separatists, in which Russia, Germany, France, and the OSCE would function as observers. Social protests and the COVID-19 pandemic provided Ukraine with a convenient pretext to block the creation of this body (["Komentarze IEŚ", nr 155](#)).

Ukraine's position did not deter the Kremlin, which continued confidential negotiations with Ukraine, the separatists, and France and Germany in order to force concessions from Ukraine. When a further plan to settle the

Donbas conflict, proposed by Russia in October 2020 and negotiated until February 2021, was rejected by Ukraine due to it involving the separatists in talks and positioning Russia as an observer and mediator, Russia, in March, launched an intensified diplomatic offensive slandering Ukraine's reputation and started to gather its armies on the Ukrainian border and in Crimea.

The next phase of negotiations to settle the Donbas conflict. Ukraine has consistently held the position that it is the Russian Federation that bears full responsibility for inciting the conflict in Donbas and that the separatists are Kremlin puppets. Neither has Ukraine been led to yield by the mass distribution of passports to inhabitants of those parts of Donbas controlled by pro-Russian separatists. According to data from Ukraine's National Security and Defence Council, over 630,000 people living there have already received Russian citizenship. The diplomatic correspondence between France, Germany, and Russia regarding the situation in Eastern Ukraine, revealed on Wednesday 17 November by the Foreign Ministry of the Russian Federation, is an attempt to exert pressure on Ukraine, France, and the Federal Republic of Germany.

It was important for Angela Merkel to organise a Normandy Format summit in Paris on the symbolic date of 11 November, before the end of her term in office. Since April 2020, the Russian Federation has blocked organisation of this, making its consent conditional on the implementation by Ukraine of Russia's own interpretation of the Minsk Agreements. On Thursday 18 November, the German Foreign Ministry claimed that Russia had breached protocol by publishing diplomatic correspondence. French Foreign Ministry spokesperson Anne-Claire Legendre declared on the same day that "she considers such a position to be contrary to diplomatic conventions and rules". This unconventional step by the Russian Federation was combined with the accusations made against Russia on 9 November by the French Foreign Ministry, blaming the Kremlin for the lack of agreement to organise a ministerial-level meeting of the Russian, Ukrainian, French, and German foreign ministries.

The conflict was caused by controversies around the draft joint declaration of the foreign ministries of the Normandy Format prepared by the Russian Federation on 29 October. The joint position of the Foreign Ministers of Germany and France of 4 November, which was a response to the Russian proposal, included the comment that the Russian proposal contained "a range of assessments not shared by France and Germany". Among these were the mention of the internal nature of the conflict in Eastern Ukraine, the attempt to position the Russian Federation as a mediator in the Trilateral Contact Group, and a formulation which would not be acceptable to the Normandy Format states, i.e., "initialising direct dialogue between Kyiv, Donetsk, and Lugansk." France and Germany also provide a reminder of the inclusion in the document of information on the necessity to ensure the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission full access to the entire territory of Ukraine.

We can assume that the attitude of Germany and France was not to the satisfaction of the Russian Federation, hence the publication of the diplomatic correspondence. Angela Merkel has admitted that the fiasco of organising the meeting resulted from "an entirely different view" of the key questions by France and Germany. She downplayed the leak itself, however, stressing that the German side had nothing to hide. Angela Merkel maintains the position that the meeting should take place.

The correspondence published by the Russian Foreign Ministry places Germany and France in a very good light, as they did not allow themselves to be drawn into the Russian game of trying to isolate Ukraine and force it into the unilateral concessions desired by the Russian Federation. The increased movement by the Russian military on the Ukrainian border is probably an attempt to force concessions from it, and a repeat of the situation from March and April this year when the Kremlin used the same method to put pressure on Ukraine (["Komentarze IES", nr 367](#) and ["Komentarze IES", nr 368](#)). The Kremlin's irritation is most likely a result of the isolation of Donbas and local authorities, unrecognised by Kyiv and being unable to influence Ukraine. The entire burden of rebuilding and maintaining the region is currently being borne by the Russian Federation. For years, the Kremlin has strived to have Ukraine, and indirectly the West (by recognising the autonomous nature of the region), take on some of the costs of maintaining and post-war reconstruction of the region. In this way, Russia would simultaneously acquire a convenient tool to interfere in Ukraine's internal matters. Volodymyr Zelensky and his political power base do not agree to the Russian proposal, despite the political, economic and military pressure. In early October, the Kremlin momentarily suspended the transit of gas through Ukraine, then in November introduced a ban on sales of

anthracite to Ukraine and prevented the transit of coal from Kazakhstan, which forced Kyiv to buy energy from Belarus. It was no accident that Moldova experienced similar problems with extending a gas contract after pro-Western circles won the recent parliamentary elections there.

Conclusions:

- The Russian Federation is consistently striving to rebuild its political, economic, and cultural influence, and to increase its military presence in the post-Soviet area. To this end, it is exploiting its entire repertoire of available instruments in the fields of hard and soft power.
- The current crisis on the Polish-Belarusian border was provoked by Aleksandr Lukashenko. It is not the first attempt to influence European Union states. In September 2020, Lukashenko drastically limited movement through the land border, which hit tourism and trade in the border region, *de facto* harming his own citizens most. An unprecedented attack on the Polish minority began in March. When those actions brought no results, he made his desperate attempt to open up a new migration trail through Belarus into the European Union.
- There is little probability of any large scale escalation of the border crisis due to the deteriorating weather conditions, the sealing off of the Polish border and the constantly rising political and economic costs of the venture. Belarus already has to assign significant resources to maintain the forces overseeing the migrants at the Polish border, supply the needy with warm clothing and food, and provide them with shelter. The first flight carrying migrants has already left for Iraq, and the Belarusian authorities have declared that they will send more. This does not change the fact that Belarus has suffered significant losses in terms of its image, due to the campaign to smuggle the migrants, and additionally now faces a further package of sanctions – the fifth. All indications are that Belarus is increasingly unlikely to succeed in repeating the Turkish scenario.
- The greatest danger on the border may be incidents provoked by Belarusian forces and migrants following their instructions. Belarusian propaganda has been reporting in detail the situation on the Polish-Belarusian border. It creates an image of Belarus as a state bringing aid to hungry refugees mistreated by Polish forces. It should be remembered that every time water cannon, tear-gas, or other methods of constraint are used, this will be recorded and appropriately publicised.
- There is a possibility that a migrant smuggling route could be created across the Belarusian-Ukrainian border. This would suit the interests of the Russian Federation which, by pressurising Ukraine, is trying to force concessions from it regarding a resolution of the Donbas conflict.
- The authorities in the Kremlin are exploiting the difficult situation in Eastern Europe to play out their geostrategic interests, attempting to convince the West that Russia is the only power capable of stabilising and controlling the situation in Eastern Europe. In the case of Belarus, the Kremlin authorities are consolidating the argument that without Russian support it is incapable of withstanding the pressure from the West. This justifies the increased Russian military presence and further steps towards economic, then no doubt political, integration. The Kremlin is additionally creating an image of Lukashenko as someone unstable and unpredictable.
- Over recent months we have been observing growing pressure on the West by the Russian Federation, increasing anti-Western rhetoric in the public statements of leading Russian politicians, and intensifying propaganda and disinformation. The reduction of gas supplies to the European Union, tacit support for the desperate measures of Aleksandr Lukashenko's regime, and the increased presence of Russian forces on the Ukrainian border constitute attempts to pressurise the West as a whole. Certification of Nord Stream 2 is a priority of the Kremlin authorities, which will not only strengthen Russia's position as a supplier of natural gas to the European market but at the same time increase the European Union's dependency on supplies from the East. Activating the second part of the pipeline will allow pressure to be exerted on

Belarus and Ukraine, and subsequently, the realisation of Putin's grand dream of uniting the three nations of Rus - the Ukrainians, Belarusians, and Russians.

- The level of activity of the Russian military on the border with Ukraine should be interpreted as an attempt to pressurise Germany and France with regard to settling the Donbas situation. Russia is striving to force through its last proposals from 29 October, which are aimed at freezing the Donbas conflict. Armed Russian intervention cannot, of course, be ruled out, but if it does happen it will not take the form of a full-scale war. A more likely scenario is a rapid intervention to resolve the matter of water supplies to Crimea through the North Crimean Canal and possibly create a land link between Crimea and Russia along the Azov Sea coast.