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## **The crisis on Ukraine's borders**

**In the background of the events at the Polish-Belarusian border, there is growing tension related to the potential transfer of the crisis to the Belarusian-Ukrainian border. Combined with the increased activity of Russian troops on the border with Ukraine, this causes growing concern not only for Ukraine but also for Western states and institutions. The multidimensional actions of Russia show that even if there is no open military confrontation, Russia will intensify the pressure on the process of integration with Belarus, continue to destabilize Ukraine, and indirectly exert influence on the West.**

**The situation at the Belarusian-Ukrainian border.** Ukraine is closely monitoring the situation at the Polish-Belarusian border, expecting that a similar crisis may spread to the Ukrainian-Belarusian border, the length of which exceeds 1,000 kilometres (in the case of the Polish-Belarusian border, it is 418 kilometres). The border has not been tightly guarded so far, and a large part of it runs through marshy and forested areas, including the sparsely populated "zone" around the Chernobyl nuclear power plant on both sides of the border. Oleksiy Danilov, secretary of the National Security and Defense Council of Ukraine (an organization under the charge of the President of Ukraine and playing an increasingly important role in the state), declared that Ukraine expects a repeat of the scenario from the Polish-Belarusian border. Danilov, as well as President Volodymyr Zelensky and Interior Minister Denys Monastyrsky, assure that Ukraine will take all measures appropriate to the development of the situation. Therefore, it was decided to move 8.5 thousand servicemen (border guards, police officers, and national guard personnel) and 15 helicopters to border regions. The chief commander of the police, Ihor Klymenko, called on the residents of the border areas to be vigilant. In turn, Dmytro Jarosh, who is currently advisor to the commander-in-chief of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, also called on the Ukrainian Volunteer Army, a paramilitary organization he commands, to be ready.

It was also announced that large-scale exercises with the participation of all power structures would be carried out in the border region. It is emphasized, however, that at present, despite information on single, detected attempts to illegally cross the border with Belarus (which so far have been rare), there is no real threat. Importantly, the Ukrainian side takes a firm stance on this matter: if Alyaksandr Lukashenka's regime directs a wave of migrants to the border with Ukraine, decisive measures will be taken – in this context, Poland's approach is assessed as appropriate and rational. Moreover, from Ukraine's point of view, such actions on the part of Lukashenka do not come as a surprise. They are clearly considered an element of the hybrid war waged by Russia and Belarus (which is increasingly dependent on Russia), both towards Ukraine (as has been the case for a long time) and towards the West.

Concern about the potential aggravation of the situation at the border with Belarus is deepened by Lukashenka's statements about the creation of training centres and military bases where NATO subversives and forces (especially American) are to be located, not only in Poland and Lithuania, but also in Ukraine. More and more statements by the dictator also refer to the tightening of military cooperation between Belarus and Russia, also in the context of Ukraine. Already in September this year (2021), Lukashenka mentioned the deployment of Russian anti-aircraft systems at the Belarusian-Ukrainian border. Considering the ongoing process of making Belarus dependent on Russia, this is a dangerous signal for Ukraine. Especially since the statements of Lukashenka and the Belarusian minister of foreign affairs, Uladzimir Makey, referring to Crimea, and adopting the Russian view and narrative, have also been noticed. So far, Lukashenka has tried not to take an unequivocal position on the issue of the annexation of Crimea or even positioned himself as a mediator between Ukraine and Russia.

The ambition factor may also be important – Ukraine, like Poland or Lithuania, did not recognize Lukashenka's victory in the presidential election in 2020 and actively supports the Belarusian opposition. So, also in the case of Ukraine, the influx of migrants may be a kind of "revenge" for Lukashenka.

**Russian military activity.** Concerns about the potential appearance of migrants at the border with Belarus are accompanied by more serious concerns about the successive movements of Russian troops close to Ukraine's borders. According to the Ukrainian Ministry of Defense, there has not been such a tense situation since 2014 and Russia has accumulated between 90 and 110 thousand soldiers in the border regions (plus about 30 thousand in Crimea and an unknown number of Russian soldiers in Belarus). Therefore, measures are being taken to internationalize the problem, attract public attention, and consolidate Ukraine's allies.

Ukraine's Defense Minister Oleksiy Reznikov, in an interview with US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin on November 18, warned that an escalation could occur at any time and could have "catastrophic consequences" for the whole of Europe. The United States recognizes the problem, expressing concern about the activity of Russian troops on the border with Ukraine and the pro-Russian forces in the Donbas. Secretary of State Anton Blinken warned both the Ukrainian authorities and European allies that it could not be ruled out that Russia would repeat its aggression against Ukraine. As a consequence, President Joe Biden increased military assistance to Ukraine and several deliveries of military equipment reached Ukraine in October and November, including Javelin anti-tank missiles. United Kingdom also declared its support: Minister of National Defense Ben Wallace visited Kyiv, promising help in the event of an armed conflict. The issue of the activity of Russian forces was also raised by the president of France in a conversation with Vladimir Putin, and the NATO secretary general emphasized that the alliance would not leave Ukraine on its own.

**Russia and Ukraine.** Firstly, the artificial migration crisis caused by Belarus's actions is not only intended to polarize Western societies and states, but also to divert attention from Russia's actions towards Ukraine. Second, in October, Russia suspended its mission to NATO and the alliance's representation in Moscow – which means there is no clear channel of communication in a crisis situation. At the same time, Russia is fuelling a sense of threat, once again intensifying the narrative of the "besieged fortress" and accusing the West of provocations and a confrontational attitude. Thirdly, taking into account the course and results of the September elections to the Russian Duma and the relatively low level of support for President Putin (53% according to the Levada Center), it should be assumed that the anti-Western course will be maintained, as will the escalation of actions towards Ukraine (and the process of absorption of Belarus).

The tightening of the policy towards Ukraine has been visible for several months and results from the determination with regard to the repeatedly emphasized "red lines" that Russia does not intend to allow to be "crossed" by Ukraine and the West, which mainly relate to Ukraine's pro-Western ambitions. To block them, Russia will use the entire arsenal of available means: energy blackmail (recently tested in Moldova, currently implemented against Ukraine, e.g., in relation to coal and electricity supplies and taking control of gas transmission infrastructure), cyber-attacks and disinformation (including suggestions that Ukrainian forces intend to shoot possible immigrants), sabotaging the activities of the OSCE mission (the extension of the OSCE mission's mandate at two points on the Russian-Ukrainian border was refused, the activities of the OSCE observation mission in Donetsk were blocked) and the expansion of influence in Donbas (citizens of separatist republics holding Russian passports took part in the elections to the Duma). The campaign of criticism against Ukraine is also continuing, and its authorities, especially President Zelensky, are disregarded by Russia – in this context, the disclosure of diplomatic correspondence between Russia, Germany, and France was supposed to be a humiliation for Ukraine.

**Perspectives.** It is unlikely that Russia would openly invade Ukraine; it would be politically costly in the long run. The Ukrainian army and society are also much more consolidated and determined than in 2014. Russia also probably takes into account that the escalation in spring 2021 brought only limited benefits, i.e., President Biden met with President Putin in Geneva, thereby strengthening his international position. However, Russia has not succeeded in reducing tensions around the Donbas, the Black Sea, and Crimea. On the contrary, NATO increased its activity in the Black Sea region, and Turkey sold combat drones to Ukraine. At present, Russia is not succeeding in pushing through the narrative that there are no intentional actions by Russia behind the migration and energy crises.

Nevertheless, even if a full-scale invasion is unprofitable, military escalation will still serve to influence the West, destabilize Ukraine, and test the possibility of influencing the internal situation of Ukraine. It is also possible that waves of migrants will appear on its border. This is all the more likely as Belarus itself may face the problem that the presence of thousands of migrants on its territory will create. Especially as attempts to direct them to the territory of the European Union prove ineffective, and Belarusian society has little faith in the narrative promoted by the regime's media. This will most likely mean a change of strategy, and the voice of Russia will be important here. Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov has already proposed that Russia can help solve the crisis on the border and become an intermediary between the EU and Belarus.

This is, incidentally, further proof that Lukashenka is not a subject but an instrument of the game between Russia and the West, which in turn also proves Russia's successive annexation of further attributes of Belarusian statehood. It should also be borne in mind that the possible influx of migrants to Ukraine may be a challenge for Poland, as they may try to get to the EU via Poland – the Polish-Ukrainian border is 535 kilometres long and runs largely through forested and mountainous areas.