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No. 922 (170/2023) | 31.07.2023

ISSN 2657-6996

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Lithuanian security and the Wagner Group in Belarus

As a result of the Wagner Group mercenaries arriving in Belarus, fears have grown in Lithuania that these mercenaries may be used by the Belarusian regime, among other things, to support migrants illegally crossing the Lithuanian border. Therefore, the discussion on the introduction of stricter entry rules for Belarusian citizens has resumed. Currently, in the opinion of the Lithuanian authorities, the threat related to the presence of the Wagner Group is not serious, but Lithuania is monitoring the situation and is considering closing some border crossings with Belarus.

The importance of the Wagner Group for the security of Lithuania. The role of the Wagner Group mercenaries who appeared in Belarus after the armed rebellion against the Russian army is currently being discussed in Lithuania. The number of these mercenaries is estimated to be about 4,000. Officially, the Russian mercenaries are there to share their experiences and train the Belarusian army. However, Lithuania fears that they will be involved in hybrid attacks and provocations in the border region and may ultimately be used for sabotage and reconnaissance purposes, not only against Ukraine but also Lithuania, Latvia, or Poland.

Migration pressure from Belarus. Lithuania, like Poland and Latvia, has been struggling with constant migratory pressure on its border with Belarus for two years. At the end of July and beginning of August 2023, the number of people trying to illegally cross the Belarusian-Lithuanian border was below 10-20 per day (for comparison: those who were trying to cross the Belarusian-Polish border - approx. 100-150, and Belarusian-Latvian - approx. 20-40). In total, in 2023 almost 1,500 people tried to illegally cross the border with Lithuania (which was less than 10 people a day). This is much less than in 2022 when there were 11,200 (approx. 30 people a day). In addition, due to the presence of militants from the Wagner Group in Belarus, there is a growing concern in Lithuania that they will be used by the Lukashenko regime to support the Belarusian border guards or to train migrants to cross the border illegally. Thus, they may contribute to further hybrid attacks against Lithuania as well as against Poland and Latvia. It is also possible that by obtaining a Belarusian passport, they will try to get to these countries themselves.

Sanctions against citizens of Russia and Belarus. Thus, Lithuania may be forced to consider further sanctions against Belarus and introduce stricter entry rules for citizens of this country. In April 2023, the Lithuanian parliament adopted a law that adopted several such restrictions on Russian citizens, including tightening the procedure for granting permanent or temporary residence permits in the country as well as obtaining visas. In addition, it was made more difficult for Russian citizens to purchase real estate. Exceptions apply only to those Russians who have a permanent residence permit or acquire property by inheritance. Lithuania also introduced import and export limits for Ukrainian hryvnias. However, these rules do not apply to Belarusians. This approach was probably influenced by the involvement of the leader of the Belarusian opposition, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, who lives in Vilnius, and appealed for easing restrictions on Belarusian citizens (according to data from the Department of Migration, there are currently about 55,000 Belarusian citizens in Lithuania; up from about 18,000 in 2020).

Lithuania had already applied some of these sanctions through regulations, but it was decided to include them in a separate law to be in force until 3 May 2024, however, parliament can extend it if necessary. It is worth noting that the president vetoed the act, arguing that the same restrictions should be introduced for citizens of Russia and Belarus, because Belarus, like Russia, is participating in military aggression against Ukraine. In his opinion, the immediate vicinity of Belarus poses an even greater threat to Lithuania than Russia itself. The head of state also proposed faster procedures for cancelling already issued visas and residence permits in Lithuania. In such a case, citizens of Russia and Belarus found guilty by the courts of violating international sanctions would pose a threat to national security, public order, and health in Lithuania, and this, according to the president, would make it easier

for them to cancel their national visas and residence permits in Lithuania and enable their quick deportation from the country. However, the parliament rejected the presidential veto, citing the need to differentiate between Russian and Belarusian citizens and the obligation to help the democratic opposition in Belarus. Interestingly, this argument did not apply to the Russian opposition, even though in recent years in Lithuania it has organized a number of initiatives for democratic processes in Russia.

The Wagner Group in Belarus and the Lithuanian economy. Lithuania and Poland are debating a joint closure of the border with Belarus due to the threat coming from the group of Russian mercenaries. Lithuania is considering closing two out of its six border crossings. Such a situation would have an impact on Lithuanian entrepreneurs and transport as goods would have to be directed towards Latvia and then across the Latvian-Belarusian border. Entrepreneurs would also be forced to look for new directions and markets. However, it is believed that the consequences for the Lithuanian economy should not be significant because, as a consequence of the European Union sanctions, the flow of goods through Belarus has already been visibly limited. For this reason, the number of Lithuanian companies dealing with transport to the East has decreased in recent years.

Conclusions. Under the current circumstances, the mercenaries of the Wagner Group in Belarus do not pose a direct threat to Lithuania's security. The border guard is on high alert and monitors the situation as there is a fear that Wagner will be used for provocations against the Baltic states or Poland, and for sabotage activities in the border region. These may be intentional, unintentional, or simulated violations of the state border, which are designed to check the reaction of Lithuanian border guards and the effectiveness of Lithuanian border protection systems. The Wagner Group can also support the Belarusian border guard in the process of instrumental migration, although currently the number of migrants attempting to illegally cross the border with Lithuania is not high and these activities concern Poland and Latvia on a much larger scale. As announced by the Minister of National Defence, Arvydas Anušauskas, in the event of border incidents, the government will not inform the public in detail about further actions to prevent threats.

In the face of threats resulting from the presence of Russian mercenaries in Belarus, Lithuania resumed the discussion on unifying national sanctions against citizens of Russia and Belarus. The Lithuanian president is of the opinion that sanctions against both criminal regimes – Russia and Belarus – should be tightened. However, both the Speaker of the Seimas, Viktorija Čmilytė-Nielsen, and the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Gabrielius Landsbergis, stress that it is necessary to differentiate Russia and Belarus in terms of the threat to Lithuania and take into account the specificity of both countries. This may be another stage of friction between the presidential office and the government (see "IEŚ Commentaries", no. 871).

Lithuania, together with Poland, may temporarily close the border with Belarus due to security concerns. In such a case, the consequences for the Lithuanian economy would be more serious than for the Polish economy; Belarus is still important to Lithuania as a trade and transit partner. Reorienting business for many Lithuanian companies would be costly and would require government assistance. At the same time, the Lithuanian authorities argue that the impact of closing the borders with Belarus on the Lithuanian economy would be limited.