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Operation “Sluice”. The so-called migration crisis at the Polish-Belarussian border: an example of hybrid actions taken in the second half of 2021 as documented in the reports of the Polish border guard

Introduction

A year after the rigged presidential elections in Belarus, Alyaksandr Lukashenka decided to use the migration crisis in Europe in 2015–2017 to destabilise the eastern flank of NATO and the European Union (EU) by taking advantage of the so-called demographic weapon, also known as Weapon D.¹ With the tacit support of the President of Russia, Vladimir Putin, Lukashenka, still hesitant to retain power, launched a hybrid operation against Lithuania, Latvia and Poland, member states of NATO and the EU. For this purpose, he used thousands of economic migrants who had been transported by air to Belarus since spring 2021. The Belarusian authorities had abolished visas for citizens of many post-Soviet countries and from other

¹ See: W. Repetowicz, “Broń »D« jako zagrożenie asymetryczne”, *Wiedza Obronna*, no. 21, 2018, pp. 107–125, <http://wiedzaobronna.edu.pl/index.php/wo/article/view/21/18> [accessed: 8 May 2022]; D. Niedzielski, “Kryzys na granicy Polski z Białorusią – nowy format działań hybrydowych?”, *Biuletyn Akademickiego Centrum Komunikacji Strategicznej*, no. 1, 2022, p. 2.

more distant countries, such as Iraq and Afghanistan. The underlying objectives of these actions vary, but one of them is the return of the Central and Eastern European region – including Poland, Ukraine and the Baltic states – to the reconstruction scheme of the Russian sphere of influence, thoughtfully devised in Moscow.

This paper looks at the events that took place on the Belarusian-Polish border, as well as in the regions of Belarus bordering Lithuania and Latvia. The events and activities are developmental in their nature; hence the circumstances and timing of their completion cannot be predicted, and because the situation is dynamic, no broader studies have been conducted on the subject of the crisis so far. Reference has been made to the modest literature on the subject available, as well as to the information found on the websites of the Polish Border Guard, which has been provided in the footnotes and bibliography. In terms of research methodology, the author has applied the evolutionary method, the method that aims to describe developmental processes and migration, and the sociological method for the study of social structures.

To act against Lithuania, Latvia and Poland, the Belarusian regime used migrants brought to Belarus from the countries of the Near and Middle East, and from Russia. As Witold Repetowicz noted, “Belarus has not been known so far as a country that ‘receives refugees.’”² The regime’s reluctance to accept migrants is also confirmed by Amnesty International: for example, in 2020, the Belarusian authorities granted international protection to only five people, and the regime cooperates with many authoritarian governments, sending people who fled from it to their country of origin for various reasons.³ Based on the observations of events and information that we already have since August 2021, the following theses can be made on this subject: First if all, the so-called the migration crisis was created by the regime of Lukashenka as a hybrid attack first on the eastern flank of NATO and the EU in order to weaken them. Second, the Belarusian authorities are supported by the Russian Federation, whose authorities are interested in the economic and resource-related “kneeling down” of the EU countries. Third, the overriding goal of the Russian Federation is to enhance a closer integration of Belarus and strengthening the country’s vassal-like bondage with Russia, as can be seen from the Russian aggression against Ukraine. Arguably, Belarusian actions are compatible with the war in Ukraine, although this issue requires a separate analysis. Fourth, the crisis may end with the return of migrants to their countries of residence, while the construction of a border fence and its surveillance schemes serve to detain migrants. These are the key goals of the actions taken by the Belarusian secret service, code-named “Sluice”.

² W. Repetowicz, *op. cit.*

³ “Sytuacja na granicy. Pytania i odpowiedzi”, Amnesty International Polska, 4 February 2022, <https://amnesty.org.pl/sytuacja-na-granicy-pytania-i-odpowiedzi> [accessed: 25 June 2022].

The nature of the so-called migration crisis on the Polish-Belarusian border

The turn of July and August 2021 witnessed the outbreak of the so-called "migration crisis." The aim of the Belarusian secret services was to literally "push" tens of thousands of people from the countries of the Middle East and the Middle East out from Belarus and into Poland. A large part of them were economic migrants, often with their families, who came to Belarus after the Belarusian authorities had lifted visas in September 2021 for many countries from this part of the world. Thus, they extended the list to 80 countries for which visas were abolished in 2017.⁴ The Belarusian regime used the experience of the 2015–2017 migration crisis in Europe as a result of the Arab Spring revolution against the undemocratic authorities that led to the revolution and the ongoing war in Syria.⁵

Illegal migration to Lithuania and Latvia, and subsequently to Poland, began at the turn of July and August 2021. It was supported by the Belarusian services, financed by state-owned enterprises, and consistently encouraged by Lukashenka himself. According to Tadeusz Giczán, an independent Belarusian journalist and CEPA think tank expert, the Belarusian services conducted activities under the code name "Sluice", developed in 2010–2011 by the heads of the KGB and OSAM, a special unit of the Belarusian Border Service. The then transfer of migrants across the border forced the EU to transfer tens of millions of euros to Belarus to seal the border. The members of the BYPOL organization of former officers of the Belarusian services operating in Warsaw informed about the operation "Sluice". According to them, the transfer of people to the EU borders was supported by the Belarusian services and the Armed Forces, and the entire operation was probably led by the head of the KGB of Belarus, General Iwan Tertel. Initially, the Belarusian authorities attacked the borders with Latvia and Lithuania; in this case, an additional factor was the fact that the leader of the Belarusian opposition, Sviatlana Cichanouska, who took refuge there in fear of being arrested by the Belarusian KGB, resided in Vilnius.⁶

⁴ "Białoruś rozszerza tryb bezwizowy. Obejmuje m.in. obywateli Egiptu, Jordanii, Pakistanu i Iranu", Forsal.pl, 16 September 2021, <https://forsal.pl/swiat/bezpieczenstwo/artykuly/8247501,bialorus-rozszerza-tryb-bezwizowy-obejmuje-min-obywateli-egiptu-jordanii-pakistanu-i-iranu.html> [accessed: 18 October 2021]; see: D. Niedzielski, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

⁵ A. Dzisiów-Szuszczukiewicz, "»Arabska wiosna« – przyczyny, przebieg i prognozy", *Bezpieczeństwo Narodowe*, no. 2, 2011, p. 42; see: W. Wilk, *Wojna w Syrii i kryzys humanitarny. Informator dla dziennikarzy*, Warszawa: Polskie Centrum Pomocy Międzynarodowej, 2016, p. 17, https://pcpm.org.pl/pliki2015/2016/04/SYRIA_Informator_full.pdf [accessed: 12 December 2021].

⁶ "Operacja »Śluza«. Tadeusz Giczán: Łukaszenka toczy wojnę hybrydową, zaplanował ją od A do Z, to było jasne od początku", Polskie Radio 24, 29 August 2021, <https://www.polskieradio24.pl/5/1222/Artykul/2796861,Operacja-Sluza-Tadeusz-Giczán-Lukaszenka>

The actions taken by the Belarusian regime are an example of a hybrid aggression by means of demographic weapons in the form of tens of thousands of people, where young men predominate, although there are also women (including pregnant women) and children. Pushing these people across the border to Lithuania, Latvia and Poland by the Belarusian services is a threat to the security of the border zone of these countries and its inhabitants. It is enough to mention the erroneous approach to the issue of migrants in Germany in 2015, when the then chancellor Angela Merkel, back in September 2015, “invited” hundreds of thousands of people from African and Middle East countries to Germany, whose arrival had a negative impact on the sense of security, because among the refugees were several former activists of the Islamic State and other terrorist organizations who were hiding from the justice system. For the above reasons, Poland and Hungary did not agree to the compulsion to relocate refugees on their territory, choosing security over the human rights, which are of major significance for the neo-Marxist circles, which treat patriotism and the obligation to defend the borders of the state and its citizens as “nationalism.” Hence, after the crisis of 2015–2017, the government of the Republic of Poland has consistently taken the position of defending the state’s borders and its security.⁷ The consequences of the uncontrolled influx of Islamic migrants were also terrorist attacks in Germany, France and Belgium, rapes and sexual harassment of women, such as in Cologne.⁸ Currently, the situation with refugees may repeat itself in Gibraltar.

Operation “Sluice” and its course in 2021: Latvia and Lithuania

From spring 2020, the Belarusian regime prepared to transfer migrants to the territory of the EU. To do this, commandos of OSAM, a special unit of the Belarusian Border Service, conducted illegal reconnaissance in the border forests in Poland. The aim of these activities was to determine the routes used by smugglers so that they could be reused for the smuggling of migrants, but the Polish Border Guard failed to locate them. From the spring of 2021, the Border Guard officers of Poland, Lithuania and Latvia recorded more and more attempts of illegal border crossing by migrants from the Middle East and Africa. Apparently, the Belarussian regime uses them to destabilise EU countries, as revenge for the imposition of sanctions

toczy-wojne-hybrydowa-zaplanowal-ja-od-A-do-Z-to-bylo-jasne-od-poczatku [accessed: 9 November 2021].

⁷ A. Głowacki, *Stosunek Polaków do przyjmowania uchodźców. Komunikat z badań nr 3*, Warszawa: Centrum Badań Opinii Społecznej, 2017, pp. 4–10; see: G. Baziur, Zagrożenia podstawowych praw człowieka w Europie w kontekście kryzysu migracyjnego i zagrożenia terrorystycznego w latach 2015-2017, [in:] *Prawa człowieka i ich ochrona*, eds. M. Malczyńska-Biały, K. Żarna, Rzeszów: Wydawnictwo UR, 2018, pp. 20–26.

⁸ *Ibidem*, pp. 28–30.

following yet another rigged presidential election, and for notorious violations of human rights.⁹

The implementation of operation "Sluice" began on 26 May 2021, three days after the Ryanair plane, on board of which was opposition blogger Raman Pratasiewicz, and his arrest by KGB officers, was forced to land at the airport in Minsk. In response, the EU imposed additional sanctions on Belarus, and Lukashenka announced that he would not obstruct people trying to enter the EU, his speech being repeatedly broadcast on Iraqi television.

After increasing the number of flights between Iraqi cities and Minsk, Iraqis began arriving in Belarus, and they were serviced by the Centrkurort company. After landing in Minsk, they received tourist visas, after which a large part of them went to the vicinity of the border with Lithuania, trying to cross it illegally. Some people used the help of smugglers, paying them 1,000–1,500 USD to be transported to Vilnius. Following the EU intervention, the Iraqi authorities suspended flights from Iraq to Belarus. Still, many Iraqis kept flying to Minsk via the Istanbul airport, or via Syria. Eventually the Turkish and Syrian airlines also banned flights to Belarus.¹⁰

After the Lithuanian government's decision to turn back the people who were trying to cross the border illegally, Belarusians redirected migrants to the borders with Poland and Latvia, and Lithuanians refused to let more than 1,500 people. After the border was closed by the Lithuanian authorities, they asked the Iraqi side to send airplanes to Minsk to take these people, including those who threw their passports away, to return them to the country, which the Iraqi authorities did, and the Belarusian regime decided to launch a hybrid attack on Poland.

Operation "Sluice": a demographic attack on Poland

The first cases of illegal migrants crossing the Polish-Belarusian border were registered on 5 July 2021, when a Border Guard patrol from the Narewka unit detained 40 Afghans near Babia Góra, who crossed the so-called "green border" without any documents. After the court's decision, they were placed in centres for foreigners.¹¹

⁹ W. Wasylów, "Białoruscy komandosi w Polsce. Reżim Łukaszenki przygotowywał się do przerzutu migrantów od roku", *Natemat.pl*, 12 November 2021, <https://natemat.pl/383727,bialoruskie-sily-specjalne-robily-rozoznanie-po-polskiej-stronie-granicy> [accessed: 12 December 2021].

¹⁰ "Kolejne linie lotnicze zawieszają loty do Mińska. To nimi przylatują migranci", *Radio Zet*, 13 November 2021, <https://wiadomosci.radiozet.pl/Swiat/Kryzys-na-granicy-z-Bialorusia.-Syrjskie-linie-Cham-Wings-zawieszaja-loty-do-Minska> [accessed: 14 November 2021].

¹¹ E. Szczepańska, "Zatrzymano nielegalnych migrantów", *Komenda Główna Straży Granicznej*, 6 July 2021, <https://www.strazgraniczna.pl/pl/aktualnosci/9270,Zatrzymano-nielegalnych-migrantow.html> [accessed: 8 December 2021].

Large groups of migrants began to cross the Polish-Belarusian border in August 2017. Between 6–9 August, officers of the Podlasie Border Guard Unit detained 349 people from Iraq and Afghanistan for illegal border crossing, who were subsequently ordered by the court to be placed in guarded centres for foreigners.¹²

During the illegal crossing of the border by migrants, the life and health of some was put at risk: for example, on the night of 19–20 August, Border Guard officers from Narewka rescued 12 people who were stuck in the Narew backwaters.¹³ Among the people who crossed the Polish-Belarusian border illegally, some made an attempt to legalise their stay in Poland, e.g. on 21 October, when officers from the Border Guard Post in Białowieża took over a group of 29 people from Iraq who declared their willingness to apply for protection in Poland; after the decision of the court, they were placed in centres for foreigners.¹⁴

Since the beginning of the “migration crisis”, the Belarusian services have used migrants to attack the Polish border, often pushing them towards it or hitting and kicking them. On 23 October, a group of about 70 aggressive people tried to break through to Poland near Usnarz Górny, throwing stones at the Border Guard officers. A day later, the migrants made another attempt, injuring two soldiers, who were transported to a hospital in Białystok, where their wounds were treated, and they were eventually discharged. Among the people breaking the border, Border Guard officers saw Belarusian soldiers in civilian clothes cutting the barbed-wire fence with scissors.¹⁵

In order to hinder the smuggling of migrants, officers of the Border Guard and the Police were locating and catching couriers who transported people from Belarus to Poland and to the border with Germany. An example of this was seen on 26 October, when 37 migrants from Iraq, during a bus control by Border Guard officers, demolished the vehicle, preventing their escape to Germany with the support of the Police. Also, on 8 December in the Jacowlan area, an Border Guard patrol tried to stop a vehicle for inspection, the driver of which did not respond to the signal

¹² “Duże grupy cudzoziemców zatrzymane na polsko-białoruskim odcinku granicy”, Komenda Główna Straży Granicznej, 9 August 2021, <https://strazgraniczna.pl/pl/aktualnosci/9350,Duze-grupy-cudzoziemcow-zatrzymane-na-polsko-bialoruskim-odcinku-granicy.html> [accessed: 8 December 2021].

¹³ E. Szczepańska, “Na pomoc migrantom”, Komenda Główna Straży Granicznej, 20 August 2021, <https://strazgraniczna.pl/pl/aktualnosci/9374,Na-pomoc-migrantom.html> [accessed: 8 December 2021].

¹⁴ “Grupa 29 imigrantów ubiega się o ochronę w Polsce”, Komenda Główna Straży Granicznej, 22 October 2021, <https://www.strazgraniczna.pl/pl/aktualnosci/9498,Grupa-29-imigrantow-ubiega-sie-o-ochrone-w-Polsce.html> [accessed: 8 December 2021].

¹⁵ “Migranci podjęli próbę siłowego przedarcia się do Polski”, Komenda Główna Straży Granicznej, 25 October 2021, <https://ww.strazgraniczna.pl/pl/aktualnosci/9500,Migranci-podjeli-probe-silowego-przedarcia-sie-do-Polski.html> [accessed: 8 December 2021].

and was later captured. The Border Guard handed it over to the Police, and the migrants were handed over to the Border Guard Station in Kuźnica Białostocka.¹⁶

The largest attack by migrants to the border took place on 16 November in Bruzgi, under the supervision of the deputy commander of the Border Service of the Republic of Belarus, General Roman Podlinev. They were repulsed by the Polish Border Guard, Police and Army officers. Seven policemen, a Border Guard officer and a soldier were wounded in the riots. After the attacks, the migrants were withdrawn from camps on the border, but returned a day later under Belarusian escort.¹⁷ The Belarusian side once again accused the Polish services of being heartless towards people and young children, who – according to their narrative – were supposed to freeze, hence they tried to escape to Poland, for which the Polish services were supposed to use stun grenades, but it was the last action on such a large scale.¹⁸

On the order of Mariusz Kamiński, Poland's Minister and Coordinator of Special Services, on 18 November, the commander-in-chief of the Border Guard, General Tomasz Praga, temporarily closed the traffic at the border crossing Kuźnica Białostocka-Bruzgi.¹⁹ Poland notified the chairman of the State Border Committee of Belarus, Lieutenant General Anatoly Lappo, about this decision, demanding that it be unblocked by 21 November 2021.²⁰ On 19 November, the Belarusian side informed that there were no foreigners in the vicinity of this crossing, and that most of the foreigners had been evacuated to the "Bruzgi" transport and logistics centre, and on November 18, a part flew from Minsk to Iraq. General Lappo announced that the Border Service officers would sort out the logistic situation in the area of the Bruzgi-Kuźnica border crossing point and stressed that Belarus was ready to resume traffic in this crossing.²¹

¹⁶ "Zatrzymano 37 nielegalnych migrantów", Komenda Główna Straży Granicznej, 27 October 2021, <https://www.strazgraniczna.pl/pl/aktualnosci/9506,Zatrzymano-37-nielegalnych-migrantow.html> [accessed: 8 December 2021].

¹⁷ "Policja: Odparliśmy atak na granicę", Portalsamorządowy.pl, 16 November 2021, <https://www.portalsamorządowy.pl/wydarzenia-lokalne/policja-odparlismy-atak-na-granice,328921.html> [accessed: 16 November 2021].

¹⁸ "Обострение ситуации на белорусско-польской границе", Государственный пограничный комитет Беларуси – информационный портал, 16.11.2021, <https://gpk.gov.by/news/gpk/130020> [accessed: 2.12.2021].

¹⁹ "Zawieszenie ruchu granicznego w Kuźnicy", Komenda Główna Straży Granicznej, 8 November 2021, <https://www.strazgraniczna.pl/pl/aktualnosci/9536,Zawieszenie-ruchu-granicznego-w-Kuznicy.html> [accessed: 8 December 2021].

²⁰ "List komendanta głównego Straży Granicznej RP, gen. T. Pragi do przewodniczącego Państwowego Komitetu Granicznego Republiki Białoruś, gen. lejtn. A. Lappo z 18 XI 2021 r.", Ministerstwo Spraw Wewnętrznych i Administracji, 18 November 2021, <https://www.gov.pl/web/mswia/przejscie-kolejowe-w-kuznicy-moze-zostac-zamkniete> [accessed: 12 December 2021].

²¹ "Strona białoruska reaguje na zapowiedź zamknięcia towarowego przejścia kolejowego w Kuźnicy", Komenda Główna Straży Granicznej, 19 November 2021, <https://www.strazgraniczna.pl>

However, the illegal border crossing continued, mainly near Czeremcha and Dubicze Cerkiewne, where it continues until now, mainly at night. Belarusian border services would send migrants text messages with instructions in Arabic, informing them of how to break through to the Polish side. Due to the impatience of migrants, there were messages about the arrival of buses, which, with the alleged consent of the Polish authorities, were to take them to Germany, but this was clearly fake news.²²

The provocations continued, and on 1 December, Belarusian officers fired on Polish lighting masts near Terespol, destroying the border protection infrastructure.²³ In response, the Minister of National Defence, Mariusz Błaszczak, summoned the defence attaché of Belarus, expressing his protest against such practices.²⁴ From the second half of November, the frequency of border violations decreased. The construction of the dam from December 2021 to June 2022 should also stop the influx of illegal migrants to Poland.

The role of Belarusian-Russian disinformation in the crisis: between security and the protection of human rights

A major component of the Belarusian hybrid activities was the disinformation campaign, in which the Belarusian authorities presented migrants as refugees from Iraq from poverty, and from Afghanistan as victims or people threatened by the Taliban regime.²⁵ Thanks to information from independent media, mainly social media, the truth about the actions of the Belarusian regime against Poland, Lithuania and Latvia, as NATO and EU member states, began to reach people's awareness. A similar situation occurred during the hybrid aggression of Russia against Ukraine in 2014, but the parties to the conflict are pro-Russian separatists in the Donbas. As there were no such groups in Belarus, the regime brought in migrants who, after being trained by the services, fulfil a similar role.

pl/pl/aktualnosci/9562,Strona-bialoruska-reaguje-na-zapowiedz-zamknienia-towarowego-przejscia-kolejowego.html [accessed: 12 December 2021].

²² K. Dejas, "Migranci otrzymują instrukcje od reżimu. »Okazcie cierpliwość, wytrzymajcie«", Interia.pl, 12 November 2021, <https://wydarzenia.interia.pl/kraj/news-migranci-otrzymuja-instrukcje-od-rezimu-okazcie-cierpliwosc-,nId,5641207> [accessed: 12 November 2021].

²³ K. Grzech, "Zniszczono maszty oświetleniowe na granicy polsko-białoruskiej", Komenda Główna Straży Granicznej, 1 December 2021, <https://www.strazgraniczna.pl/pl/aktualnosci/9601,Zniszczone-maszty-oswietleniowe-na-granicy-polsko-bialoruskiej.html> [accessed: 13 December 2021].

²⁴ "Kryzys na granicy. Padły strzały z terenu Białorusi", Wprost, 1 December 2021, <https://www.wprost.pl/polityka/10557631/granica-polsko-bialoruska-padly-strzaly-z-terenu-bialorusi-mariusz-blaszczak-prowokacje-bialoruskich-sluzb-sa-absolutnie-nieakceptowalne.html> [accessed: 1 December 2021].

²⁵ "Operacja »Śluza«", *op. cit.*

On 23 August 2021, Lukashenka stated that "Poland caused a border conflict with migrants"²⁶ by violating the Belarusian border, accusing the Polish Border Guard of allegedly forcing out to the Belarusian side, a thesis that was being disseminated by the Belarusian media, announcing that migrants from Syria, Iraq and Libya, Afghan citizens would join.²⁷ The Russian-Belarusian disinformation system presented the activities of the Border Guard, the army and the Police as heartless and hostile to migrants. This narrative was also supported by the media in Poland opposing the government, with the support of organisations defending human rights. In this case, there was a dilemma typical of a state threatening a crisis of security or independence: security or human rights?²⁸

Human rights defenders, such as Janina Ochojska from the Polish Humanitarian Action, with the support of some anti-government opposition activists, such as Władysław Frasyniuk from Koalicja Obywatelska (KO, the Civic Coalition), began to accuse the Border Guard, Police and soldiers of brutal treatment of migrants attacking the Polish border under the supervision of Belarusian services.²⁹ The allegations revealed that the situation at the border in this respect is not "black and white", as reported by numerous volunteers, e.g. activists of the "Granica" group, who tried to help people, disregarding the intentions of the Belarusian regime and counteracting the actions Belarusian by the Polish services. They postulated that an educational campaign should be conducted among local residents in order to open them up to help people crossing the border illegally.³⁰ During the humanitarian crisis, one message was missing at the border, which led to a communication crisis. It resulted from the difference of intentions of the Belarusian and Polish services (attack with "D" weapons → protection of the border against it), and the lack of coordination of the activities of Polish services and volunteers, not to mention the rejection of Frontex assistance by the Polish authorities.³¹

²⁶ "Alaksandr Łukaszenka oskarżył Polskę o wywołanie konfliktu granicznego", Forsal.pl, 23 August 2021, <https://forsal.pl/swiat/aktualnosci/artykuly/8230263,lukaszenka-oskarzyl-polske-o-wywołanie-konfliktu-granicznego.html> [accessed: 1 December 2021].

²⁷ "Łukaszenka oskarża Polskę o wywołanie konfliktu granicznego", Gazeta Prawna, 23 August 2021, <https://www.gazetaprawna.pl/wiadomosci/swiat/artykuly/8230253,lukaszenka-oskarza-polske-konflikty-graniczny.html> [accessed: 24 June 2022].

²⁸ K. Chochowski, "Kryzys na granicy polsko-białoruskiej jako przejaw wojny hybrydowej. Aspekty administracyjnoprawne", *Roczniki Nauk Społecznych*, vol. 13, no. 4, 2021, pp. 83–96.

²⁹ "Komisja Praw Człowieka NRA o sytuacji na granicy polsko-białoruskiej", Adwokatura.pl <https://www.adwokatura.pl/z-zycia-nra/komisja-praw-czlowieka-nra-o-sytuacji-na-granicy-polsko-bialoruskiej> [accessed: 24 June 2022].

³⁰ *Kryzys humanitarny na pograniczu polsko-białoruskim. Raport Grupy Granica*, ed. W. Klaus, Grupa Granica, 1 December 2021, <https://www.grupagranica.pl/files/Raport-GG-Kryzys-humanitarny-napograniczu-polsko-bialoruskim.pdf> [accessed: 13 December 2021], pp. 13–23.

³¹ M. Kurzejewski, "Kryzys komunikacyjny na granicy polsko-białoruskiej", *Biuletyn Akademickiego Centrum Komunikacji Strategicznej*, no. 1, 2022, pp. 15–19.

On 24 August, the representatives of 32 foreigners staying on the Polish-Belarusian border sent applications to the European Court of Human Rights requesting international protection and asking for the supply of food and medicine. On 1 October, the president of the Supreme Bar Council, Przemysław Rosati, requested the Ombudsman for Children, Mikołaj Pawlak, to scrutinise the protection and humanitarian aid for children staying in the border area of Poland and Belarus. He appealed for intervention in the case of ending the use of the push back procedure against mothers with children by the Polish services, as the ombudsman protects the rights of children regardless of their origin and nationality.³²

On 23 October 2021, the Supreme Bar Council appealed to the Polish authorities to respect the human dignity, rights and freedoms of every human being, including migrants on the Polish-Belarusian border, and to respect the principle of “non-refoulement,” a major provision of the Geneva Convention. These activities led to the launch of a free Legal Aid Coordination Centre for migrants in Hajnówka by legal advisers who came to the border for this purpose.³³ Such situations took place, but in view of the tension on the border, these actions meant that thousands of people – victims of the Belarusian regime’s policy – were not allowed to enter Poland and the EU, as in 2015–2017.

The case of the alleged lack of help from the Polish authorities was taken advantage of by opposition politicians, mainly from the Left and the KO. Iwona Hartwich, a member of the KO, demanded that the border be opened, forgetting about the consequences of the uncontrolled admission of migrants to Germany by Chancellor Angela Merkel in 2015.³⁴ On 31 August 2021, former President Aleksander Kwasniewski spoke about the situation on the Polish-Belarusian border. He supported the protection of the border, but accused the government of heartlessness towards migrants, jamming volunteers, and preventing the supply of products and water.³⁵ This context also included the rebellion that took place on 25 November

³² “Kryzys migracyjny. Prezes Naczelnej Rady Adwokackiej wzywa do działania Rzecznika Praw Dziecka”, *Wprost*, 1 October 2021, <https://www.wprost.pl/kraj/10501321/kryzys-migracyjny-prezes-naczelnej-rady-adwokackiej-wzywa-do-dzialania-rzecznika-praw-dziecka.html> [accessed: 25 June 2022].

³³ Uchwała nr 26/2021 Naczelnej Rady Adwokackiej z dnia 23 października 2021 r., https://www.adwokatura.pl/admin/wgrane_pliki/file-uchwala-nra-nr-26-2021-32203.pdf, por. „Radcowie prawni na granicy polsko-białoruskiej”, *Rzeczpospolita*, 3 December 2021, <https://www.rp.pl/zawody-prawnicze/art19163431-radcowie-prawni-na-granicy-polsko-bialoruskiej> [accessed: 24 June 2022].

³⁴ Twitter, 20 August 2021, <https://twitter.com/iwonahartwich/status/1428722102799159298> [accessed: 12 November 2021].

³⁵ A. Zygiel, “Kwaśniewski o sytuacji na granicy: Politycznie rząd działa słusznie, humanitarne – bezdusznie”, *RMF24*, 1 September 2021, https://www.rmf24.pl/fakty/polska/news-kwasniewski-o-sytuacji-na-granicy-politycznie-rzad-dziala-sl,nId,5455721#crp_state=1 [accessed: 12 November 2021].

at the Centre for Foreigners, located at the Military Training Centre in Wędrzyn. They refused to go out for lunch, destroying the fence and other equipment, demanding that they be released. However, the situation was brought under control and the services identified the 10 most aggressive people, isolating them from the rest of the migrants from this centre.³⁶

Meanwhile, officers of the Podlasie and Nadbuże Border Guard Departments, along with several non-governmental organisations, volunteers and residents helped migrants who cross the border. The Podlasie Branch of the Border Guard distributed a variety of items, such as: thermal blankets, protein and energy bars, bottled water, thermos flasks with tea, warm clothes, shoes, blankets, and food. A fundraising campaign was also held with the cooperation of the Human Rights Defender, with the participation of the Polish Red Cross, Caritas Polska and the University of Warsaw, and on the initiative of the Border Guard and the Polish Army chaplains. Thanks to the integration of assistance, the Border Guard also ensured full care and necessary medical care to the detained and to those staying in Guarded Centres for Foreigners.³⁷

On the orders of President Andrzej Duda, a humanitarian convoy went to Belarus on 23 August, but despite the appeals of the Polish side it was not admitted there. The same situation occurred with the next ones on 5 and 23 October, as they were also not allowed into the territory of Belarus.³⁸ Belarusian-Russian disinformation used the case of helping refugees in Poland, as well as probably the cases of inappropriate attitudes of Polish officers to create a black and white message from the Polish-Belarusian border, but the situation there was much more complex than the information provided.

Counteracting actions by the Belarusian regime by the Polish authorities

Since the beginning of the crisis, the Polish authorities have adopted a border protection strategy in line with the Polish *raison d'état*. In response to the actions taken by the Belarusian authorities, President Duda introduced a state of emergency in the border areas for 30 days, effective 2 September, which, due to the further escalation

³⁶ E. Szczepańska, "Bunt w ośrodku dla migrantów w Wędrzynie", Komenda Główna Straży Granicznej, 26 November 2021, <https://www.strazgraniczna.pl/pl/aktualnosci/9579,Bunt-w-osrodku-dla-migrantow-w-Wedrzyne.html> [accessed: 12 December 2021].

³⁷ E. Szczepańska, "Z pomocą migrantom", Komenda Główna Straży Granicznej, 22 October 2021, <https://www.strazgraniczna.pl/pl/aktualnosci/9499,Z-pomoca-imigrantom.html> [accessed: 8 December 2021].

³⁸ "Kryzysowa sytuacja na granicy z Białorusią. Polska wysłała pomoc humanitarną", TVP Info, 23 October 2021, <https://www.tvp.info/56534064/migranci-granica-polska-konwoj-z-pomoca-humanitarna-rusza-na-bialorus> [accessed: 12 November 2021].

of tension and the arrival of new groups of migrants, was extended on 2 October for another 60 days. It covered 183 localities in the border areas of Podlaskie and a part of Lubelskie regions, and the majority of residents understood these activities with understanding.³⁹ The same goal was also achieved by the enactment of the State Border Protection Act by the Sejm of the Republic of Poland on 17 November 2021, and the decision to build a border wall with safeguard mechanisms that would hinder illegal crossing.⁴⁰

Pursuant to the Regulation of the Minister of the Interior and Administration of 30 November 2021 on the introduction of a temporary ban on staying in specific areas in the border zone adjacent to the state border with Belarus, on December 1, the state of emergency was replaced by a ban on staying in these areas imposed on anyone, apart from the residents of the areas, from outside the activity zone. The ban was in force from 1 December 2021 to 1 March 2022. Journalists could stay there only with prior accreditation issued by the commander of a given Border Guard post.⁴¹ The key issue was the safety of journalists, as well as of officers of the Border Guard, Police and soldiers. It was resolved that editorial offices interested in participating in an organised form of entry to the area subjected to the prohibition of stay would be able to indicate the area of their visit, and at their disposal, a special press centre would be made available, located between Kuźnica Białostocka and Sokółka.

On 8 December, Poland's President Duda and his wife came to Kuźnica Białostocka, where they met with officers of the Border Guard, Police, Fire Brigade, soldiers of the Polish Army and soldiers of allied forces from the UK and Estonia, who had been there since December 2021. The talks also concerned assistance for migrants, both at the border and during their stay in migration centres in Poland. After the meeting at the border, the president and his wife took part in a charity concert for migrants and sick children of officers and employees of the Podlasie Border Guard Division "Pomagamy Razem III", which took place at the Podlasie Opera and Philharmonic in Białystok.⁴² In the following months, the crisis gradually de-escalated, which resulted from both the return of potential migrants from

³⁹ "Stan wyjątkowy przy granicy – co myślą mieszkańcy? »Zrobią w końcu porządek z tymi, co tu się nazjeżdżali«", *Niezależna.pl*, 31 August 2021, <https://niezalezna.pl/409663-stan-wyjatkowy-przy-granicy-co-mysla-mieszkancy-zrobia-w-koncu-porzadek-z-tymi-co-tu-sie-nazjezdza> [accessed: 10 November 2021].

⁴⁰ Ustawa z dnia 17 listopada 2021 r. o zmianie ustawy o ochronie granicy państwowej oraz niektórych innych ustaw, *Dz.U.* [Journal of Laws of the Republic of Poland], 2021, item 2191.

⁴¹ Rozporządzenie Ministra Spraw Wewnętrznych i Administracji z dnia 30 listopada 2021 r. w sprawie wprowadzenia czasowego zakazu przebywania na określonym obszarze w strefie nadgranicznej przyległej do granicy państwowej z Republiką Białorusi, *Dz.U.*, 2021, item 2193.

⁴² "Spotkanie ze służbami na granicy polsko-białoruskiej", *Prezydent.pl*, 8 December 2021, <https://www.prezydent.pl/aktualnosci/wizyty-krajowe/spotkanie-z-przedstawicielami-sluzbchroniacymi-granice-polsko-bialoruska,46323> [accessed: 15 December 2021].

Belarus to their countries of residence, the construction of a dam on the border, and the Russian aggression against Ukraine, which overshadowed the smouldering crisis, although some of the migrants were directed by the Belarusian services to Ukraine so that they would go to Poland with the refugees.

Conclusions

Ever since the migration crisis broke out, the question of the date and method of its termination, as well as its short and long-term effects, has been of major importance. On the surface, the answer seems simple: once the Belarusian dictator stops sending migrants over to the borders of Belarus with the countries of the EU. However, this may happen when the demands are met, or when the costs of his actions prove to be higher than the potential benefits, and the sanctions of the EU and the US will actually be conducive to an ultimate collapse of the Belarusian economy, indirectly hitting Russia, for supporting the actions of the Belarusian regime.⁴³

The number of migrants who made attempts to illegally cross the border with Poland in 2021 was around 40,000 people: in August 2021 there were 3,500 attempts, in September there were 7,700, in October – 17,300, in November – 8,900, and in December 2021 the number of migrants amounted to 1,700 until December 29, 2021.⁴⁴ According to the statistical data of the Polish Border Guard, in 2021 its officers refused entry to Poland through the Belarusian border to 1,610 people. At the same time, they detained and revealed 2,877 foreigners who attempted to cross the state border against the law, or attempted to cross the border from Belarus.⁴⁵ In 2021, the Border Guard authorities detained and revealed the illegal stay of 236 people who came from Belarus, including 111 citizens of that country.⁴⁶ During this period, 7,257 people filed 4,298 applications for international protection, of which 2011 submitted 1,283 applications to the Polish Border Guard in Warsaw, and 673 people submitted a total of 375 applications to the Podlaskie Unit. All of them were granted, following a positive assessment.⁴⁷

In view of the artificially induced migration crisis, since December 2011, Poland has been securing the border with Belarus by building a fence separating the Polish

⁴³ M. Menkiszak, "Kiedy zakończy się kryzys na granicy? »Mamy przed sobą dwie ewentualności«", TVN24, 16 November 2021, <https://tvn24.pl/polska/kryzys-na-granicy-polsko-bialoruskiej-kiedy-i-jak-sie-zakoczy-ekspert-o-dwoch-mozliwosciach-5491888> [accessed: 22 November 2021].

⁴⁴ "W sierpniu było 3,5 tys. prób przekroczenia granicy polsko-białoruskiej – informuje Straż Graniczna", Radio Białystok, 1 September 2021, <https://www.radio.bialystok.pl/wiadomosci/index/id/203925> [accessed: 1 September 2021].

⁴⁵ *Informacja statystyczna za 2021 r.*, Straż Graniczna, Warszawa, styczeń 2022, p. 5, 11.

⁴⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 25.

⁴⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 10.

border zone in order to prevent illegal border crossing from Belarus. The dam is 5.5 metres high and has been fitted with electronic motion sensors and cameras. 750 new Border Guard officers have been sent to the border. The legal basis for these activities is the State Border Protection Act of 4 November 2021, which defines the rules for the implementation of the construction of the state border protection of the Republic of Poland, which is also the external border of the EU.⁴⁸ In the context of the general defence of Poland, including potentially the border with Belarus, the Homeland Defence Act was passed by the Sejm on 11 March 2022. Belarus is regarded as a major contemporary ally of Russia, which is important, especially after the Russian aggression against Ukraine, against which Belarus took a “waiting” position, making its territory available for aggression against neighbouring Ukraine.⁴⁹

In sum, the conclusions from the above considerations are as follows. First, the aim of the artificially created “migration crisis” has been to weaken and destabilize the states of the eastern flank of NATO and the EU with the support of the Russian Federation, which is interested in the dependence of the EU in terms of raw materials in the context of building Europe “from the Atlantic to the Pacific.” Second, the geostrategic goal of the Russian Federation has been to foster a closer integration of Belarus with it, as the Russian way to the west (Poland), north (Lithuania, Latvia) and south (Ukraine). Third, the end of the crisis may take place after the construction of a dam on the border and the return of migrants to their countries of residence. However, it cannot be ruled out that an invasion by a “D” weapon, for example, from the side of the Kaliningrad Oblast of the Russian Federation, cannot be ruled out. Fourth, the actions taken to destabilise the borders of Poland, Lithuania and Latvia are in line with the Russian aggression against Ukraine, the aim of which is to distract these countries from providing aid to Ukraine, which ended in failure for the Russian Federation. Also, Belarus and Russia do not intend to give up further weakening the border, they can only change the means and forms of actions, e.g. sabotage, or taking advantage of the Russian minority in Transnistria, Latvia and Estonia to act against these countries. Last but not least, Lukashenka’s position depends on the outcome of the war in Ukraine. In the event of a defeat of Russia – which is real, provided that an international coalition is formed and military aid is increased, and thus the Russian Federation weakens – Lukashenka may lose power, although Russia will seek to control Belarus, regardless of who will be in charge of the state; hence, an important factor is self-identification of Belarusians.

The adoption of further sanctions by the EU against the Belarusian regime and the tough stance of NATO indicate solidarity with the countries attacked by demographic weapons. In the context of Belarusian hybrid activities under the patronage

⁴⁸ Ustawa z dnia 29 października 2021 r. o budowie zabezpieczenia granicy państwowej, Dz.U., 2021, item 1992.

⁴⁹ Ustawa z dnia 11 marca 2022 r. o obronie Ojczyzny, Dz.U., 2022, item 655.

of Russia, as well as Russia's aggression against Ukraine, the solidarity of the EU, NATO and the United Nations with potentially endangered states remains a vital factor at stake.

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Operation “Sluice”: The so-called migration crisis at the Polish-Belarusian border: an example of hybrid actions taken in the second half of 2021 as documented in the reports of the Polish border guard

Abstract

This article is a cognitive-analytical text that looks at the so-called “migration crisis”, which turned out to be an attempt to destabilise the situation on the border between Belarus and Poland, Lithuania and Latvia in 2021. Following the introduction, which outlines the main goals and theses of the article, the author looks at the origins of the operation by the name of “sluice”, and the nature of the “migration crisis” on the Polish-Belarusian border in the period from August to December 2021. On the basis of the information available, retrieved mainly from the official website of the Border Guard, the author has attempted to describe the operation of the Belarusian authorities and border services in the process of bringing migrants to Belarus, and then “transferring” them over to Poland and other countries of the European Union. The text ends with a summary of the issues raised, and an attempt to outline the prospects of bringing the crisis to an end.

Key words: migration crisis, Poland, Belarus, Russia, disinformation