

POLITICO. – 26.11.2021

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Lukashenko sends mixed signals over Belarus migrant crisis

О. Лукашенко посилає неоднозначні сигнали щодо білоруської мігрантської кризи

Прикордонна криза з ЄС, викликана авторитарним лідером Білорусі, не зникає, хоча деякі з людей, які провели тижні в пастці на кордоні, починають повертатися додому на Близький Схід. Олександр Лукашенко перебував на прикордонному переході з Польщею Брузги і заявив, що його уряд допоможе репатріювати частину нелегальних мігрантів. Але він також сказав, що влада не планує перешкоджати іншим людям намагатися пробитися на захід. «Я хотів би, щоб ви знали, що ми не збираємося вас затримувати, штовхати в літаки і відправляти додому, якщо ви цього не хочете», – сказав О. Лукашенко під час відвідування табору мігрантів. Білорусь вже почала дозволяти деяким мігрантам повертатися в країни походження. Минулого тижня до Іраку прилетіли майже 400 осіб. Понад 600 осіб повернулися в Ербіль, столицю іракської автономної провінції Курдистан.

<https://www.politico.eu/article/alexander-lukashenko-sends-mixed-signals-over-belarus-poland-migrant-crisis/>

The border crisis with the European Union sparked by the authoritarian leader of Belarus isn't going away — although some of the people who've spent weeks trapped on the frontier are starting to go home to the Middle East.

On Friday, Alexander Lukashenko was at the Bruzgi border crossing with Poland and said his government would help repatriate some of the irregular migrants. But he also said authorities have no plans to prevent other people from attempting to force their way westward.

“I would like you to know that we are not going to detain you, push you onto planes and send you back home if you do not want to do that,” Lukashenko said during a visit to a migrant camp.

Belarus has already begun allowing some migrants to return to their countries of origin. Last week, almost 400 people flew to Iraq. On Thursday and Friday, over 600 returned to Erbil, the capital of Iraq's autonomous province Kurdistan, and another flight is scheduled for Saturday.

At the same time, Lukashenko made it clear that if someone wants to take their chances and cross the border into the EU, his government won't stop them. “If you want to go west, we won't choke, grab and beat you. It is your will. If you go through, go ahead. That's simple,” he said.

He's also pushing for the EU to backtrack on sanctions

According to Belarusian officials, around 2,000 migrants, mainly from the Middle East, have been camped in a warehouse turned into a temporary shelter near the border with Poland.

The arrival of new migrants has been made difficult by a concerted EU effort to threaten airlines carrying people from the Middle East to Minsk.

Polish authorities said Friday that thousands of people remain close to the border, which is guarded by Polish troops and border guards.

“Lukashenko's regime still controls the migrants and is organizing attacks on the border,” Stanisław Żaryn, spokesperson for Poland's special services ministry, told the press.

Lithuanian authorities warned Friday that they'd close the border with Belarus if the situation doesn't improve.

EU countries accuse Lukashenko of orchestrating a hybrid war on the bloc's border in retaliation for sanctions imposed by Brussels in the wake of last year's flawed presidential election and the subsequent violent crackdown against pro-democracy activists.

“You've enforced sanctions against me. You've put a noose on my neck in order to choke me, and you, scoundrels, want me to protect you? It won't happen,” Lukashenko said, explaining why he's not shutting access to the frontier.

Let the people pass

He also urged Poland to allow migrants to cross its territory to reach Germany.

“We do not need any clashes, let alone wars. Let these people through to Germany. After all, neither Belarus nor Poland is their final destination,” Lukashenko said. “They want to get to Germany, let them pass and the problem will be resolved.”

Pavel Latushko, one of the leaders of the Belarusian opposition living in exile in Poland, told POLITICO on Friday that Lukashenko is in no rush to end the crisis that’s seen his country become one of the EU’s top geopolitical problems. He warned that Lukashenko’s next gambit may be trying to funnel refugees from Afghanistan toward the EU.

“Lukashenko wants to keep Europe in suspense until early spring. There are two nuances here. The first issue is whether [Russian President Vladimir] Putin will agree to ensure the transit flow [of Afghan migrants] through Russia. I see no other way of delivering them from Afghanistan. The second is whether the migrants can withstand such a long stay in Belarus.”

Lukashenko also warned that migrants could try to get to reach the EU through Ukraine.

“If Afghans rush here [to Belarus] and to Ukraine, Europe is unlikely to be able to handle such a migrant flood,” Lukashenko said, adding that “this will happen if they [the EU] refuse to hear us [Belarus], and to solve the problem now.”

Ukraine’s government is worried about a possible influx of migrants from Belarus, orchestrated by Lukashenko with support from Russia.

Ukraine’s former Foreign Minister Pavlo Klimkin called the migrant crisis “a cynical special operation by Russia.”

“[The Kremlin’s] idea is very simple — to create a migrant crisis after the energy crisis. Russia wants to create multiple crises and manage them manually, so as to put pressure on the EU and on us,” the diplomat said.

Klimkin, who led Kyiv’s diplomatic corps after Russia’s 2014 annexation of Crimea and during the Donbas military crisis, warned that Ukraine’s 1,000-kilometer border with Belarus could quickly become a crisis zone.

“Poland, Lithuania and Latvia will find ways to protect themselves from the migrant crisis within the EU, NATO, or using their own resources. When this happens, Minsk and Moscow could say that desperate people should go to our [Ukrainian] border,” he said.

Kyiv plans to deploy an extra 8,500 border guards and police officers along its border with Belarus.