

# Eastern Europe teeters on war

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Tensions over refugees at the Polish-Belarus border, Ukraine's conflict with Russia, and NATO's aggressive actions in the Black Sea threaten to provoke a military conflict in Eastern Europe involving the world's major powers.

On Thursday, Russian President Vladimir Putin declared that as part of exercises in the Black Sea, NATO bombers had flown within 20 kilometers of his country's borders, an act that he described as "crossing the line." In April of this year at his annual address to the nation, Putin used similar language to warn that his government would take "asymmetric, rapid, and tough" actions when it determined that "red lines" were crossed.

In his remarks yesterday to a gathering at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Kremlin leader accused the West of aggravating the situation in Ukraine by providing Kiev, which is currently waging a civil war to retake two breakaway pro-Russian regions in its east, with modern weapons. He said that in addition to its maneuvers along Russia's southwestern flank, NATO has been conducting training operations very close to other parts of Russia's borders.

Simultaneously, in an effort to demonstrate that it is Paris and Berlin, and not Moscow, that are behind the failure to tamp down the crisis in Ukraine's east, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov published private correspondence with the governments of France and Germany, indicating that Russia has been insisting on direct talks between the warring parties in an effort to implement the Minsk Accords.

As this has been unfolding, there are reports in the Russian press that Ukrainian forces shelled parts of the Lugansk People's Republic, one of the areas seeking to separate from Kiev, this week. The government of President Volodymyr Zelensky, which recently sent an additional 8500 troops to its border with Russia, said that its marines are now carrying out drills near the

Crimean Peninsula in the Black Sea.

Ukraine and its Western backers are demanding that Russia draw down troops massed along its borders with Ukraine, with Kiev and much of the media declaring that Moscow is on the verge of invading. Having just met with his Ukrainian counterpart to give public assurances of Washington's support, US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin stopped short of the same accusation, stating, "We'll continue to call on Russia to act responsibly and be more transparent on the buildup of the forces around on the border of Ukraine." "We're not sure exactly what Mr. Putin is up to," he added.

Meanwhile, the situation along the Polish-Belarusian border remains fraught. On Wednesday, Polish forces unleashed tear gas and water cannons on thousands of primarily Iraqi refugees trying to enter the country in order to make their way to Germany. With Warsaw, Brussels, and Washington accusing Minsk of engaging in "hybrid warfare" by allegedly causing a migrant crisis along Poland's border, the same day German Chancellor Angela Merkel called the Polish prime minister to declare "Germany's full solidarity with Poland."

The G7 issued a statement 24 hours later stating that it "condemn[s] the Belarus regime's orchestration of irregular migration across its borders. These callous acts are putting peoples' lives at Risk [sic]."

"We are united in our solidarity with Poland, as well as Lithuania and Latvia, who have been targeted by this provocative use of irregular migration as a hybrid tactic," said the foreign ministers of Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the UK, and the US.

The men, women, and children being drenched with freezing water, gassed, and left to die in the forests along Poland's borders are all fleeing countries that have been laid waste by the very powers now applauding their persecution on the basis of the inverted reality that somehow Belarus' decrepit

dictatorial regime is the real source of their misery.

Imperialism is relentless towards its victims. At least eleven refugees have frozen to death so far, and volunteers from both the Polish and Belarusian sides of the borders who have been trying to bring food, tents, and medicine to the migrants say they expect to find many more bodies.

Following Wednesday's assault by Polish forces and a second conversation with Merkel, Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko ordered the removal of a thousand refugees to a nearby hangar where they are being given food and shelter. While thousands more remained in the forest about a mile away, his government said the area is being cleared.

Coming out of his discussion with Merkel, Lukashenko began deporting migrants, with nearly 400 sent back to Iraq on Thursday and plans to return another 5000. Belavia, Belarus' national carrier, has stopped transporting people from Afghanistan, Iraq, Lebanon, Libya, Syria, and Yemen who are seeking to fly to Minsk through Tashkent, Uzbekistan but do not have Polish entry documents. Other airlines are also refusing to provide passage to Iraqis traveling from Turkey, Iran, and Dubai to Belarus.

Lukashenko's press secretary said Thursday that an agreement was also reached with Merkel to create a humanitarian corridor through which 2000 refugees can make their way to the EU.

The character of the arrangement made between Lukashenko and Merkel remains unclear, with Berlin describing the discussion as merely "underlin[ing] the need to provide humanitarian care and return options for the people affected." Minsk declared that the two leaders "agreed that the problem will be addressed at the level of Belarus and the E.U., and that the two sides will designate officials who will immediately enter into negotiations in order to resolve the existing problems."

Regardless of the developments of the last two days, it is clear that the campaign against the Lukashenko regime, which is ultimately directed against Russia, will continue.

The EU is preparing new sanctions against Belarus, and on Tuesday US cyber security firm Mandiat issued a report stating that it has "high confidence" that a hacking and disinformation campaign titled "Ghostwriter" is "aligned with Belarusian government interests" and it "cannot rule out Russian

contributions" even though it has "not uncovered direct evidence of such contributions."

The statement that someone "aligned with Belarusian government interests" —which could mean anything, including false flag operators— has been transformed in the Western press to mean, as a recent AP article stated, that there is "compelling forensic evidence that Belarus was involved in the hacking."

NATO members Estonia and Latvia, who criticized Merkel for meeting with Lukashenko, have both announced the immediate deployment of troops to their Russian and Belarusian borders, respectively. The two Baltic countries called snap military exercises this week. Prior to these events, Lithuania had already begun building a steel and barbed wire wall on its border with Belarus.

On Tuesday, Germany announced it was suspending the certification of Nord Stream 2, a Russian-German natural gas pipeline that runs under the Baltic Sea to deliver supplies to Europe. The process of bringing online the transit route, which is of critical economic and geopolitical significance to both Moscow and Berlin, is now allegedly being held up because Gazprom needs to create a German subsidiary to handle its European operations. The US as well as countries such as Ukraine and Poland have long bitterly opposed the pipeline but Germany had insisted on building it anyway.

On Wednesday, John Bolton, who served as the US National Security Advisor under President Donald Trump and has had diplomatic posts in every Republican administration since Ronald Reagan, called for ousting Lukashenko.

"So, our strategy, I think, should be how to get Lukashenko out of power and finding him a nice villa on the Riviera or something like that. [It is] something we ought to consider because if he invites Russia in, I don't think they are leaving," Bolton stated.



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