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The EU Migrant Crisis: Options for Border Security and U.S. Interests

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Brief Analysis

Spurred by conflicts in the Middle East, North Africa, and Afghanistan, the migration emergency in Belarus gives Washington an opportunity to foster cooperative agreements and goodwill.

In recent weeks, EU member states have widely denounced President Aleksandr Lukashenko of Belarus for inciting a migrant crisis on their shared borders. As civilians continue to flee violence in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria, flights from Damascus and Erbil to Minsk have served as an easy pipeline to Europe. Lukashenko is weaponizing these migration routes in order to threaten the EU, which maintains economic sanctions against the autocratic leader. Although his cynical tactics are a new development, the crisis also highlights the EU's long-running struggle to efficiently and humanely process major influxes of migrants and refugees. As the United States looks to repair its frayed transatlantic ties, the situation in Belarus provides an opportunity to work with allies on a humanitarian and security problem of mutual concern.

Weaponizing Migrants and Refugees

In early November, a fourteen-year-old Kurdish boy from northern Iraq reportedly froze to death on the Belarusian border with Poland, making him the eighth person to perish at a makeshift camp that has seen an increased flow

of Middle Eastern migrants in recent weeks. The latest iteration of Europe's migrant crisis emerged in June, when Belarus began allowing Middle Easterners to pay for streamlined passage to the EU states along its borders (Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia). European officials have criticized the move as a "hybrid attack," arguing that Minsk is leveraging migrants to gain sanctions relief, undermine the EU's stability, or both. Neighboring states have answered by militarizing their borders and pushing migrants back to Belarus. With nowhere else to go, many of these individuals are trapped in a no man's land along the Belarusian frontier, with limited food, water, and medical care amid frigid temperatures.

Overall, thousands of migrants have arrived at the EU's doorstep this year via the Mediterranean Sea, and tens of thousands more have approached via Eastern Europe. In response, the union's exterior states have fought to banish and harass these individuals and those who aim to help them. In Poland, for example, medical personnel and journalists have been barred from reaching the border with Belarus, while Mediterranean states have passed legislation and launched court cases against private vessels engaged in search-and-rescue operations. In 2019, Italy passed a law imposing fines of up to 1 million euros against such vessels, while Malta is currently prosecuting three migrants on terrorism-related charges with dubious evidence.

Lukashenko's novel pressure tactics are exacerbating the EU's longer-term migration crisis, which was set off primarily by post-Arab Spring violence in 2011 and reached its peak in 2015, when over a million mostly Syrian refugees headed to Europe. Tens of thousands of migrants have arrived every year since, and the EU has failed to implement a consistent policy to process asylum claims or repatriate non-qualifying individuals. Although COVID-19 lockdowns and border closures slowed the problem somewhat, migration from the Middle East never stopped. This year, the situation has deteriorated rapidly amid Lukashenko's confrontational policy, growing humanitarian emergencies, and new developments in Afghanistan. The economic and security repercussions of the Taliban conquest have driven tens of thousands of Afghans to flee their homes, while the Belarusian government's willingness to provide visas to anyone with cash has led to a new influx from areas with longstanding security and humanitarian problems, most notably Iraq and Syria.

Implications for U.S. Policy

In some ways, U.S. policy has contributed to this crisis over the past few years. For example, the chaotic U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan is the primary reason for the increased refugee flow from that conflict zone to Europe and elsewhere. As Washington and the international community move to freeze Afghan government assets and suspend their cash transfers to Kabul, the situation is likely to worsen. Even if Afghan migrants are not making their way to the United States, their plight has implications for U.S. interests to the extent that it has far-reaching effects on European partners.

The crisis has strategic implications as well. Although it is unclear whether Russia directly crafted Lukashenko's recent policy shift, his decisions on the matter clearly benefit Moscow's interests. After all, the move was prompted by Western sanctions imposed on Minsk for its brutal campaign against pro-democracy protestors—a campaign enthusiastically backed by Vladimir Putin. It should come as no surprise, then, that the Russian leader has been so eager to provide rhetorical cover for Lukashenko's role in the migrant crisis. In addition to giving a key ally leverage for sanctions relief, the present emergency has enabled Moscow to present its EU rivals with a thorny, expensive, and politically charged challenge to resolve.

Washington has a vested interest in checking Russia's destabilizing policies in Eastern Europe, and in helping its allies develop sustainable solutions to migration influxes. Fortunately, the Belarus crisis provides an opportunity to adopt straightforward measures on both fronts, while also protecting the rights of migrants who have been caught in the middle.

Allocate emergency USAID funding. The U.S. Agency for International Development routinely allocates available funds to meet emerging crises or mitigate rapidly deteriorating humanitarian situations, so it is a prime candidate to support humanitarian operations along the EU’s borders with Belarus. In addition to showing Europe that Washington is a reliable partner on issues of shared concern, allocating funds would also send a signal about U.S. expectations for respecting the rights and dignity of migrants.

Raise the U.S. refugee cap. By default, EU member states are required to resettle qualified asylum seekers who enter the union. The current crisis stems in large part from the fact that many states are choosing a policy of pushback rather than shouldering the resettlement responsibility alone. To ease this burden and show allies that human rights are a shared obligation, the White House could raise its [refugee cap for fiscal year 2022](#) and allocate more slots to individuals from the Middle East. The administration could also reduce bureaucratic hurdles and increase funds for processing asylum cases so that it actually reaches the cap it sets for itself. During the previous fiscal year, the United States [admitted](#) only 11,411 refugees out of 62,500 allocated slots.

Forge consensus against smuggling. Washington and its transatlantic partners urgently need a cohesive plan and agreement for policing waterways and ports used for smuggling activities—not just migrant trafficking to Europe, but also the transfer of oil, weapons, and drugs to sanctioned parties in the Middle East. Given the destabilizing effects of such smuggling, it is in the U.S. national security interest to work alongside countries that patrol these corridors, including EU members Greece, Italy, and Malta, various Eastern European nations, and governments that send spotter planes for such missions (France, Germany). Asking U.S. Africa Command to assert its military presence in relevant waterways could help in this regard. Moreover, U.S. counter-smuggling efforts would be more effective if they were integrated into a broader Mediterranean mission with EU support. For instance, Syria’s “industrial-scale” Captagon trade—which an April report by the Center for Operational Analysis and Research valued at \$3.5 billion annually—represents a major transnational security threat, and while recent [congressional efforts](#) to address it are a welcome first step, further cooperation with Europe is needed.

In the longer term, Washington should do more to address regional trends that exacerbate Europe’s migrant challenge. In North Africa, for example, U.S. officials and their European counterparts should collectively prioritize efforts to blunt Russian and Chinese influence in Tunisia and Libya, particularly when it contributes to instability that spurs refugee flows. Congress might consider expanding sanctions in these jurisdictions under the Global Magnitsky Act. Finally, the United States should work with NATO, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), and the African Continental Free Trade Area to counterbalance rival efforts in the region and stem terrorist violence, which once again threatens to endanger U.S. partners, personnel, and facilities across the Mediterranean.

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