



EUROPEAN COUNCIL STUDY GUIDE

Agenda Item: The Situation in Belarus
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. Introduction: The European Council and Belarus
2. General Overview
 - a. Belarusian Protests
 - b. Belarus-European Union Border Crisis
3. Major Parties Involved
4. Timeline of Key Events
5. Useful Links
6. Appendix

1. Introduction: The European Council and Belarus

a. The European Council

Although it has no legislative power, the European Council is a strategic body that defines the general political direction and priorities of the European Union. The council consists of the heads of state or government of the EU member states, the President of the European Council, and the President of the European Commission.

b. The Situation in Belarus

The August 2020 presidential elections in Belarus, deemed neither free nor fair by international monitors, prompted the citizens of Belarus to protest against *Alexandr Lukashenko*, also known as “Europe’s Last Dictator.” In response to the intimidation and violent repression of peaceful protesters, along with the unjust nature of the elections, the EU has progressively imposed sanctions against Belarus.

2. General Overview

a. Belarusian Protests

Alexandr Lukashenko has been the president of Belarus since 1994, hence why he is often referred to as a “dictator” by various media outlets. The protests against Lukashenko first began in May 2020, three months prior to the August 2020 presidential elections. Many of the opposition candidates registered for the election were arrested. Viktor Babaryka, the main opposition candidate, was detained by authorities, which resulted in Belarusians taking to the streets to criticize the authoritarian rule of Lukashenko. The protests are nicknamed the *Slipper Revolution* and the *Anti-Cockroach Revolution*, due to a reference made by famous blogger Sergei Tikhanovsky.



After Babaryka’s arrest, *Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya* registered as a candidate, and in June 2020, police started using harsher methods to put an end to the protests. Many activists, journalists, and protesters were arrested using pepper spray, tear gas, and rubber bullets. On election day, the violence escalated even further. TV aired exit poll results showed Lukashenko allegedly receiving 80.23% of the votes, while Tsikhanouskaya received 9.9%. The landslide seemed unlikely to all Belarusians including pro-government parts of the country. This resulted in supporters of Tsikhanouskaya gathering in major

cities in Belarus, calling for a fair count of votes. In the protests, countless Belarusians were beaten with police batons and shot with rubber bullets fired from shotguns. Law enforcement officers used grenades with lead balls, water cannons, tear gas, and stun grenades to suppress the protests.

Following the protests, on 14 August 2020, Tsikhanouskaya declared the creation of the *Coordination Council for the Transfer of Power*, which would handle the transfer of power from Lukashenko and help with the organization of a free and fair presidential election. The council was recognized by the European Parliament in September 2020. A month later, the *National Anti-Crisis Management (NAM)* was created by the council as a shadow government. NAM states that it will lose its power once a new president has been elected.

b. Belarus-European Union Border Crisis

Following the protests, the EU imposed restrictive measures against Belarus. Lukashenko countered this by threatening to bring smugglers, human traffickers, and armed migrants into Europe. He then went on to promote tours to Belarus by increasing his relationship with the Middle East and airlines operating in the Middle East. The countless migrants who were given Belarusian visas and the promise of a safe passage further into Europe were met with Poland, Latvia, and Lithuania declaring a state of emergency and building border walls on their borders with Belarus. The Belarusian government provided migrants with wire cutters and axes to cut their way into the EU. Those who failed at their attempt to cross the border were not let back into Belarus and were even beaten by Belarusian police.



According to several media outlets such as but not limited to LRT, the Lithuanian media outlet, Iraqi Kurds believed entering the European Union via Belarus was legal. In short, creating the border crisis by deceiving migrants was Lukashenko's plan to get the EU to lift the sanctions. The Belarus-European Union Border Crisis is an ongoing emergency.

3. Major Parties Involved

a. Belarus

2020-2021 Protests

The 2020–2021 Belarusian protests were a series of mass political protests against the government and President Alexander Lukashenko. The largest anti-government protests in the history of Belarus, the demonstrations began in the lead-up to and during the 2020 presidential election. In response to the

demonstrations, a number of relatively small pro-government rallies were held. The protesters faced violent persecution by the authorities.

Belarus-European Union Border Crisis

The 2021-2022 Belarus-European Union border crisis is a migrant crisis consisting of an influx of several tens of thousands of immigrants, primarily Iraqi Kurds, with smaller groups hailing from Asia and Africa, to Lithuania, Latvia, and Poland via those countries' borders shared with Belarus. The crisis began sometime around July 7, 2021, when Alexander Lukashenko threatened to "flood" the European Union with human traffickers, drug smugglers, and armed immigrants.

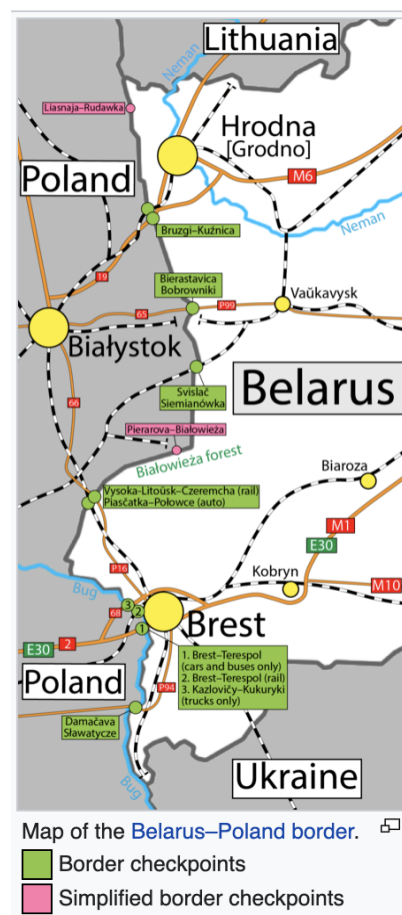


b. Poland

On 12 July 2021, Polish President Andrzej Duda stated that Poland would provide assistance to Lithuania, which it sent later that month. The number of intercepted attempts increased significantly in the autumn. In September 2021, Polish authorities estimated the number of migrants waiting to sneak from Belarus to the EU at 10,000. In total, there were more than 32,000 intercepted attempts of immigrants to cross the Polish border as of 11 November 2021, of which 3,500 attempts were made in August, almost 7,700 in September, and almost 17,300 in October. In November 2021, the Polish government estimated that 3,000–4,000 migrants were waiting in the vicinity of the border.

In early August, a group of 32 Afghans and 41 Iraqi Kurds appeared on the border in the aftermath of the fall of Kabul and were denied entry to either country, resulting in lines of military personnel on each side isolating the encamped migrants. Their appearance follows an influx of thousands of mostly Western Asian migrants that had crossed the border from Belarus into Poland in the months leading up to the fall of Kabul, with the EU claiming that Belarus purposefully engineered the migration in response to union sanctions. While the Belarusian government denied this accusation, Poland called it a "hybrid attack" on the bloc and said the migrants should not be allowed entry because they are technically still in Belarus.

Since 18 August 2021, the Polish Armed Forces were sent to secure the border with Belarus. As the number of attempted crossings increased, on 2 September, Poland announced a state of emergency in the areas



close to the border, limiting the freedom of movement, freedom of assembly, and, controversially, ordering human rights activists and doctors unaffiliated with the Border Guard to go and effectively forbidding journalists from reporting from the area, which Urszula Glensk described as an "informational blockade" instituted by Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki.

Just like Lithuania, Poland announced its intention to build a border wall with Belarus. On 25 October, Mariusz Blaszczak, the defense minister, announced the construction of a permanent border wall on Poland's 400 km border with Belarus.

c. Latvia

Illegal migrants numbers also exceeded the previous annual numbers in Latvia. On 13 August 2021, the news portal of the Latvian Armed Forces published a video showing three cases of armed Belarusian border guards trying to expel migrants to Latvia, and not let them return to Belarus. Similar reports about Belarusian border guards who pushed out migrants from Belarus to Latvia appeared later.

The Government of Latvia declared a state of emergency from 11 August until 10 November in the border municipalities of Ludza, Kraslava, and Augsdaugava and also in Daugavpil. The government prohibited the submission of applications for refugee status in these border regions, and all migrants captured there had to return to Belarus. President of Latvia Egils Levits said that migrants could seek asylum in Belarus.

On 12 November, the Latvian Saeima approved the construction of the border wall on the stretch with Belarus.

d. Lithuania

Lithuania has a 680-kilometer-long border with Belarus, which is described as poorly protected. Lithuania claimed to not have the necessary infrastructure to accommodate large numbers of migrants.

According to public figures, the country had 81 refugees in 2020. Lithuanian and EU officials claim that the illegal immigration was weaponized by the Belarusian president as a response to the imposed sanctions of the EU, due to election fraud, oppression of protests, and the forced landing of Ryanair Flight 4978. Belarusian opposition leader Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya is currently living in exile in Lithuania, whose government officially recognizes her as the legitimate president of Belarus.

e. Russian Federation

There have been allegations that the Russian Federation is behind the migrants who are stuck at the border, although they have denied all such claims. Poland had accused Russia of being the "mastermind" behind pushing migrants to Poland's border with Belarus. Some media reports, citing EU officials, have suggested that the EU sanctions could target Russian state flag carrier Aeroflot.

f. European Union

Individuals and entities including the Belarusian President, Alexandr Lukashenko, and his son and National Security Adviser, Viktor Lukashenko, as well as other key figures of the political leadership and of the government, high-level members of the judicial system, and several prominent economic actors are now designated under the sanctions regime on Belarus.

In June 2020, the council intensified the restrictive measures in light of the circumstances in Belarus by introducing a ban on the overflight of EU airspace and on access to EU airports by Belarusian carriers of all kinds.

4. Timeline of Key Events

August 2020 - Protests begin in Belarus after Lukashenko claims a landslide win in an election that foreign observers say was neither free nor fair.

May 23, 2021 - Belarusian authorities scramble a fighter jet and flag what turned out to be a false bomb alert to force a Ryanair plane to land, detaining an opposition-minded journalist who was on board. The move draws condemnation from Europe and the United States.

May 26, 2021 - Lukashenko says his country will no longer prevent migrants from crossing its borders into EU member states Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia.

June 24, 2021 - The EU imposes wide-ranging economic sanctions on Belarus for the first time, targeting its main export industries and access to finance.

July 7, 2021 - The Belarus-European Union border crisis begins.

July 9, 2021 - Lithuania commences building a 550-km (320-mile) razor-wire barrier on its border with Belarus.

July 19, 2021 - EU border agency Frontex announces the deployment of 60 border guards with helicopters and vehicles to Lithuania's frontier with Belarus following a surge in illegal crossings.

Aug 10, 2021 - Latvia declares a state of emergency along its border and starts pushing migrants back into Belarus.

Sept. 2, 2021 - Poland declares a state of emergency in two regions bordering Belarus.

Sept. 8, 2021 - Belarus says it may freeze an accord with the EU on taking back migrants who have entered the bloc via its territory, citing “unfriendly actions” by Brussels.

Sept. 20, 2021 - Three people die after crossing into Poland from Belarus, and a fourth one is found dead on the Belarusian side of the border.

Oct. 8, 2021 - Poland accuses Belarusian services of firing shots, probably blanks, towards its troops and summons Minsk’s envoy in Warsaw.

Oct. 14, 2021 - Poland passes legislation allowing migrant pushbacks at the border.

Nov 8, 2021 - Polish authorities accuse Belarus of preparing a major provocation, with reports of hundreds of migrants walking towards the Polish border.

Nov. 9, 2021 - Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov suggests the EU consider offering financial assistance to Belarus to help stop migrants crossing the border, along the lines of a similar deal the bloc negotiated with Turkey.

5. Useful Links

- <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/eastern-partnership/belarus/>
- <https://ifex.org/repression-and-resistance-in-belarus-a-monthly-chronology/>
- https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2021-0420_EN.html

6. Appendix

- https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2020%E2%80%932021_Belarusian_protests
- <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/eastern-partnership/belarus/>
- https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2021%E2%80%932022_Belarus%E2%80%93European_Union_border_crisis#:~:text=The%202021%E2%80%932022%20Belarus%E2%80%93European,via%20those%20countries'%20borders%20with
- <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-belarus-migrants-timeline-idAFKBN2HU1SV>
- <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/sanctions/restrictive-measures-against-belarus/belarus-timeline/>