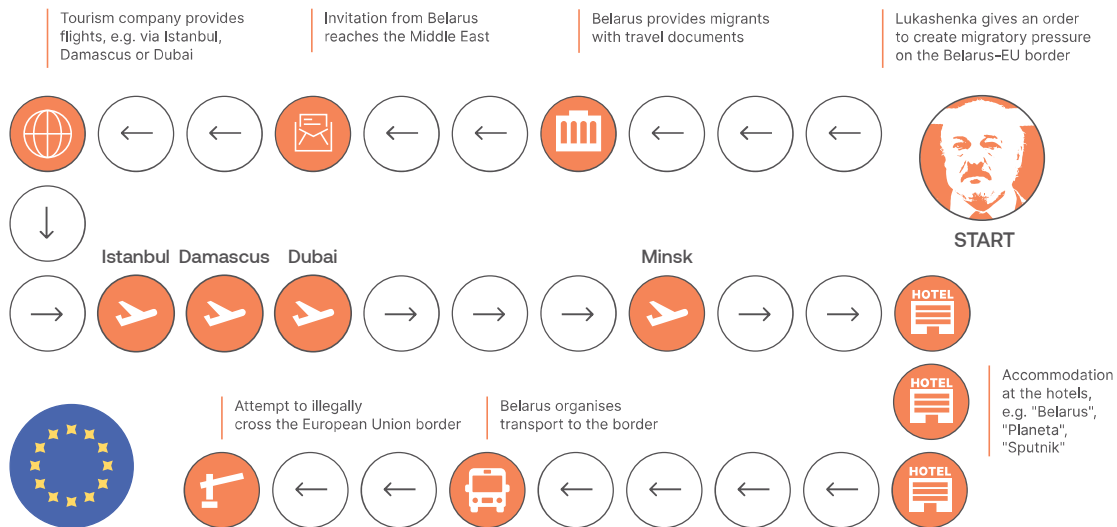


ALYAKSANDR LUKASHENKA'S HYBRID WAR AGAINST THE WEST

Alyaksandr Lukashenka did not succeed in using a hybrid attack to force the European Union to recognise him as a legitimate head of state.

Russia preferred to stay in the background in the migrant gambit orchestrated by Belarus, watching Belarus burn all its bridges with the West.

Lukashenka's negotiating position with the Russians has weakened considerably, as he can no longer present the West as an alternative to Russia.



Belarusian authorities arranged for thousands of migrants to be transported from their countries of origin to the borders of Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia. Belarus issued them fast-track visas, the state-owned company Belavia flew many of them to Minsk, from the airport they were sent to hotels. Afterward, they were transported to illegally cross the border. In the event of a failed attempt, they were forced to cross the border from elsewhere.

In the aftermath of the forced diversion of a Ryanair flight by the Belarusian regime in May 2021 and the subsequent new sanctions imposed by the European Union, Alyaksandr Lukashenka launched a massive hybrid attack against EU member states. Lukashenka intended to punish the EU for imposing sanctions and supporting the Belarusian opposition. He aimed to force the EU into political negotiations to legitimise his regime and break Belarus out of international isolation.

The Belarusian foreign ministry and tourism offices provided the migrants with travel documents and accommodation in state-owned or private hotels in Belarus.

For this to happen, Lukashenka facilitated the transport of thousands of migrants, mainly from the Middle East, to Belarus and then to the EU's external borders. Migrants were flown to Minsk by both scheduled and charter flights by airlines such as the Belarusian national carrier Belavia and US-sanctioned Syrian airline Cham Wings. In cooperation with Middle Eastern tour operators, the Belarusian foreign ministry and tourism offices provided the migrants with travel documents and accommodation in state-owned or private hotels in Belarus. They were then taken to the EU border, where Belarusian border guards gave them instructions on crossing it. The border guards used violence against the migrants, stole valuables from them and demanded bribes of up to \$1,000 per person if they wished to return to their home country.

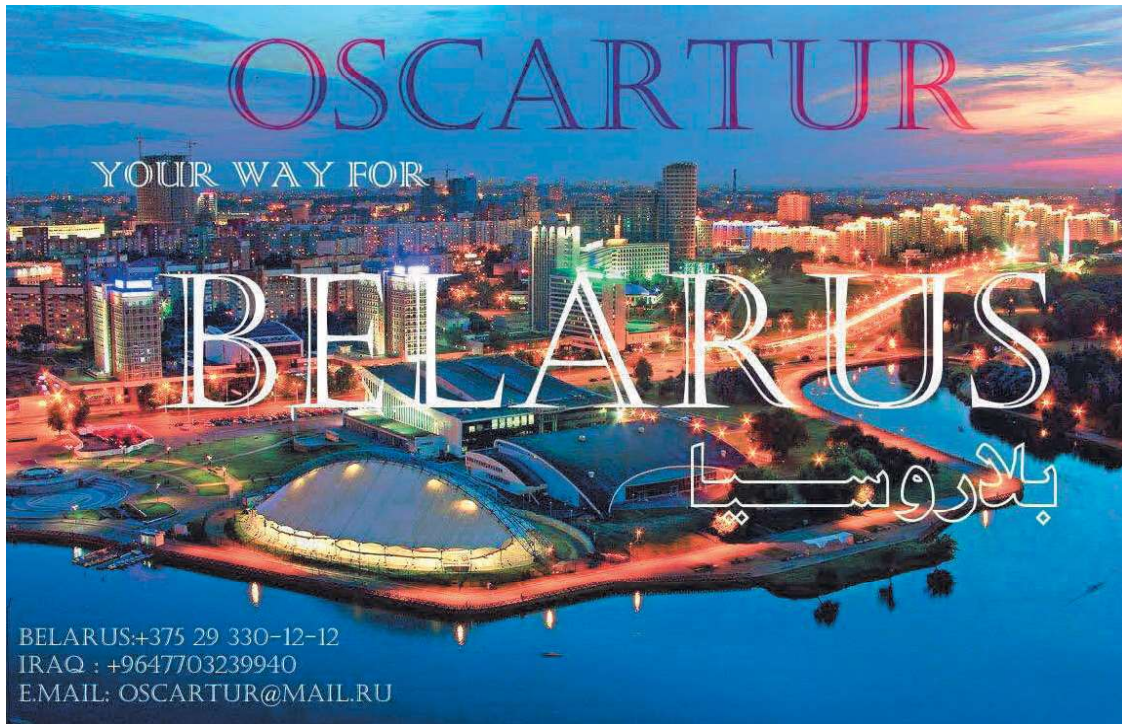
Belarus also conducted information attacks against its neighbours. State media coverage on the ground attempted to shape and disseminate their narrative of the border events for audiences abroad. Distorted information was used to accuse Western countries of causing migratory pressure and human rights violations. Unsurprisingly, footage of migrants being escorted from one location to another at gunpoint by Belarusian border guards was removed from the video clips.

Although Russia remained in the background of Lukashenka's hybrid attack, confining itself mainly to public support for the brother nation and blaming the situation on the West, the Belarusian regime's actions served Russian interests. The EU was pressured using Belarusian resources, draining both sides. By acting against the EU, Lukashenka lost even the slightest chance to manoeuvre between the West and Russia. As a result, Russia's negotiating position with Lukashenka became even more potent.

Although Russia remained in the background, Lukashenka's hybrid attack served Russian interests.

Against the backdrop of the hybrid attack, Russia used the opportunity to pressure Lukashenka into signing economic integration programmes within the Union State of Russia and Belarus framework on 4 November 2021. Russia needed to show the public it was making progress in the three-year-long protracted negotiations from which references to political integration had already been removed. Due to the vagueness of the programmes, Lukashenka will probably seek to delay the implementation of the agreements for as long as possible, debating every last detail. Lukashenka only needs the Union State as a semblance of an alliance that can be used to his benefit at any moment.

Lukashenka's hostility towards the West will grow in 2022 in our assessment, as his hybrid attack has not had the desired effect. Lukashenka will likely try to reuse as well as find new means to force the West into negotiations and thus recognise his legitimacy. The Kremlin is probably not interested in directly engaging in Lukashenka's ventures, as long as they do not lead to problems for Russia.



Screenshot from the webpage of Belarusian tour operator OscarTur, which organises trips for potential migrants from Iraq to Belarus. The word "Belarus" is displayed in Arabic along with a telephone number in Iraq.

Source: social media