



Possibilities of Halting Oil and Gas Transit via Belarus

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On 11 November, Alexander Lukashenka threatened to halt gas transit to the EU, and then on 17 November Belarus restricted oil shipments to Poland due to unplanned maintenance. These actions are intended to discourage the EU from imposing further sanctions on the Belarusian regime over the border crisis it has caused. Concessions by the EU would be seen as weakness and provoke Belarus to escalate the situation on the border. Threats to stop the supply of gas, and possibly oil, by Belarus to the EU are very unlikely to materialise.

Belarus as a Transit Country. The main transit route for natural gas to the EU via Belarus is the Yamal pipeline. Through this pipeline, Poland imports gas from Russia under the so-called Yamal contract, which accounts for over 40% of Polish consumption. This pipeline also supplies gas sent by Poland to Germany, but it will be less important for Poland after the Baltic Pipe is commissioned, while in deliveries to Germany Russia prioritises supplies via Nord Stream 2 (NS2). A second gas transit route through Belarus is the Minsk-Vilnius-Kovno-Kaliningrad pipeline, which supplies the Kaliningrad region and Lithuania.

The Druzhba oil pipeline also runs through Belarus, supplying oil to refineries in Belarus, Germany, and Poland (Northern branch), as well as Czechia, Slovakia, and Hungary (Southern branch). Until 2006, there was also a branch to Lithuania and Latvia, but its operation was suspended due to poor technical condition and not resumed for political reasons. The refineries supplied by Druzhba were built along its route during the socialist era and were adapted to process only Russian Urals crude. Poland has been making efforts to become independent from it in part through the oil terminal in Gdansk and adjustment of refineries to process non-Russian oil. Still, over 60% of crude imported to Poland comes from Russia, the majority of which arrives via the Druzhba pipeline.

Probability of Suspension of Gas Transit. Lukashenka on 11 November threatened to halt gas transit if the EU imposed further sanctions on Belarus over [the border crisis](#). The risk that this could happen without consulting Russia is highly unlikely since the Belarusian section of the Yamal pipeline is

owned by Gazprom Transgaz Belarus, a subsidiary of Russia's Gazprom. It is not possible for Belarus to provoke a breakdown of this pipeline because that would mean sabotaging Russian infrastructure. It is theoretically possible to coordinate with Russia to tamper with supplies to Poland, for example, by sending water-contaminated gas, as happened in 2017. However, as of 2019, this is pointless as the Polish gas company PGNiG has commissioned a gas dehydration plant, making Poland immune to such incidents. It would also be possible to carry out unplanned maintenance to exert political pressure, but this type of work is too short to affect Poland's energy security. A decision by Russia to suspend gas supplies to Poland completely can be ruled out, as this would breach the provisions of the Yamal contract. Russia is trying to build up its image as a reliable partner for Western European countries, which involves meeting its contractual obligations regarding gas supplies. This was confirmed in a statement by President Vladimir Putin on 13 November in which he opposed the suspension of gas transmission through Belarus.

However, if gas transport through Belarus to the EU was halted, it could be replaced by increased supplies from other directions, including LNG terminals in Świnoujście, Lithuania's Klaipėda, or Croatia's Krk. However, the high demand for LNG on Asian markets makes this task difficult. Poland could meet most of the demand for gas from the Yamal pipeline with gas from its own storage facilities, the LNG terminal in Świnoujście, and interconnectors with neighbouring countries. After the Yamal contract expires on 31 December 2022 (which Poland does not plan to extend), the Russian gas will be replaced by

Norwegian gas imported via Baltic Pipe. The commissioning of this pipeline is planned for 1 October 2022, and the laying of the offshore part was completed on 18 October. The commissioning of Baltic Pipe will finally prevent Belarus and Russia from using gas as blackmail against Poland.

Likelihood of Suspension of Oil Transit. The operator of the Belarusian section of the Druzhba pipeline is the state-owned company Gomeltransneft Druzhba, but the Belarusian authorities that control it will not stop oil transit to the EU. This would be detrimental to the interests of Russia, which exports about a quarter of its oil through the Druzhba. On the other hand, it is possible to carry out an unplanned repair or provoke an “accident” that could partially reduce supplies. Belarus did this on 16 November when an unscheduled repair began on the Unecha-Mozyr section. As a result, transmission to Poland was reduced by about 7%. This type of action does not affect the energy security of Central European countries, but aims to influence public opinion through Belarusian propaganda.

Suspension of supplies in agreement with Russia is also unlikely. Given the importance of Druzhba for the Russian economy, it is trying to ensure continuity of supply. The biggest incident that could seriously threaten Central Europe’s energy security occurred in 2019 when contaminated oil entered Druzhba, leading to, among other things, damage to facilities at a refinery in the Belarusian city of Mozyr. However, provoking such incidents is not in the interest of Russia due to the financial and image costs it would entail. This is evidenced by Russia’s reaction to take back the contaminated oil. During the 46-day crisis, Polish refineries maintained production at assumed levels. This was thanks to storage facilities and the oil port in Gdansk. Other countries in the region, such as Czechia, are also taking measures to diversify supplies (imports from oil ports in Italy and Croatia). The obligation for EU Member States to maintain sufficient oil stocks for at least 90 days also has built up the resilience of EU countries. However, given the high dependence of Central European refineries on processing Russian oil, a prolonged suspension of supplies via the Druzhba would threaten the continuity of operations of some of them.

Conclusions and Recommendations. Threats to stop the transit of gas through Belarus should be treated as uncoordinated with Russia and as having a very low chance of being implemented. A halt in transit via the Druzhba oil pipeline is also very unlikely. Lukashenka’s aim is to discourage the EU, and above all Poland and Lithuania, from introducing further sanctions against his regime. Not enacting further sanctions will be perceived in Belarus as weakness on the part of the EU and would likely enable the regime to further escalate the situation on the border with Poland and Lithuania. Poland may seek to introduce new EU sanctions as soon as possible.

If additional sanctions or measures to force Lukashenka to de-escalate the border crisis are implemented, further attempts by Belarus to intimidate the European public can be expected. This may be conducted by Belarus through unscheduled maintenance of oil transmission infrastructure (on its own) and gas (in coordination with Russia). The resulting short-term supply restrictions may then be presented in Belarusian propaganda as a demonstration of strength. Such supply interruptions do not, however, pose a threat to the EU or Poland.

By threatening to stop the transit of gas through Belarus, Lukashenko is providing Russia with another propaganda argument for the faster certification of NS2 as a pipeline without any transit risk. This argument is unfounded, however, as Russia also controls the Belarusian section of the Yamal pipeline and is able to mitigate the transit risk. Instead, the NS2 certification process should respect EU and German law, regardless of the current political and market situations.

Lukashenka’s threats fit in the longstanding paradigm of non-democratic regimes using gas as an instrument of political pressure. In the case of supplies to the EU, this not only applies to imports from Russia but also from Algeria. The EU’s dependence on gas subject to manipulation of the market by supplier countries may increase with the energy transformation in EU countries. Poland may call for greater use of nuclear energy as an alternative, which would reduce the EU’s dependence on gas and avoid blackmail.