European External Action Service (EEAS)

Belarus: Speech by High Representative/Vice-President Josep Borrell at the EP on the situation on the border

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Check against delivery!

Thank you Ms President,

Sorry for being late, but I have been called with a short notice and I had to finish some previous agenda items before being able to free myself and attend this call of the Parliament.

Everybody has seen the images of groups of people - let us call them migrants – escorted by armed Belarusian security forces towards the borders of the European Union Member States with the aim to force irregular entries and these images are certainly shocking and the situation can become worse, and the images can still be more shocking.

It is clear that the Belarusian authorities are using human beings as a tool for political purposes. They have given them false expectations and have put them in a situation of extreme vulnerability.

This summer, it started from Iraq. Iraqi people – mainly coming from Kurdistan – were told that the doors of Europe were open on the Belarusian border and were transported from Baghdad to Minsk and from Minsk to the border of Poland and Lithuania. I personally intervened with the Foreign Affairs Minister of Iraq, explaining what was happening and the risk that their people were facing. And, I have to recognise that the Iraqi authorities answered correctly suspending the flights from Baghdad to Minsk.

At the end of the summer, the situation looked under control. But in October things became again at a large scale, because even if the Iraqi airways were still not flying, some other small private companies were flying from Baghdad and, suddenly, from many other airports in the Middle East. Many other airports in the Middle East have been used as a hub to send people from Syria, from Iraq, from Afghanistan to Belarus and, from there, to the European borders.

We have been engaging in diplomatic outreach alerting the countries of origin and transit about this situation and asking them for cooperation to stop this flow.

To date, the European External Action Service has been reaching out to 13 relevant partner countries. As I said, I have personally discussed this issue with Iraqi authorities, and they took concrete measures suspending direct flights and closing two honorary Belarusian consulates in the country. But now our outreach has to be much more extended, because it is not a point to point travel with a single or a couple of actors; it is a full network of destination with transit countries, involving a lot of airlines and a lot of people.

We continue our diplomatic outreach and Vice-President of the European Commission [Margaritis] Schinas will, personally, because I cannot go - I cannot afford travelling to all these places, just coming from Latin America and this weekend we have the Paris Peace Forum - but President [of the European Commission, Ursula] von der Leyen charged Commissioner Schinas to go to Abu Dhabi, to Beirut, to Baghdad and Erbil in the coming days. There are many other places. And later, also to Ankara, to specifically discuss this crisis, which is putting European Union borders under pressure at the cost of human suffering and human lives.

We are also monitoring potential new routes and possible new flight connections as well as developments in more than 20 countries where our Delegations are asked to report. I have also asked the Delegations to embark in wide efforts of information to the people, explaining to the people of these countries that the promises of a free entry to Europe are fake, that they are being cheated, they are being stolen, they are being asked to pay $6,000 or $7,000 for a travel that goes nowhere. The first thing to do is to try to inform these people, these potential victims of the smugglers. To tell them the truth “do not go, do not believe these people, do not spend your money, do not put your lives at risk, do not do that”. Our Delegations will do whatever they can in order to spread this information. But the desperation of so many people is so big that maybe they do not care and they are ready to take the risk.

But in our case, our responsibility is to try to inform them as much as we can. Also, our Delegation in Minsk - because we still have one – will get in touch with the Belarusian authorities, although I suppose there is nothing to explain to them because they know perfectly what they are doing. What they are doing - they are using migrants as an instrument, accompanied by a widespread disinformation campaign, to put pressure on our borders and create a humanitarian crisis.

We are monitoring disinformation narratives, exposing and debunking them. We do whatever we can in order to inform them what it is about. In Iraq it worked, but now people are flying from airports very close to the Syrian refugee camps in Jordan and Lebanon. Now they take the people from the place where people are. From Jordan and Lebanon, a lot of charters are bringing these people to Minsk.

To address this situation, we have to see which is the scope of the existing sanctions regime on Belarus and to expand it. We are studying how to expand it in order to adopt a new – it will be the 5th one - package of sanctions, which will include those responsible for, or contributing to, the

ongoing crisis at our external borders. The European Council meeting in October gave us a clear mandate in this regard. Foreign Affairs Minister will deal with this issue next Monday.

I want to say also that this crisis should not distract our attention from what is behind this current escalation at the European Union's border. The Lukashenko regime is a regime that is oppressing its own people, disregarding their fundamental freedoms and perpetrating human rights violations. Systematically silencing all remaining independent voices in the country: free media, human rights defenders and civil society at large.

Since last August, more than 35,000 people have been arrested. There are more - that we know - than 830 political prisoners and more than 270 NGOs dissolved. Representatives of the opposition and journalists have been sentenced to long prison sentences in closed trials.

We must continue to be very active in this respect, because the problem is the Lukashenko regime. This is the problem, and we have to go to the root of the problem. A regime that lacks any kind of respect for human dignity and human life. We have to promote international accountability mechanisms. We are thinking of mobilising the United Nations framework to face this new crisis created by the Lukashenko regime.

On the other hand, this is a humanitarian crisis and it has to be dealt with as it is. And I am sorry to say that today, the organisations that face humanitarian crisis, cannot reach these people from neither side of the border. Not from European Union side, not from Belarusian side. Certainly, these people are on the Belarusian side, and the first one who should allow free passage is the Belarusian regime, which, until now, has been impossible.

I have just been talking with Filippo Grandi [United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees] and commenting with him the situation, which is completely unaffordable, because it is winter and you can imagine what can happen if thousands of people have to stay during low temperatures in the fields: no water, no food, no heating. It does not happen thousands of kilometers away from us, it is happening just on the other side of our border. So, the first thing that we have to do is to get from the Belarusian government that the organisations that can provide humanitarian help can reach these people, in order to avoid images that can provoke big trouble among us.

The second thing is to open a humanitarian corridor for these people to come back. They cannot go into the European Union border by forcing [their way through] the borders, but they cannot stay there forever. They need humanitarian help and they need a way out from the situation where the Belarusian regime has put them. Because they were perfectly aware of what they were doing "come, take a plane, I will bring you to the border, I will push you through the border and I will not let you go back". And they start shooting in the air in order to avoid these people going backwards. So, a humanitarian corridor has to be opened in order to allow these people to go back. We have to get agreements with the countries of origin for a safe return.

But this is the migration part of the problem, what bothers me, bothers all of us, is first, the humanitarian situation of these people, and secondly, the grave geopolitical situation on which we are embarking in our relationship with the Lukashenko regime. It is clear that it is an answer to our sanctions "you sanction me, I will create troubles for you". "If I have to put at risk people to create troubles, I will do it". And this is something completely unacceptable and we have to mobilise all our resources in order to face this situation from any point of view: humanitarian, geopolitical and migration.

I have reports from intelligence about the situation there. It has become worse and worse since the end of October. Istanbul remains one of the main transit hubs for the migrants. From Dubai, from Yerevan, from Damascus, from Jordan, from Lebanon, big planes that at the beginning were small charters, after, there were big planes with 400 people on board. And these people explained their story "I have been proposed, by travel agencies, a nice holiday in Belarus and they will provide me a way to go to Europe, they cost $6,000 or $7,000, but I want to take the chance". Nobody told them which was the real destination.

This is a severe crisis. It is not a war, but it is an attack, it is a weaponisation of the human beings, of the weakest human beings. The desperation of the people looking for a better life makes some inhuman dictator use them as arms that can be thrown against a wall.

I am happy to have the opportunity to talk with the European Parliament today in order to make you aware of what is happening. We have to do whatever we can in order to provide humanitarian assistance to these people. I hope that Filippo Grandi will be able to push the Belarusian government, we will do it also. And then we have to look for a way out and continue fighting with a regime that is able to do this kind of inhuman behaviour.

Thank you.

Link to the video: https://audiovisual.ec.europa.eu/en/video/I-213653

Closing remarks

Muchas gracias, señorías, por este debate vivo sobre una realidad viva.

Hemos utilizado mucho, y yo también, el concepto de guerra híbrida. Y si uno se refiere a las definiciones que utilizamos normalmente para dar sentido a las palabras, una guerra híbrida es un proceso que combina operaciones de desestabilización, no necesariamente violentas, con una batalla de información, o de desinformación, y que puede generar también situaciones violentas o acciones militares como consecuencia de la tensión que crean los procesos de desestabilización. Dicho así, sin duda lo que está pasando en la frontera de Bielorrusia merece que se utilice este término porque se acoge a la definición. Pero, yo creo que tendríamos que hacer un esfuerzo para evitar una escalada de términos bélicos. Tendríamos que evitar aumentar la tensió clima bélico o neo-bélico que estamos creando con el discurso de guerras, asaltos, etcétera, no creo que nos ayude mucho a tener un cabal conocimiento de lo que ocurre para darle una respuesta constructiva.

Sí, podemos utilizar los términos en el sentido que les da la literatura técnica, pero deberíamos también evitar embarcarnos en una dinámica donde los términos “guerra” e “invasión” no sirvieron el propósito que tenemos, que es en este momento proteger las fronteras de la Unión, sin duda; hacer frente a una crisis humanitaria, también; y respetar nuestras leyes y nuestros procedimientos. También en este caso. Y respetar el Código de Schengen, que está pensado para todo tipo de situaciones.

Entonces, señorías, lo que es evidente es que estamos haciendo frente a una instrumentalización de personas para ser utilizadas como instrumentos de presión contra nuestras fronteras. Llámenle como quieran, pero estamos asistiendo a una operación masiva de desinformación. Veo aquí a mi colega la Comisaría [Vera Jourová, Vicepresidenta de Valores y Transparencia] encargada de luchar contra ello. Una desinformación masiva en muchos países a la vez, donde se le dice a la gente que hay un camino para llegar a la tierra prometida. La tierra prometida somos nosotros, Europa, que para mucha gente es una esperanza de una vida mejor.

Y las escenas y las informaciones que tenemos por los servicios de inteligencia que compartimos con los Estados miembros, demuestran claramente que esta operación está muy orquestada. Que al principio fue solo un vuelo a la semana desde Bagdad. Y, ahora, voy a poner el ejemplo de una compañía aérea ligada a un oligarca, primo de Bachar al Asad, que hasta ahora se dedicaba a transportar las tropas de los Grupos Wagner y que ahora ha encontrado una actividad aparentemente más lucrativa, que en una semana, ha hecho veinte rotaciones entre Damasco y Bielorrusia. Y tiene vendidos todos sus billetes para los próximos vuelos.

Es una operación absolutamente medida, que se basa en un engaño. Y ese engaño produce pingües beneficios a mucha gente. Hay cónsules de Bielorrusia, que tienen agencias de viajes. El viernes por la mañana son cónsules y por la tarde venden billetes. Está ganando mucho dinero mucha gente. Ciertamente tenemos que cortar este flujo. Lo conseguimos con Irak. Estamos intentando hacerlo ahora. Nuestro colega el Vicepresidente [Margaritis] Schinas dará una gira por los países de tránsito, que no son todos países de origen, pero cada vez no son ya iraquíes, son sirios, son afganos, son todos los que han encontrado refugio transitorio en algún país de tránsito y ahora creen que pueden llegar a Europa y acaban encontrándose entre dos muros. Los muros, quizá no sean muros, pero son obstáculos, una frontera cerrada y unos guardias bielorrusos que, una vez que les han llevado hasta ella, les impiden echar marcha atrás.

Tenemos que respetar nuestros códigos de Schengen y nuestros códigos de Schengen dicen que tiene que haber puntos de cruce en las fronteras donde se pueden efectuar los controles de las personas. Y que lo que se llama el , el non-refoulement, tiene que ser respetado. Y que, ciertamente, hay que vigilar el cruce ilegal de la frontera, pero el tiene que haber puntos de check-in y control. Tenemos que conjugar la defensa de nuestra frontera - y lo digo en plural, porque la frontera de Polonia, Lituania y Letonia es frontera europea - con el respeto a nuestras leyes y normas y tenemos que hacer todo lo que podamos para impedir una crisis humanitaria que se plantee al pie mismo de donde empieza Europa que es el poste de nuestra frontera. Y para eso, y muchos me lo han pedido, y créanme que haremos todo lo posible para conseguirlo, que las agencias de ayuda humanitaria puedan ayudar a esta gente y puedan acceder a ellos por los dos lados. De momento no lo hemos conseguido, pero espero que lo podamos conseguir.

En segundo lugar, hay que elevar el tono del debate político y llevar el tema a las Naciones Unidas. Ya no se trata de un tema de diálogo bilateral entre nosotros y Bielorrusia. Estamos asistiendo a una operación masiva de violación de Derechos Humanos que merece ser debatida en el máximo órgano político internacional, que son las Naciones Unidas. Y me propongo utilizar los medios diplomáticos que tenemos, nosotros y los Estados miembros para plantear la cuestión al máximo nivel.

Y desde luego tenemos que seguir combatiendo el régimen de Lukashenko, pero no va a caer mañana, y pasado mañana nos podemos encontrar con personas que no sean capaces de sobrevivir en las circunstancias en las que se han encontrado como consecuencia del engaño que han sufrido y de la falta de respeto a su dignidad del régimen de Bielorrusia.

Todo eso lo tenemos que hacer. Yo agradezco sus opiniones, sus críticas, sus distintos puntos de vista, pero creo que en eso Europa tiene que estar unida. Unida, en torno a cosas que no deben ser incompatibles entre sí. Unida en torno a la defensa de nuestra frontera y nuestro territorio. Unida en torno al respeto a nuestros valores, que se fundamenta en el leyes.

Y unida en las formas y métodos que tenemos para evitar que este flujo continúe, y que los que han llegado hasta allí tengan una forma de volver. Me han preguntando que volver dónde. Volver de donde vinieron para muchos de ellos, porque si todos no pueden entrar en Europa, lo que es seguro es que no se pueden quedar eternamente al pie de nuestra frontera.

Gracias por su apoyo. Gracias por esta discusión. Es una buena ocasión para demostrar lo que Europa representa en el mundo.

Gracias.

Link to the video: https://audiovisual.ec.europa.eu/en/video/I-213656

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