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## Belarus Threat Shows The Importance Of Energy Independence

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During the last few weeks, Europe has perched itself on one of its most dangerous periods in the post-Cold War world. As the US was busy celebrating the Thanksgiving holiday, all sides in Europe were signaling they want to pull back from the brink, but the problems created by the former Soviet Republic of Belarus defy simple solutions. The one thing they show clearly, however, is the importance of energy independence.

The story begins and ends with one man who rules Belarus with an iron fist – Aleksandr Lukashenko. When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, Belarus, located directly east of Poland, was one of the former Soviet Republics that gained its independence. Some of the republics lurched toward democracy, while others established mixed political systems containing elements of both democracy and autocracy. Belarus, however, turned into nearly a full-fledged dictatorship under the rule of Mr. Lukashenko.

Lukashenko often has acted erratically, as when he dismissed all concerns about Covid-19. He has referred to himself as “Europe’s Last Dictator” and has put down all protests, often violently. In 2020, Lukashenko won an election widely dismissed in the West as fraudulent. The EU responded by slapping sanctions on Mr. Lukashenko.

In an extraordinary and equally callous move, Lukashenko decided to punish the EU by using migrant people as a weapon. He ordered Belarus’ State airline, Belavia, to offer cheap flights from places like Syria and Iraq, knowing that this would bring in tens of thousands of refugees desperate to reach the West. Lukashenko then rounded up the new arrivals in Belarus and transported them to the Polish border, in some cases apparently even providing them with tools like wire cutters for the purpose of cutting the border fence and allowing the migrants to flood into the West.

This has caused massive tension on the Polish-Belarus frontier, of a type that could lead to armed conflict. Poland has been forced to send large amounts of troops to the border and train water cannons and even tear gas on the migrants, as the refugees have begun throwing rocks and bottles at the Polish troops and police across the border. In response, the EU then slapped even more sanctions on Belarus.

Now, in the tit-for-tat game, Lukashenko has threatened to cut off all gas supplies to the West through the pipelines that transverse Belarus.

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However, Lukashenko may have overplayed his hand. Quickly, even Russian President Vladimir Putin cautioned Lukashenko, who has otherwise been his close ally. Putin warned that any move by Belarus to shut off the Yamal-Europe pipeline, which runs through Poland to Germany, would cause Russia to default on its energy contracts. This would be dangerous for Putin in light of the new Nord Stream 2 pipeline that is being completed directly from Russia to Germany.

Whether or not Belarus makes good on Lukashenko's threat, his words have shown the danger of energy dependence on foreign nations, many of which have questionable governments. This becomes even more evident every day in the United States as energy prices soar. As with the situation far away in Belarus, with winter approaching, the forfeiting of American energy independence could have a profound effect on American politics and its economy as well.