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NATO push for dangerous escalation along its European border with Russia

Military tensions between Russia and NATO at two major flashpoints, the Polish-Belarusian border and the Black Sea region in Ukraine, have escalated further over the weekend. Both Ukraine and Poland have for decades been cornerstones of the US-led NATO encirclement of Russia following the 1991 dissolution of the Soviet Union.

As the EU and NATO are illegally denying entry to thousands of refugees at the Polish-Belarusian border, NATO member states have been escalating military threats against Belarus while claiming that Russia was behind the crisis and using the refugees to engage in “hybrid warfare.”



British destroyer HMS Defender arrives at the port of Batumi, Georgia, Saturday, June 26, 2021. (Georgian Interior Ministry via AP)

The far-right Polish government of the Law and Justice Party announced on Sunday that Poland, Latvia and Lithuania intended to evoke Article 4 of the NATO charter to convene an extraordinary meeting of NATO. The Polish prime minister Mateusz Morawiecki called it “inevitable” that the alliance gets involved. Last week, the UK already deployed troops to the border to assist the Polish government in its border standoff with Belarus.

The Russian government has responded to NATO’s growing military threats with a joint Russian-Belarusian paratrooper exercise on Friday in which two Russian paratroopers died. The Kremlin has rejected claims that it was engaging in “hybrid warfare” on the border through the refugees and insists that it has “nothing to do” with the crisis. Russia’s foreign minister also denounced plans by the European powers to sanction Aeroflot, Russia’s biggest airline, for allegedly flying refugees to Belarus.

Putin, however, also rejected the threats of Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko to cut off gas supplies through the Yamal-Europe pipeline which crosses from Russia through Belarus to Europe. The Kremlin has backed the Belarusian president since a mass protest movement erupted against him last year, but relations have been tense, and Moscow has tried to make Lukashenko leave office as soon as possible, so far without success.

Russia has called for direct discussions with the EU to resolve the crisis. The Russian press has also long waged a vicious, racist campaign against refugees fleeing to Europe, including those on the Polish-Belarusian border, as well as against migrants in Russia itself.

With full backing from the EU, the Polish army has violently cracked down on the defenseless refugees, who have fled the ruins, social disaster and civil wars created by imperialism in the Middle East. At least eight have already died, and many more are at risk of freezing to death as temperatures have dropped well below zero degrees Celsius.

The hysterical campaign against refugees and Russia by the far-right Polish government, which has banned mention of Polish anti-Semitism and openly collaborates with fascists,

has been echoed across the European press. Germany, in particular, has seen a massive press campaign, and the German government has already declared it would send thousands of policemen to fight off migrants at its border with Poland.

In an indication of the fascistic forces that are being stirred up, the press service of the 61st infantry division of the Ukrainian army declared on its Facebook page that it would “destroy” any migrants trying to cross the Ukrainian border. Ukraine earlier announced it would move 8,500 soldiers and police officers to its 1,000-kilometer border with Belarus and build border fortifications for €560 million. The regime, which has emerged out of an imperialist-backed, far-right coup in February 2014, has been heavily promoting far-right forces for many years. Neo-Nazis regularly march on Ukrainian streets, and terrorize and assassinate political opponents, journalists and ethnic minorities with impunity.

The dangerous escalation along the Polish-Belarusian border is unfolding as NATO is simultaneously stepping up pressure on Russia further south in Eastern Europe, in the Black Sea region and Ukraine. The US has sent a missile destroyer, the tanker USNS John Lenthall and the staff ship USS Mount Whitney to participate in the US Joint Forces Command Europe military drills in the Black Sea. On Sunday, the British press reported that the UK was preparing to send 600 troops to Ukraine.

The Russian Foreign ministry has published a statement calling the activities of the US “a destabilizing factor in the Black Sea region, one of the goals of which is the military conquest of Ukrainian territory.”

In an interview with Russian state television on Saturday, Russian president Vladimir Putin described the US warship deployment to the Black Sea as a “serious challenge” and added, “This is creating the impression that they will just not allow us to let our guard down—well, let them know that we’re not letting our guard down.” He also reiterated the Kremlin’s position that any attempts by NATO to admit Ukraine to the alliance were “unacceptable’ for Russia.

The latest escalation in the Black Sea region—the third major provocation of NATO in this region this year—began with completely unsubstantiated claims by the US in late October that Russia was moving troops near Ukraine’s border. These claims were initially rejected not only by Russia but also Ukraine. Washington then sent its CIA director to

Ukraine and then signed a “strategic partnership’ agreement with Ukraine’s foreign minister Dmytro Kuleba at the State Department.

In the agreement, the United States vowed to continue to back Ukraine both militarily and economically. In regard to Ukraine's potential entry to NATO—regarded as a red line by Moscow—the document backs Ukraine’s “right to decide its own future foreign policy course free from outside interference, including with respect to Ukraine’s aspirations to join NATO.”

Several articles in the Russian press over the weekend have discussed it as likely that within the next month the Pentagon is planning to back Ukraine in a war over the Crimean Peninsula, which was annexed by Russia in 2014, and the Donbass, a region in East Ukraine that has been controlled by pro-Russian separatists since 2014. This February, the Ukrainian government announced a military strategy to “retake” the Crimean Peninsula, triggering a crisis that lasted several weeks.

Kiev has now deployed 8,500 troops to its side of the border with Russia and has announced that it would relocate parts of its fleet from the Black Sea to the Sea of Azov. Any such move would be highly provocative, as these waters are claimed by Russia. In 2018, Ukraine, with US backing, sent three warships to the Sea of Azov, provoking a military standoff with Russia.

The military crises in Eastern Europe are unfolding against the backdrop of a profound destabilization of capitalist society amidst the pandemic, which is still claiming thousands of lives every day. The resulting social and political tensions and the growth in the class struggle, especially in the United States, are a major factor driving the increasingly reckless ratcheting up of tensions by the imperialist countries with Russia.

Class tensions are also running high in Eastern Europe and Russia, where the criminal handling of the pandemic by the ruling oligarchies has led to horrifying levels of mass death and infections among children. The crisis of the governments of these countries is lending the situation an additional degree of instability. The danger of war can only be countered through conscious efforts to build a socialist anti-war movement in the working class that needs to merge the fight to put an end to the pandemic with the struggle against imperialist war.

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