RUSSIAN HYBRID WARS: FINNO-RUSSIAN BORDER

Finland closed its land border with Russia from November 30 to December 13 (with the exception of cargo transportation). The reason for that is the massive flow of refugees from Russia. Finland almost completely closed the border with Russia, leaving only one checkpoint in operation - Raja-Jooseppi, located beyond the Arctic Circle in Lapland, three hours’ drive from Murmansk. However, it will only work for 4 hours a day. The country's Prime Minister Petteri Orpo said that the decision to close the border is due to a sharp increase in asylum seekers from the third countries trying to get to Finland from Russia.

In his opinion, Russia caused this situation and only it can put an end to it. It is symbolic that the date of the complete closure of the border coincided with the anniversary of the USSR's attack on Finland in 1939, which led to the Winter War between the two countries. Finland and the EU believe that the current situation is a form of hybrid pressure of Russia with the help of migrants. The Finnish authorities believe that Moscow is sending refugees to the border in order to take revenge for the country's accession to NATO and the expansion of defense cooperation with the United States. The Kremlin denies these accusations.

According to the Finnish border service, approximately 900 asylum seekers from countries such as Afghanistan, Kenya, Morocco, Pakistan, Somalia, Syria and Yemen entered Finland from Russia in November. For a comparison, according to the statistics of the southeastern sector of the border guard of Finland (it controls the most popular crossing points of the Finnish-Russian border), in the first half of 2023, no more than ten people applied for asylum per month. Then it were 32 in October. Since the middle of November, the number has increased sharply, and on November 17, it was recorded 176 asylum seekers per day.

NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg said at a press conference in Brussels that this is another example of how Russia is using migration as a tool to try to put pressure on other countries in Europe. Restrictions on crossing the border have actually already begun to operate. On November 27, only three migrants crossed the border to Finland through the Raja-Jooseppi checkpoint, and the next day, Finnish border guards did not let a single person in from Russia. A representative of Finland's border guard, Colonel Matti Pitkäniitty is sure that the Russian border guards deliberately tried to create problems for their colleagues from Finland. According to him, after letting in migrants from third countries, they repeatedly announced a break in the work of the border post. Thus, migrants could not return to Russia if they were refused entry to the territory of Finland.

Prime Minister Petteri Orpo previously accused Russian border guards of conniving with migrants. He said that it is clear that they (asylum seekers) are being helped. Russian border guards have clearly changed their procedures and are allowing people with invalid documents to cross the border. In addition, the authorities emphasized that Russian border guards allow people to
cross the border on foot, violating the rules that the crossing should take place in cars. All this looks like a clearly thought-out special operation, since the Russian border service is part of the FSB, which is directly subordinated to the head of the Kremlin.

The head of the Refugee Assistance Center in Finland, Pia Lindfors, fears that the closure of all checkpoints on the border with Russia will lead all refugees and migrants to trying entering Finland illegally - along paths in the forest, covering hundreds of kilometers. As reported by the Ukrainian service of the Finnish public broadcaster Yle, the Minister of the Interior, Mari Rantanen, noted that asylum requests could now be submitted only at ports and airports. According to Rantanen, the complete closure of the eastern border is necessary in the name of national security.

The Russian authorities reject accusations of manipulating the flow of refugees. Russian presidential spokesperson Dmitri Peskov said that those who have the legal right to do so use the border crossing and that Russian border guards fully comply with all official instructions. Peskov admitted that Russia cannot influence the decision of the Finnish side in any way and said that this situation does not cause anything but deep regret, because our long-standing, very good relations with Finland were pragmatic, based on mutual respect. He regrets that these relations have been replaced by an exclusively Russophobic position, which the leaders of this neighboring country now adhere to.

What is happening is reminiscent of the crisis with the flow of refugees to the borders of the EU from Belarus in the summer-autumn of 2021. At that time, large groups of immigrants from the countries of the Middle East and Africa appeared in various parts of the border of Belarus with Latvia, Lithuania and Poland. Migrants claimed that Belarusian border guards escorted them to the borders or even drove them by force.

Later it turned out that the flow of visitors was provided by special flights from Iraq to Belarus. The same flights began to return to Baghdad the migrants who did not break through the borders, but groups of foreigners remained at the borders of Belarus for several months. Evidence that the flow of refugees to the Finnish border was organized at the same high level has not yet been obtained. However, it is obvious that the Russian special services, which are responsible for the transit regime in the border zone, were at least not particularly excited by the sudden flow of foreigners from third countries.

Many videos taken at or near border crossings show the organized distribution of bicycles (often brand new) from minibuses in close proximity to Russian border guards. In one of the videos, an employee of the Russian border control lines up a group of such ‘cyclists’ before leaving for the neutral lane and further to the checkpoint of the Finnish border service.

It can be concluded that Russia uses the human resources of third countries as a pressure on the countries of Europe and tests the edges of the ‘red lines’ of NATO. In addition, they are seeking for all the possibilities for the penetration of its sabotage and intelligence groups into these countries, as it was already shown in the case in Poland, in particular, the mercenaries of the group ‘Wagner’.

References:
1. The Guardian. ‘This may be just the beginning’: the guards at Finland’s closed Russian border’. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/nov/30/this-may-be-just-the-beginning-the-guards-at-finlands-closed-russian-border