



Instrumentalisation of migration on the border of Belarus and the European Union: An illustration of interconnectedness of the OSCE human and military-political security dimensions

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Emergence of the migration crisis in 2021

The migration crisis of 2021 at the border between Belarus and the European Union/NATO emerged as one of the most significant migration crises in Europe in the 21st century. The International Strategic Action Network for Security – iSANS researched manifestations and mechanisms of the crisis and developed recommendations for concerned states and the international community. This paper is based on a research report produced by iSANS in November 2024.²

This crisis came as a surprise to the authorities of states bordering Belarus, as the main migration routes to the EU at that time did not run through Belarus.³ Until April 2021, the number of people trying to enter the European Union via the so-called Eastern Borders Route, which includes Lithuania, Latvia, and Poland, was about 100 per month. From May onwards, this number began to increase rapidly, reaching over 3,000 per month by July, representing a thirtyfold increase. In the beginning of 2021, a significant proportion of these migrants were women and children;⁴ however, later, adult men constituted the vast majority of those attempting to cross the border. Initially, irregular border crossings were attempted predominantly by individuals and smaller groups. As the crisis gathered momentum, both the frequency of attempted crossings and the size of the groups involved increased. In August-September 2021, Polish border authorities registered approximately

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² Instrumentalization of Migration at the Belarusian-Polish Border in 2021-2024: A Tool of Hybrid Warfare. Research report by the International Strategic Action Network for Security – iSANS, November 2024, 69 p.

³ M. Zdanowicz. The Migration Crisis on the Polish–Belarusian Border // Białystok Legal Studies/Białostockie Studia Prawnicze. 2023. Vol. 28, No. 1. P. 105.

⁴ A. Sari. Instrumentalized migration and the Belarus crisis: Strategies of legal coercion. Hybrid CoE Paper 17. The European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats, April 2023. P. 12.

9,400 attempts to cross national borders irregularly each month.⁵ In October 2021, the total number of persons attempting to cross the Polish border had risen to 17,000.⁶

At least initially, the authorities in Latvia, Lithuania and Poland struggled to accommodate the unexpectedly large number of persons entering their territories. At the same time, an increasing number of migrants found themselves stranded on the Belarusian side of the border, often without adequate shelter, provisions, or medical care, after being denied entry into the EU and prevented from leaving the border area by Belarusian Border Service officers. The humanitarian situation began to deteriorate over the summer months. Conditions became particularly grim with the onset of the colder season, resulting in more than a dozen fatalities.⁷ The Polish Border Guard claimed that it had repeatedly requested the Belarusian Border Service to intervene and remove the migrants attempting to cross the border. However, these requests not only remained unanswered, on the contrary, the Belarusian border guards actively undermined the efforts of the Polish authorities.⁸

Human rights concerns

Poland, Latvia and Lithuania have repeatedly been criticised by human rights organisations for their approach to handling the crisis. NGOs have accused these states of violating human rights by employing “pushback”⁹ tactics to expel migrants and asylum-seekers. Belarus has been under much less scrutiny and pressure regarding its non-adherence to human rights norms compared to the EU countries, which are subjects to more stringent obligations, including those under the European Convention on Human Rights which Belarus is not a party of.

Nevertheless, Belarus is a signatory to several key international agreements, including the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the Convention against Torture and the Convention on the Rights of the Child which include provisions potentially applicable to violations of migrants’ rights at the Belarusian-Polish border. Moreover, Belarus is also a party to the Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (2000), including its Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, and its Protocol against the Smuggling of Migrants by Land, Sea and Air. Both of these Protocols require Belarus to take a series of steps to criminalise and suppress the trafficking in persons and smuggling of migrants, including by cooperating with other state parties. Several

⁵ M. Forti. Belarus-sponsored Migration Movements and the Response by Lithuania, Latvia, and Poland: A Critical Appraisal // *European Papers*. 2023. Vol. 8, No. 1. P. 230.

⁶ Z. Erdoğan, Z. Karakoç Dora. Belarus-Poland migration crisis and supra-national political concerns of the extended actors. // *Güvenlik Bilimleri Dergisi*. 2022. Vol. 11, No. 2. P. 420

⁷ A. Sari. Op. cit. P. 12.

⁸ M. Konieczny. Operacja „Śluza” – kryzys uchodźczy związany z przerzutem nielegalnych migrantów przez Polsko-Białoruską granicę // *Roczniki Administracji i Prawa*. 2022. XX, z. 2. P. 94.

⁹ Pushbacks are “various measures taken by states which result in migrants, including asylum-seekers, being summarily forced back to the country from where they attempted to cross or have crossed an international border without access to international protection or asylum procedures or denied of any individual assessment on their protection needs which may lead to a violation of the principle of non-refoulement” (Report on means to address the human rights impact of pushbacks of migrants on land and at sea. Special Rapporteur on the human rights of migrants. A/HRC/47/30. 12 May 2021. Para. 34. www.ohchr.org/en/special-procedures/sr-migrants/report-means-address-human-rights-impact-pushbacks-migrants-land-and-sea)

reports¹⁰ indicated that migrants suffered beatings and other abuse at the hands of Belarusian servicemen. The inadequate and, at times, life-threatening living conditions experienced by many migrants, especially during the colder months, implicated additional positive obligations of Belarus under the human rights framework.

Moreover, groups working with refugees reported the repression of NGOs in Belarus resulted in many organisations ceasing their aid efforts for migrants, leaving them with limited or no humanitarian assistance.¹¹ Although both international and local organisations continued to provide assistance to migrants on the EU side of the border, this was much more limited on the Belarusian side, according to those directly involved in migrant support.¹²

The 2021 crisis demonstrated that Europe was not prepared to address large-scale waves of refugees, both in terms of reception and assistance and in protecting their rights in cases of violation. There was, however, another dimension of this crisis, which showed that the situation on the Belarus-EU border in 2021 was not purely a human rights crisis falling under the OSCE third dimension, as it was initially presented.

The role of the Lukashenka and the Putin regimes in organising the migration crisis

It is important to note that the “migration crisis” unfolded against the background of the fraudulent Belarusian presidential election followed by mass repression of participants of peaceful protests, the Ryanair forced landing incident, and the imposition by Western states of restrictive measures against Belarus in response, all of which contributed to the delegitimising of the regime both domestically and internationally. While initially observers suggested that Belarusian authorities encouraged but were not necessarily involved in organising massive migrant crossing of the EU border, later reports disclosed documents that indicated the involvement of Belarusian state bodies and state-owned companies in the coordination of migrants’ travel to the EU border.

Research by iSANS¹³ revealed that the organisation and maintenance of the migration crisis constituted a carefully planned operation conducted jointly by Russia and Belarus. On the Belarusian side, a system of government bodies, including security services, and state-affiliated institutions participated in the operation, and the measures taken included both legal and organisational actions. The level of the organisation of migration flows and the associated

¹⁰ Press Briefing Notes on Poland/Belarus Border. Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. 21.12.2021. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/2021/12/press-briefing-notes-polandbelarus-border>; Belarus/EU: New Evidence of Brutal Violence from Belarusian Forces Against Asylum-seekers and Migrants facing Pushbacks from the EU. Amnesty International. 20.12.2021. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2021/12/belarus-eu-new-evidence-of-brutal-violence-from-belarusian-forces-against-asylum-seekers-and-migrants-facing-pushbacks-from-the-eu/>; L. Gall. Die Here or Go to Poland: Belarus’ and Poland’s Shared Responsibility for Border Abuses. Human Rights Watch, 2021. <https://www.hrw.org/report/2021/11/24/die-here-or-go-poland/belarus-and-polands-shared-responsibility-border-abuses>, pp. 17–23.

¹¹ E. Bronitskaya, A. Chekhovich, A. Gogelytė, A. E. Griķe, D. Krapavickaitė, A. Palęcka, I. Raubiško. No safe passage. Migrants’ deaths at the EU-Belarusian border. Report. Fundacja Ocalenie. Warszawa, 2024 <https://en.ocalenie.org.pl/news/the-premiere-of-the-report-no-safe-passage-migrants-deaths-at-the-eu-belarusian-border>, p. 22.

¹² Незаконные пушбэки и нарушения прав стали широко распространенным инструментом управления миграцией в страны ЕС. Human Constanta. 16.02.2024. <https://humanconstantia.org/nezakonnye-pushbeki-i-narusheniya-prav-stali-shiroko-rasprostranennym-instrumentom-upravleniya-migracziej-v-strany-es/>

¹³ Instrumentalization of Migration at the Belarusian-Polish Border in 2021-2024: A Tool of Hybrid Warfare. Op.cit.

decision-making processes indicated that this was a priority for the involved government bodies. According to the an opposition NGO National Anti-Crisis Management, 20 security forces servicemen and 26 propagandists were directly involved in the organisation and maintenance of the migration crisis.¹⁴

Russia's involvement in the instrumentalisation of migrants at the Belarusian-Polish border was traced in three spheres: visa support, facilitation of travel, and disinformation efforts. Research shows that Russian government agencies not only stimulate migration to flow in the direction they are interested in, but also control criminal business related to illegal migration and human trafficking. Russia's earlier experience in the instrumentalisation of migration,¹⁵ its interest in destabilising the EU, its aggressive rhetoric, its provision of essential logistics¹⁶ for the delivery of migrants to Belarus by Russian security services and, finally, and the non-overlap in time of this crisis with similar Russian hybrid attacks on Finland, Poland, Lithuania and Latvia indicate that Russia is not just an ally of the Lukashenka regime, but rather a key instigator and coordinator of hybrid warfare against EU member states.

Goals of the instrumentalised migration crisis

Aliaksandr Lukashenka made no secret of his intention to use migration as a weapon in retaliation for the sanctions imposed by the European Union against his government. In May 2021, he openly threatened the EU, stating that Belarus would cease enforcing border controls at the EU border: "We stopped drugs and migrants [previously]. Now you will catch them and eat them yourselves."¹⁷ In a speech in June 2021, he suggested that European leaders were insane to think that Belarus would assist them in combating illegal migration while they were inflicting economic sanctions on his country.¹⁸ Later, when the crisis had already escalated, Lukashenka admitted it was "absolutely possible" that his troops helped migrants in their attempts to enter Poland: "I think that is absolutely possible. We are Slavs. We have hearts. Our troops know the migrants are going to Germany." He acknowledged that he was not going to undertake any measures, whether prescribed by national law or international agreements, to prevent illegal migration within Belarus' jurisdiction: "Maybe someone helped them. I won't even look into this." He added, "I am not going to detain migrants on the border, hold them at the border, and if they keep coming further, I still will not stop them, because they are not coming to my country, they are going to yours."¹⁹

¹⁴ НАУ подготовило список силовиков и пропагандистов для введения санкций за миграционную войну. Reform.news. 08.09.2024. <https://reformby.org/nau-podgotovilo-spisok-silovikov-i-propagandistov-dlja-vvedeniya-sankcij-za-migracionnuju-voynu>

¹⁵ Szymański, P., Żochowski, P. & Rodkiewicz, W. Enforced cooperation: the Finnish-Russian migration crisis. Centre for Eastern Studies. 06.04.2016. <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2016-04-06/enforced-cooperation-finnish-russian-migration-crisis>

¹⁶ Surprisingly surprised. Report. Protecting Rights at Borders. September 2023. P. 5. https://pro.drc.ngo/media/rwncmjsa/prab-report-may-to-august-2023-_-final.pdf

¹⁷ E. Kuźelewska, A. Piekutowska. Belarus' Violation of International Obligations in Connection with Artificial Migration Pressure on the Belarus–European Union Border // Białystok Legal Studies / Białostockie Studia Prawnicze. 2023. Vol. 28, No. 1. P. 40.

¹⁸ Commemorative Meeting at Brest Hero Fortress. Website of the President of the Republic of Belarus. <https://president.gov.by/en/events/uchastie-v-pamyatnyh-meropriyatiyah-v-memorialnom-komplekse-breetskaya-krepost-geroy>

¹⁹ P. Dallison. Lukashenko on migrants: 'They're not coming to my country, they're going to yours'. Politico. 19.11.2021. <https://www.politico.eu/article/alexander-lukashenko-migrants-belarus-poland-border/>

The criticism of Poland and the EU by international, as well as Belarusian and Polish human rights organisations for failing to uphold the rights of migrants was fully exploited by the Lukashenko regime to achieve its political objectives of discrediting and exerting a pressure on EU countries. “They beat them, break ribs. [...] People have bruises all over [their bodies]”, Lukashenko claimed.²⁰ After the clashes in Kuźnica, Belarusian propagandists accused Poland of direct aggression towards migrants and announced that a criminal investigation would be initiated against the Polish Border Guard. Indeed, the Belarusian Prosecutor’s Office opened a criminal case against representatives of the Polish authorities. The list of victims included more than 130 migrants.²¹

Joining the chorus of those condemning human rights violations, the Third Secretary of Belarus’ Permanent Mission to the United Nations, Aliaksandra Shmat, speaking at the Forum on International Migration, accused the EU of “using gas and weapons, brutality and violence against defenceless people,” as well as of “suspending cooperation, including in the field of border security and migration.” Emphasising Belarus’ non-involvement in violations of the human rights of migrants and the emergence of the migration crisis in general, she reiterated Belarus’ purported “readiness for mutually beneficial cooperation with all interested countries.”²²

Russian propaganda supported Belarus in conveying the message of Poland’s and the EU’s responsibility for the migration crisis at their border and the mistreatment of migrants at the border. It made a considerable effort publishing articles in 12 different languages (Russian, Polish, Lithuanian, Arabic, German, Hungarian, Spanish, Georgian, French, Bulgarian, Italian, and Swedish), all united by the same narratives.²³

The instrumentalisation of migration thus became a tool of choice employed by Belarus and Russia in 2021 and beyond in their hybrid warfare against the “collective West”, in particular the EU and Poland, with the aim of retaliating against the EU’s recognition of the 2020 elections in Belarus as fraudulent and of the adoption of amendments to the Russian Constitution the same year as contradicting international norms, for their support to civil society, pro-democracy forces and independent media in both countries, as well as for their imposition of sanctions on Russia and Belarus for massive human rights violations and, subsequently, for the aggression against Ukraine.

The goals of the crisis manufactured by the two regimes included destabilisation of Poland by threatening its sovereignty and territorial integrity, putting the effectiveness of its border service under questions, forcing the country to divert resources to border protection, polarising society by instigating debates on a controversial issue, and inciting social conflicts; creation of a pretext for the information warfare to discredit Polish government and the EU institutions internationally by accusing them of violating human rights of migrants; enhancing Lukashenko’s domestic popularity and seeking to restore his international legitimacy; and diverting attention from the crimes committed by both regimes against Ukrainians and their own populations.

²⁰ “Pul Pervogo” Telegram channel. 2021. Telegram: @pul_1. 15.11.2021. https://t.me/pul_1

²¹ M. Konieczny. Op. cit. S. 99.

²² “Не Беларусь применила против беззащитных людей газ и оружие”. Литовский дипломат получила жесткий ответ в ООН. Белта. 21.05.2022. <https://belta.by/society/view/ne-belarus-primenila-protiv-bezzaschitnyh-ljudej-gaz-i-oruzhie-litovskij-diplomat-poluchila-zhestkij-503220-2022/>

²³ C. Kruttke. Displacement and Disinformation: How Russia is Instrumentalizing Migration and Disinformation as a Foreign Policy Tool against the European Union. University of Twente, 2024. Pp. 19, 28.

**The interconnectedness of the first and the third OSCE dimensions illustrated by the crisis.
Recommendations for action.**

What could have been done within the OSCE framework to address the instrumentalisation of migration and its political exploitation, had the organisation not been in crisis and preoccupied with other priorities?

An important tool to draw attention to the situation would be the self-invocation of the OSCE Moscow Mechanism by Poland, Lithuania, or Latvia. The Moscow Mechanism is regarded as a “nuclear option” invoked by OSCE participating States to address a human dimension crisis in another OSCE participating State. But it can also be invoked by the state facing a crisis to address the situation within its territory or at its borders, seeking assistance to gather and highlight critical information and request further support. This was done twice in the early 1990s.

Another option would be the application of the OSCE Vienna Mechanism by other states, which could approach Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland to inquire about the situation and offer assistance in good faith.

Finally, deployment of a monitoring mission represents another tool to establish facts and preserve evidence.

While bringing violators to account is impossible within the OSCE framework, findings and conclusions of OSCE monitoring missions and the Moscow and Vienna Mechanisms could be used as a basis for actions outside the OSCE, including for ensuring accountability through international judicial bodies. When a state blatantly violates fundamental Helsinki principles, such as sovereignty and territorial integrity of another state, it should face international accountability, which is essential to upholding these principles during the periods of interstate disagreement and mistrust. Therefore, the OSCE should prioritise efforts to address the absence of enforcement and accountability mechanisms for violation of the Helsinki principles and OSCE commitments.

In spring 2024, attacks on the Belarus-EU border intensified again and became more violent.²⁴ Moreover, they have continued in 2025 and have become more violent on the part of the groups trying to cross the border. The renewed crisis appears designed to bolster the international position of Belarus, demonstrating that the hybrid warfare tool, proven effective in 2021, is being used by the regime again. Belarus’ most recent rhetoric towards Poland and the EU has been characterised by its ambivalence. On the one hand, invitations to engage in dialogue and cooperate have been voiced by the Lukashenka regime’s representatives. On the other hand, Belarusian authorities accuse Poland and the EU for human rights violations, echoing those they made in 2021.

Thus, two possible directions for the development of the situation on the border are demonstrated now by the Lukashenka regime – declarations of intent for constructive cooperation, in case the EU acknowledges the Lukashenka regime as a legitimate partner, including recognising the results of 2025 presidential “election”, or increased pressure at the border if this does not happen.

²⁴ Two more soldiers injured after migrant attacks on the Polish-Belarusian border. Polskie Radio, 31.05.2024.
<https://www.polskieradio.pl/395/7784/artykul/3385514,two-more-soldiers-injured-after-migrant-attacks-on-the-polishbelarusian-border>

In light of this, the OSCE community and civil society should adopt a more proactive stance regarding the instrumentalisation of migration, using the case of Belarus-EU “migration crisis” to highlight interconnectedness and inseparability of the human dimension and the military-political security dimension. This strategy should be based on a unified approach and shared responsibilities of all EU member states, supported by other OSCE participating States committed to the Helsinki principles, in the fight against hybrid attacks.

For addressing the use of disinformation and propaganda realised by Belarus and Russia in the course of the instrumentalised migration crisis at the Belarusian border with the EU, a coordinated response should be developed aimed at counter-disinformation measures. An appropriate terminology should be used to create a narrative explaining the institutionalised migration as a threat to security. Constant monitoring of narratives delivered by Russian and Belarusian media is necessary to detect spikes in disinformation signalling about possible upcoming hybrid attacks.

Outside of the OSCE framework, efforts to ensure legal accountability of the Lukashenko regime and the Putin regime for the instrumentalisation of migration through legal avenues should be pursued by concerned states, including filing an interstate complaint with the International Court of Justice for the violation of relevant international treaties.

Upholding of human rights obligations by states targeted by the instrumentalised migration attacks should be an essential component of a strategy. Human rights of migrants should be always respected in the process of development and implementation of measures aimed at countering instrumentalised migration. If legislative and policy measures developed by concerned states and practices they apply to counter the security threat posed by the instrumentalised migration contradict their human rights obligations, they should be appealed to national courts and become a basis for complaints to the European Court of Human Rights.

A comprehensive strategy should take into account the following aspects of the crisis:

- the artificial, instrumentalised nature of migration flows used by the Lukashenko regime and the Putin regime as a tool of hybrid warfare to intimidate and destabilise the EU;
- Russia’s central role in the crisis;
- security threats to sovereignty and territorial integrity of the targeted states;
- the key role of propaganda and disinformation by Russia and Belarus in this crisis;
- threats to security, health and lives of migrants posed by the crisis and the responsibility of the targeted states to comply with their international human rights obligations.

The “migration crisis” of 2021 and the continued attempts by Belarus and Russia to instrumentalise migration should serve as a catalyst for the OSCE to proactively develop measures to address a wide range of hybrid threats to state security and sovereignty, encompassing not only artificial migration crises, but also propaganda and disinformation, cyberattacks, and other tools employed by manipulative authoritarian regimes.