PEOPLE AS AMMUNITION

THE STRUCTURES BEHIND RUSSIAN AND BELARUSIAN WEAPONIZED MIGRATION

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Weaponized migration, which is sometimes called instrumentalized migration or coercive engineered migration,[1] is by no means a new challenge, but it is one that is arguably easier to apply in the modern age of cheap and easy international travel and growing awareness of the wealth and security disparities across the globe. It is also more likely to have local and widespread political impacts within democratic governments with free media. This report considers particular case studies from the Russian–Finnish border in 2015 and, especially, the Belarusian borders with Poland and Lithuania in 2021, and Russia's with Finland and Norway in 2023/24.

In subtly different ways, these were all examples of attempts to use weaponized migration to bring pressure to bear on the target countries, in the hope of influencing their leaderships by generating division, disruption and costs, both practical and political. They certainly all proved problematic and, although there is scope for serious debate as to whether they were ultimately effective or counter-productive, the consensus appears to be that both Minsk and Moscow were left with the sense that, in the short term at least, weaponized migration remained a viable tool within their 'hybrid war' toolbox.[2]

Given the scope for the renewed use of this tool by Belarus and, especially, the Russian Federation, as well as its potential use by other nations such as Türkiye, which has already employed it, European societies in particular must consider the contexts in which it can be used against them in the future and potential responses. This report, therefore, concludes with future scenarios for the weaponization of migration, ranging from facilitating flows from North Africa to the online encouragement of would-be asylum seekers, as well as a range of recommendations for both the EU and individual states, ideally that do not simply depend on a dangerous 'Fortress Europe' approach.[3]

Methodology

The research is based on open sources (primarily in English and Russian), as well as necessarily anonymous interviews with observers, law enforcement officers and figures within the underworld. Given that this is an illegal and politically sensitive subject that is prone to being both exaggerated and wilfully downplayed, efforts have been made to triangulate sources, so as not to depend too much or too uncritically on any one source.

INTRODUCTION

A Russian said that we have a tool here [the instrumentalization of migration] that works against you. There was no hidden message in that. It was told to us quite directly.

FORMER FINNISH INTERIOR MINISTER PETTERI ORPO, RECALLING A MEETING WITH RUSSIAN SECURITY OFFICIALS.[4]

Can one weaponize bicycles? In 2015, at a time when hundreds of thousands of refugees were making their way to Europe across the Mediterranean, some 5 500 people, largely fleeing war-torn Syria, made their way through Russia to the Arctic Circle in order to take advantage of a singular legal loophole. This involved the Storskog crossing into Norway, where a probing finger of Russian territory points to the city of Kirkenes. Here, the Russians did not allow people to cross the border on foot, whereas the Norwegians, conversely, banned motor vehicles carrying anyone without entry visas. No one, though, had thought to ban bicycles.

The refugees would typically obtain Russian tourist or student visas in Damascus or Beirut, fly to Moscow and then take the 38-hour train ride from Moscow to Murmansk. From there, they could travel some 200 kilometres by bus to the Norwegian border where they would buy a bicycle and make their way through the Storskog crossing and claim asylum. Some even took advantage of a 'package deal' offered by some enterprising business people in Murmansk who, for US$500 or more, offered a ride to the border and a bicycle, too. Although Norway sought to send most back into Russia, Moscow largely refused to accept them. Indeed, following the influx through Storskog, Oslo decided to suspend their terms of considering asylum applications from migrants with legal residence in Russia – Moscow then promptly issued deportation orders for many of these migrants, pushing them back to Norway.[5] Finally, the Norwegians announced that no entry by third-country citizens would be allowed as of 30 November, but also signalled a willingness to talk to the Russians about mutual border control. In a striking manifestation of the degree to which Moscow was in control of the process, the number of crossings dropped from 314 to zero in a single week.[6]

Bikes used by refugees attempting to cross the border into Norway from Russia are stacked at the border crossing at Storskog, November 2015. *© Jonathan Nackstrand/AFP via Getty Images*

Migration as a hot-button issue

The reason the weaponization of illegal migration is such a potentially potent option in Europe is that it plays on the degree to which this has become a major political issue, and one often mobilized by populist parties and politicians challenging the mainstream consensus. The issue became especially significant in 2015, driven by a massive exodus of refugees from Syria, thanks to the convergence of security concerns, economic pressures and the rising political influence of far-right parties.[7] While some of these parties, such as Germany's Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) and Italy's Lega Nord, have been broadly (and somewhat misleadingly) characterized as 'pro-Russian', others, such as Poland's Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (PiS) and Finland's Finns Party (formerly known as True Finns) are quite the opposite.[8]

However, neither Minsk nor Moscow envisaged its operations in terms of winning supporters, so much as spreading division and instability. Belarus was primarily seeking to punish Europe for supporting anti-Lukashenko forces. The Russian agenda was more diffuse, looking both to undermine the cohesion of Europe at a time when it was imposing sanctions on Moscow after the annexation of Crimea and shooting down of the Malaysia Airlines MH17 airliner, both in 2014, and more broadly supporting Kyiv in its struggle to retain its sovereignty and control over the disputed Donbas region. Whether notionally 'pro-Russian' or not, populist (and often Eurosceptic) parties undermined the unity that represented the EU's greatest strength.[9] The relatively limited use of instrumentalized migration was also a threat, that if Europe continued to challenge Putin, more extensive campaigns of the kind could follow. ■

FIGURE 1 The 2023 Russia–Finland border crisis.

SOURCE: Adapted from the Finnish government

Meanwhile, it had become Finland's turn. Would-be migrants began turning up at Salla and Raja-Jooseppi, the two most northern crossing points on the Finnish–Russian border. In December 2015, when the Finns responded by banning crossings by bicycle, migrants began turning up packed into cars.[10] In due course, attempts were made to restrict border traffic, as the crossing stations were over capacity to process the irregular migrants. In response, cars would try to force their way through, driving in bumper-to-bumper convoys, making it often impossible for the border guards to lower barriers between cars.[11] In January and February 2016 alone, about 1 000 migrants and asylum seekers crossed the Finnish–Russian border, compared to only 700 who had had made the trek in all of 2015.[12]

By March 2016, the crisis was abating. Confronted with broad hints that this could become an even greater problem, given the 11 million foreigners in Russia, the Finns looked for a diplomatic solution.[13] Helsinki and Moscow signed an agreement that limited crossings at Salla and Raja-Jooseppi to Finnish, Russian and Belarusian citizens.[14] The suspicion must be that, for the Kremlin, the operation had done

its job, warning Finland and Norway – and, indeed, the EU as a whole – that, should it choose, Russia could again weaponize migration and on a much larger scale. In the process, it forced both countries to back away from efforts to reduce their contacts with Moscow in response to the 2014 annexation of Crimea and subsequent intervention in Ukraine's Donbas region. It also spread alarm and division within both Finland and Norway, with disputes between those advocating tough measures and those advocating refugees' rights, and Helsinki even contemplating deploying armed conscripts and reservists along the border.[15]

This was an early example of what could be described as a deviant public–private partnership. During this brief pulse of irregular migration, much of the operation was of an entrepreneurial nature: gangs organized flights and rail tickets to Murmansk and Kandalaksha; embassy staff issued visas on often spurious grounds; border guards waved migrants through for a token bribe; and cunning merchants gathered second-hand and stolen bicycles (and later beat-up second-hand cars) to sell at a fat mark-up.[16] (Admittedly, some migrants could even hire a car to cross the border, but this tended to require more comprehensive documentation.) The migrants – many of whom had been languishing in Russia for some time, hoping to make it into the EU – typically paid organized crime groups the equivalent of several thousand euros to make the crossing.[17]

Nonetheless, this could not have been done without official sanction and intent, and organized crime networks seem to have exploited and facilitated this new opportunity only after state structures had begun encouraging them. After all, the High North region around Murmansk is one of Russia's most heavily secured, largely because of the presence of nuclear submarine bases and similar strategic infrastructure. As such, special permits are required to enter the border zone, with the police and Federal Security Service (FSB) typically assiduously enforcing the control regime. Suddenly the border zone seemed surprisingly porous, and the FSB and Federal Migration Service (FMS) were showing particular vigour towards the Indian, Afghan and Syrian migrant communities in Moscow, with many suddenly being advised that their temporary residence permits might be revoked or otherwise 'encouraged' to move on.[18] Furthermore, as the opening quote from Petteri Orpo demonstrates, Russian officials were willing to acknowledge their role behind closed doors and were able to choke off the flow of migrants very quickly as soon as the Kremlin decided the operation was over.

Compared to subsequent efforts, such as Belarus's campaign in 2021, this venture was certainly small scale but demonstrates how, in different ways and at different times, both Moscow and Minsk have used weaponized irregular migration as an instrument of statecraft, which remains a potential threat in the future. The possible implications are relatively well understood, but what is less clear is how both nations came to adopt this policy and how they went about deploying it. This report thus seeks to explore the similar but different processes used by Russia and Belarus to recruit, marshal and move their 'human ammunition' – and how and where they may do so again in the future.

From the outset, it is also worth noting that, despite some overheated suggestions that Alexander Lukashenko's Belarusian government is no more than an obedient proxy of Moscow and 'a de facto Russian outpost', this is an oversimplification of the realities.[19] The Belarusian State Security Committee, the KGB, retains close links to its Russian counterparts, the FSB and Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR), but also acts to foil their more ambitious efforts to suborn Minsk.[20] Likewise, Lukashenko regularly meets with and praises Vladimir Putin, but he has also maintained his own strategic autonomy, not least in keeping Belarus out of direct involvement in the war in Ukraine.[21] The two nations' underworlds are also deeply connected, in a manner reminiscent of how the Russian and Ukrainian ones were before the February 2022 invasion.[22] Therefore, although Minsk and Moscow often coordinate their activities and share 'best practice', including how to bring pressure to bear on their neighbours, they have distinct interests, modes of operation and perceived opportunities, and will be treated as distinct geopolitical actors.

THE BELARUSIAN BORDER, 2021

We were stopping migrants and drugs – now you will catch them and eat them yourselves.

BELARUSIAN PRESIDENT ALEXANDER LUKASHENKO, 2021[23]

Mounting European criticism and then sanctions followed the disputed – and for many, simply downright fraudulent[24] – Belarusian presidential election in August 2020, which saw Lukashenko reinstalled with allegedly 81% of the vote and the apparent fake bomb threat used to make a civilian airliner, which was flying from Athens to Vilnius, land in Minsk, where police arrested political activist Roman Protasevich.[25] In response, Lukashenko threatened to 'flood the EU with drugs and migrants',[26] claiming that he meant simply that Belarus would no longer enforce border controls on outgoing people and cargoes. However, from August 2021, when the Lithuanian and especially Polish authorities began registering a dramatic increase in unauthorized border crossings, the claim appeared to be a much more direct and deliberate campaign.

Tens of thousands of migrants were involved, largely from North Africa and the Middle East. Most came from Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Somalia and Eritrea, either entering Belarus direct by air or transiting through Türkiye, Armenia, Iran, Uzbekistan or Russia.[27] Their aim was to make their way into the EU, typically in the hope of ultimately reaching Germany. For example, Polish border guards reported that about 6 000 irregular migrants tried to cross the frontier in September 2021, compared to around 100 in all of 2020.[28] As will be discussed below, the extent to which the Belarusian authorities were directly involved would also become increasingly evident, from busing migrants to the border to helping them breach frontier defences.

By 2022, the EU and individual border states were taking an increasingly tough line. Poland deployed 15 000 troops to support its border guards, and all three affected countries (Poland, Lithuania and Latvia) declared states of emergency that allowed them to modify or suspend their usual terms of considering asylum claims. Minsk was called out for its campaign, and border defences were made stronger. Although the EU was reluctant to provide funds for more extensive physical barriers, Poland and Lithuania nonetheless built enhanced frontier defences. Other EU assistance included a Rapid Border Intervention to Lithuania from Frontex, the European Border and Coast Guard Agency, (Warsaw rejected such assistance) and the deployment of British and Estonian military engineers to Poland.[29] During 2022, the number of irregular border crossings fell sharply but never quite reached the pre-crisis levels.

Shelters made by migrants in Belarus attempting to cross into Poland. Lukashenko had threatened to 'flood the EU with drugs and migrants'. In late 2021, tens of thousands of migrants attempted to make their way to Europe via Belarus, many fleeing conflict zones. *© Sefa Karacan/Anadolu Agency via Getty Images*

A state campaign

Lukashenko himself, when he addressed the migration crisis at all, presented it as orchestrated solely by organized crime gangs – and what is more, gangs based in the EU:

> People travel, go to the border [...] They were transported there. Certain people take care of their transit: They help migrants board aircraft, welcome them in Belarus, take them to the border, help them cross the border, and then Poles, Germans, Ukrainians welcome them over there. Everything in exchange for money.[30]

He blamed 'mafia-like structures', with 'cells in Germany, France and other countries', including Poland. There is certainly some truth in the claim that criminal networks facilitated a certain amount of this irregular migration, especially once migrants were over the borders and outside Belarus. However, a Belarusian police officer who had been peripherally involved at the height of the crisis suggested that 'once it was clear that [the government] was encouraging people to break through the border, then local criminal structures also got involved'.[31] In particular, he cited gangs that had existing connections into countries such as Syria, including a gang that had been smuggling Captagon manufactured outside Damascus into Germany. Furthermore, Kurdish human smuggling gangs were identified as being involved in collecting migrants from Minsk airport, facilitating their border crossings and then moving them along established routes, in some cases all the way to the UK.[32] According to a British Border Force intelligence analyst, this was 'not one of their established routes – it seemed opportunistic, something they picked up when the Belarusian government suddenly decided to lay out the welcome mat'.[33]

In other words, even such organized crime involvement should be seen very much in the context of a deliberate and calculated campaign of weaponization of irregular migration by Minsk. The organized crime gangs clearly operated with the blessing of the KGB, and there is also ample evidence that the government directly trafficked many or most of the migrants, reportedly charging '€2 000 for the

airline tickets and €3 000 for transportation to the border' and offering temporary accommodation in official properties.[34] This often appears to have been through the Tsentr Kurort and Oskartur travel agencies – the former being state controlled – which advertised tours to Belarus explicitly holding out the prospect of onward travel into the EU[35] and often suggesting that this was legal or easy.[36] Meanwhile, the Belarusian government eased visa regulations to expedite the process, and national airline Belavia increased flights from source destinations, such as Iraq and Syria. In August 2021, when the EU managed to persuade Iraqi Airlines to suspend direct flights to Minsk,[37] Fly Baghdad stepped up to fill the gap in the market for as little as US$400.[38] Flights were also added from Erbil in Iraqi Kurdistan.[39] Belavia and Turkish Airlines flights from Istanbul brought more migrants and, in October, the Syrian Cham Wings Airlines launched a daily connection between Minsk and Damascus.[40] Would-be migrants arriving in Belarus were provided with guidance on potential routes across the border and what to say if and when they were stopped by border guards. Some were even provided with wire cutters or other tools to get through border fences.[41]

This was an all-of-government campaign, initiated by Lukashenko and, according to Polish intelligence sources, coordinated by the KGB. As one officer stated, 'This was a special operation – and in Belarus, that means the KGB.'[42] While under normal circumstances the KGB lacks the power to initiate wider campaigns involving other arms of the state, a Lithuanian official with particular responsibility for Belarus at the time believed that 'Lukashenko had granted it a special mandate to run this operation with his authority'.[43] Meanwhile, according to Meta, the parent company of Facebook, the KGB established dozens of fake social media accounts under the guise of journalists and activists to criticize both the Polish and the wider European response (in line with the broader political goals of the operation, as discussed below) and to encourage new migrants to make the attempt to cross into the EU.[44]

The KGB

When the USSR was dissolved, Belarus neither reformed nor renamed its branch of the Soviet Committee for State Security (KGB). Like its predecessor, the Belarusian KGB is responsible for both foreign intelligence and domestic security, and has become more powerful as the Lukashenko regime has come increasingly under pressure at home and abroad.[45] Headed since 2020 by Ivan Tertel, the rise of domestic political opposition has made Lukashenko's regime more dependent on the agency.[46] Tertel's own profile has risen, and the KGB is clearly more influential than the Ministry of Internal Affairs and rivals the army for pre-eminence within the system.[47] A combination of corruption and a desire to use organized crime gangs as a means to bring deniable pressure to bear on dissidents at home and abroad has seen the KGB increasingly connected with the underworld.[48] ■

FIGURE 2 Belarus–Poland border crossings.

SOURCE: Adapted from the Polish Border Guard

In November 2021, Minsk stepped up the pressure and demonstrated a growing direct role. Increasingly, the authorities sought to marshal and direct the migrants, driving them to try and mount mass assaults on portions of the border fence:

> According to multiple [migrants'] accounts given by text or phone to Polish journalists, the migrants claim the Belarusian armed forces are putting pressure on them to storm the border, either by threatening them or by denying them food and water. There are also indications that some of the migrants might be trying to resist carrying out such directions, despite the risks inherent in that.[49]

The aim seems to have been both to maximize the chances of their breaking through and to create powerful visual images for the world's media. Instead, the result was a dangerous escalation. When one group started throwing stones and even reportedly a stun grenade, the Polish side retaliated with tear gas and water cannon.[50] The Belarusian security forces also became more directly and overtly involved, cutting holes in fences, providing migrants with tear gas, and even using strobe lights and lasers to blind Polish soldiers and border guards.[51]

Minsk itself was clearly not willing to accept migrants. As Polish, Lithuanian and Latvian border guards became increasingly aware of the problem and at times used forceful, even violent pushback tactics (which prevented asylum seekers from making claims[52]), their Belarusian counterparts proved no more welcoming. Migrants who had failed to cross the border and been returned to Belarusian soil, or were simply awaiting their moment to try and break through into the EU, were corralled in makeshift camps, often in very poor conditions and facing abusive treatment from the security forces.[53] Polish convoys bearing humanitarian aid to these camps were turned back at the border: as one aid worker later observed, 'It was clear that the Belarussians wanted to keep conditions bad enough that the [migrants] would be desperate enough to try the border crossing again and again.'[54] During the tough winter of 2021/22, more than 20 would-be migrants died, primarily of exposure.[55]

A political campaign

These actions were not simply or even primarily about the migrants but were the ammunition in Lukashenko's cynical campaign to punish his critics and bring disruption and division both within the target countries and the wider EU. Certainly, the tough tactics used, the imposition of states of emergency and Poland's decision to reject Frontex's assistance (which was widely regarded as an attempt to avoid international scrutiny of its approach) proved controversial internationally, doubly so given that the agency is actually headquartered in Warsaw.[56] For example, a European Commission spokesperson, while acknowledging 'that the Polish authorities are dealing with a difficult situation [...] created by an attempt to instrumentalise people for political purposes', nonetheless implicitly criticized how Warsaw was dealing with the crisis, saying that effective border management 'should not come at the expense of human life'.[57]

The European Court of Human Rights issued an order demanding that Poland and Lithuania meet their humanitarian commitments to provide migrants with 'food, water, clothing, adequate medical care and, if possible, temporary shelter',[58] while the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights challenged the imposition of states of emergency, reminding Poland (and Latvia and Lithuania) that 'the right to life and freedom from torture, *refoulement* and collective expulsions are non-derogable rights. This means they can never be suspended, not even in a state of emergency.'[59] Meanwhile, the Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights, which had been monitoring the activities of the security forces and providing aid to refugees, accepted that 'Belarus is guilty of the gravest

human rights violations, and its actions on the border with Poland constitute crimes against humanity', but also accused the Polish government of ignoring a 'growing humanitarian crisis' and instigating 'harassment, criminal charges, and brutal detentions against activists'.[60] It is no wonder that a 'plague on all their houses' attitude emerged in some quarters, implying a degree of shared guilt on all sides, and a disregard for the migrants who are 'the only victims as Belarus, Lithuania, Latvia, Poland and the EU are battling for border control and political gains'.[61]

It was not just organizations abroad that expressed their concerns. Warsaw's hard line discomfited the influential Catholic Church, which appealed for greater humanitarian assistance for refugees, especially those from Iraq and Syria. Archbishop Stanisław Gądecki argued that 'medical and humanitarian aid for migrants should be a priority for both the state and non-governmental organisations', because 'the inalienable dignity of every human being, regardless of their status, origin or religion, and the law of brotherly love, urge us to help them'.[62] Furthermore, after the government suggested that the would-be migrants included paedophiles and devotees of bestiality, even the conservative newspaper *Rzeczpospolita* published an editorial that criticized the government for circulating 'photos of people from the Middle East in uniform, a man about to have intercourse with an animal, photos of naked children only slightly covered with a black stripe' in order 'to cast a shadow on everyone storming our eastern border [...] to sow fear, hatred, and appeal to racist stereotypes'.[63]

Regardless of the perfectly valid debate over the legality and morality of the Polish response to the crisis, ultimately this was a political trap for Warsaw. Allowing the migrants to enter unchecked would have undermined the credibility of the right-wing PiS-led government, and – given that many or most would have headed on further into Europe – created knock-on tensions with Poland's neighbours.[64] By adopting instead what could at the very least be described as a robust approach, though, the Polish government generated disquiet at home and condemnation abroad. It also imposed substantial practical costs: between building new border walls, deploying extra troops and providing accommodation to those migrants who did make it into the country, this costs some €600 million annually.[65] Either way, it proved divisive, and although it helped provide a slight bump to PiS's poll ratings, the handling of the crisis was one factor behind its defeat in the 2023 elections.[66]

It even allowed Lukashenko's propaganda machine to use the crisis to domestic advantage.[67] Extensive coverage in the state media focused on both real and invented abuses by Polish border guards in particular. The testimony of a Polish soldier attached to the border guards, Emil Czeczko, who crossed the border and requested asylum in Belarus, received particular attention. Although many inconsistencies in his accounts have since been noted, his claim that Polish border guards had killed more than 200 migrants in cold blood was extensively reported.[68] Overall, in a striking mirror-image of the Western perspective, a spokesperson for the Belarusian State Border Committee stated that 'neighbouring EU countries have become accustomed to disseminating deliberately false reports and baseless accusations (information leaks), distorting events at the border, and manipulating public opinion' in order to blacken Minsk's reputation.[69] It is unclear how effective this campaign was, but a British diplomat at the embassy at the time recalled some awkward engagements with locals who had clearly been influenced by the coverage and seemed to have concluded 'not that Lukashenko was any better than they had thought, but that he was no worse than everyone else'.[70]

THE RUSSO–FINNISH BORDER, 2023

Now it's important for the Finnish authorities to remember to build toilets [along their new border wall]. If their worst phobias start to overwhelm their common sense, this is the only thing they'll need.

RUSSIAN FOREIGN MINISTRY SPOKESPERSON MARIA ZAKHAROVA[71]

In 2023, it was again Finland's turn to experience Russian weaponized migration along their 1 340-kilometre common border. Finland had once been the country that issued the most Schengen visas to Russian citizens (which grant access throughout the Schengen Area). Russians would frequently travel across the border, even just for day trips to go shopping. However, the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 led to growing constraints on Russians, as well as escalating Russian threats and anger. In 2023, Helsinki stopped issuing short-term visas to Russians except in a few specific circumstances and then, in accordance with a decision by the EU, banned the entry of vehicles with Russian licence plates.

In August, though, increasing numbers of irregular migrants started trying to cross the border without visas, with the greatest upsurge in numbers in November, when 800 arrived compared to 900 arriving between August and October.[72] They arrived on bicycles, in buses and taxis or on foot, travelling as individuals but mainly in groups. They came mostly from Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Somalia, Ethiopia and Egypt. Again, there was clear evidence of a combination of organized criminal trafficking, opportunistic commercial activity and official connivance, given that they were able to travel across Russia and over the Russian border control points, often without documentation. There were accounts of Russian border guards providing would-be refugees with bicycles, although more often they had to pay criminals or opportunist entrepreneurs for whatever means available to try and claim asylum in Finland.

Many of these refugees had originally been trying to get into the EU across the Polish–Belarusian border, but the agents of the Russian state contacted the migrant smuggling gangs involved and encouraged them to divert their charges to the Finnish–Russian frontier instead. As one recounted, in early November, 'Russian officers' known to him contacted him and said that Moscow was now allowing migrants through that border.[73] Meanwhile, the word of this new opportunity also started to spread in Arabic-language chat rooms frequented by would-be migrants.

At first, the Finns again banned bicycle crossings, but when this failed to stem the flow, they started to close crossings altogether. On 18 November 2023, Helsinki closed four border crossings along the southern stretch of the border: Vaalimaa, Nuijamaa, Imatra and Niirala.[74] As migrant flows quickly re-directed northwards, the next week three northern ones (Kuusamo, Salla and Vartius) were also closed. Only the Arctic Circle crossing at Raja-Jooseppi was left open, albeit subject to temporary closures. The closures were initially intended to last only until 2024 but were still in place at the time of writing.

It transpired that the authorities in Murmansk were busing migrants from the closed border crossing points to those that were still open, setting up temporary tent camps and even providing hot meals. This was in part to avoid disappointed refugees returning to the city, in part to keep up the pressure on Finland and in part to reap some propaganda rewards. On Telegram, Murmansk Region Governor Andrei Chibis presented the situation as a Western problem to which Russians were providing humanitarian solutions:

> A NATO country is artificially creating a traffic jam. And approximately 300 people from more than 10 foreign countries have been waiting not just for hours, but for days, to cross the border.
>
> We are providing comprehensive support to prevent them from standing in the freezing cold of our Far North. We are accommodating them and have also set up warming stations where people can warm up, eat, and even just drink hot tea.
>
> Maintaining a human face is crucial in any situation. I hope the Finnish authorities will also remember this.[75]

A Finnish border guard speaks to migrants at the Salla border crossing with Russia. In late 2023, there was a surge in attempted crossings by migrants seeking asylum in the EU country – mostly from Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Somalia, Ethiopia and Egypt – said to be a destabilization ploy by Russia. *© Jussi Nukari/Lehtikuva/AFP via Getty Images*

By early 2024, the flow of migrants had largely been staunched, through closing the border and then building new fences along a frontier, which for a long time had not been physically blocked because of the relatively effective cooperation of respective border guards and the sheer inhospitality of the conditions. Furthermore, Finland's controversial 'instrumentalization act' of 2024 also made it easier for border guards to turn back migrants at the border with Russia without giving them the opportunity to apply for asylum.[76] Faced with the prospect of having to manage large numbers of migrants themselves, the Russian authorities throttled back their operation, even though they still had a substantial population of asylum seekers either hoping to remain in Russia or looking for onward transit westward. Later, the authorities would encourage or coerce migrants who had been unsuccessful in their attempts to cross the Finnish border to sign up to fight in Ukraine.[77]

State involvement

The Finnish government presented this situation as an escalation of the strategy used in 2015/16. According to Foreign Minister Elina Valtonen, 'We have proof showing that, unlike before, not only Russian border authorities are letting people without proper documentation to the Finnish border, but they are also actively helping them to the border zone.'[78]

Yet at the same time, it was clear that this was another public–private partnership. Eager to find a cost-effective way of bringing pressure to bear on Helsinki and with a tradition of using criminals as deniable instruments,[79] the Russian government let it be known that it was willing and eager to see irregular migration across the border. Just as the Belarusian project relied heavily on the KGB, its Russian counterpart, the FSB, seems to have been the lead agency involved here. The FSB controls the Federal Border Guard Service and so was well placed to ensure that potential irregular migrants were allowed entry into the country and passage through checkpoints on Russia's side of the border. One border guard even admitted to a Finnish journalist that the FSB was organizing the migrant traffic to the border with Finland, deciding which (and when) cars could leave for the border and giving priority to families with children and people with health issues, whose rejection would be especially politically damaging for Helsinki.[80]

Nonetheless, this was clearly not limited to the FSB. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs is responsible for visa processing and so eased controls on the issuing of visas. The police of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the FMS regularly check the documents of apparent migrants and must also have been involved in their unopposed passage northwards.[81] Although the FSB is undoubtedly a powerful institution, it does not have the authority to instruct other agencies to break or bend the law on this scale. Russian insiders consulted on this issue have suggested that the campaign must have originated with, or at least been authorized through, either the Security Council or the Presidential Administration. The former is a body that brings together the key figures responsible for security affairs, broadly conceived, but tends to be a consultative, rather than decision-making, structure and rarely deals directly with covert operations. The majority opinion was that the campaign would have been overseen by the Presidential Administration, which in many ways acts as a 'shadow government', separate from the Cabinet of Ministers, 'that helps the president formulate policy, communicates it to the executive agencies, coordinates its execution, and monitors (and if necessary polices) performance'.[82] In the words of one former insider, 'Even if the FSB was the lead agency, it would make sense that the [Presidential Administration] would manage the operation as a whole, not least to minimize the usual inter-agency frictions.'[83] For example, in 2016, the Presidential Administration 'played a key role in the concerted campaign launched […] in response to the debate in Finland about joining the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). This was a coordinated operation that combined overt sabre-rattling with covert destabilization'.[84]

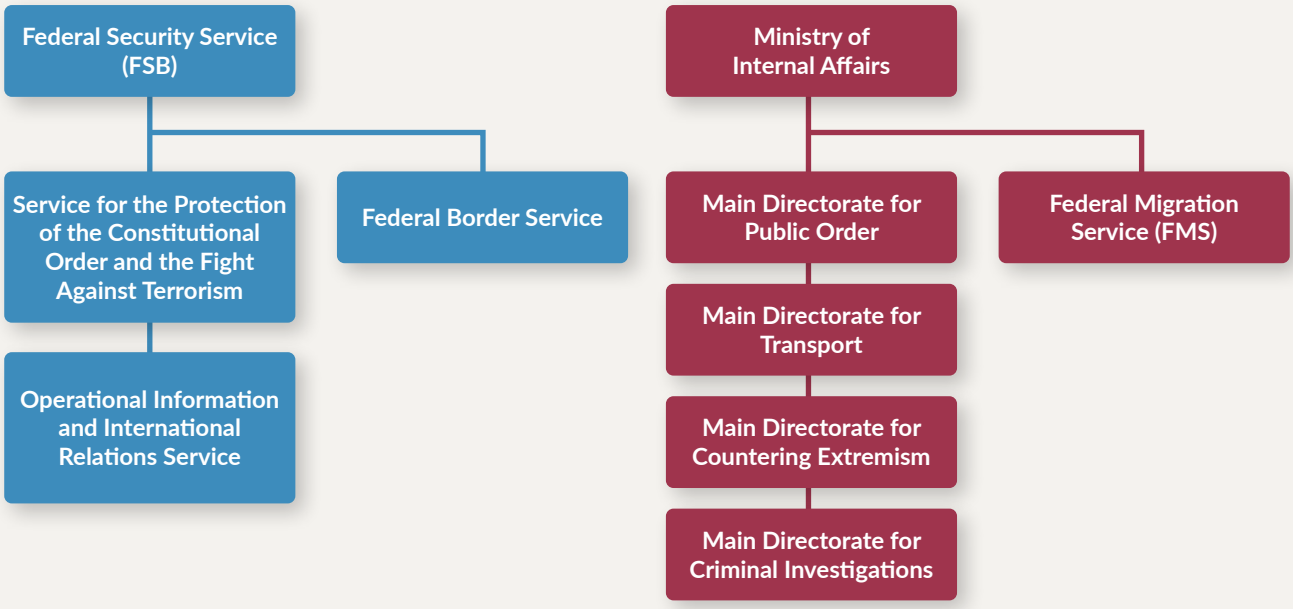

FIGURE 3 Who were the 'watchdogs'? Main Russian law enforcement agencies responsible for controlling migration.

That said, this was still an operation in which the state created opportunities that the market then exploited. The work of recruiting, motivating and moving the migrants was done by experienced traffickers and an array of facilitators, from organized crime gangs to entrepreneurs spotting an opportunity to sell everything from clapped-out second-hand cars to warm-weather clothing.[85] Furthermore, even many of the officials involved were clearly not following direct orders but spotted an opportunity for some extra-curricular graft. For example, to move someone out of Russia and into Finland, one migrant smuggler who went by the name 'Abdullah' charged US$1 200, of which US$500 was for bribes to the Russian border guards.[86] (According to Europol's 2025 migration report, the usual fees for travel to Finland via Russia ranged from €1 501 to €5 000.[87]) Similarly, another professional smuggler who also handled movement into Russia said that upon landing at the airport, they were met by a 'certain colonel', presumably from the border guards, who ensured (for a fee) that they were able to enter the country before handing them on to the next link in the migration chain.[88]

The involvement of organized crime structures other than established migrant smuggling networks tended to be on the periphery. The underworld of Murmansk, in particular, is characterized by many small gangs rather than an overarching single structure or network, as is often found elsewhere in Russia. Despite occasional cases, such as a gang that helped Uzbeks cross the border and were rounded up by the police in 2017, they were not traditionally involved in migrant smuggling or people trafficking.[89] As such, local criminals were generally confined to minor roles in the operation, including stealing cars to be sold on to migrants to take across the border, or providing cheap accommodation for undocumented migrants who might have problems staying in hotels. They also tended to act as go-betweens for established human smuggling networks, which were often made up of Arabs with Russian residency and new to the north-west frontier, and so needed introductions (for a fee) to suitably corrupt officials and border guards. After the closure of the Finnish border, these criminals also marketed their services (such as faking documents and falsifying the results of Russian-language exams) to disappointed migrants, as a means of obtaining Russian residency rather than risk being deported home.[90]

Political impact

As with the Belarusian incursions, more draconian responses by the authorities and border guards generated a degree of unease at home and criticism abroad. Since 2024, the increase in deportations and tougher policies on the right to work has led to discomfort in some quarters.[91] Expressing a widely held view, a researcher at the Migration Institute of Finland stated that 'before, it was possible to build a secure life in Finland for more immigrants … But that is not the case anymore'.[92] However, whether Finns as a whole considered this a bad thing is less clear. In contrast to attitudes in 2015, which were broadly sympathetic to migrants, by 2023 the tide of public opinion had turned. While there was still considerable abstract support for the notion that migration enriched the nation culturally and provided an additional workforce, there was a growing sense that migrants, especially from the Middle East, were a threat to the country's security and national identity.[93]

Ironically, this shift possibly undermined one of Moscow's presumed intentions, to generate greater division and rancour within Finnish society. As a Helsinki-based political lobbyist observed, 'by linking migration with the Russian threat, Moscow made it easier for the current centre-right government not to have to worry too much about appearing heartless. It just has to sound tough'.[94] Indeed, concern about migration was a significant factor behind the right-wing Finns Party surge in the 2023 general elections, after which they became a major partner in the coalition described by some as Finland's 'most rightwing government ever'.[95]

There was, inevitably, also concern from human rights bodies. Amnesty International condemned the 'instrumentalization act' on the grounds that it 'gravely undermines access to asylum and the protection from refoulement in Finland. It risks serving as a green light for violence and pushbacks at the border.'[96] However, in general, the political environment had clearly shifted following the 2015/16 and 2021 crises, and the impact of such expressions of discomfort was much less significant. Arguably more significant was the more subtle effect of economic repercussions from closing the border for regions and businesses that had once relied on Russian tourists and travellers. They had been worth some €360 million per year to the economy of South Karelia alone, and this essentially disappeared.[97]

Russia's use of this gambit in 2015 had shocked the Finns, who had felt they had something of a special relationship with Russia. It left them with fewer illusions, triggered heightened security cooperation with Sweden, the UK and the US, and prompted a fundamental overhaul of Finnish intelligence legislation over the next few years. As a result, following the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, Finland finally cast aside the last vestiges of its neutrality and, along with Sweden, applied for NATO membership.[98] In this context, while the border crisis clearly created a practical headache for the Finnish government, it proved much less politically and socially disruptive than Moscow might have hoped.

Meanwhile, the Russian state eagerly took advantage of the crisis for both domestic and wider international purposes. At home, it was mobilized to support a narrative that portrayed a hostile West eager to generate a crisis to justify greater militarization of its front-line states and even potential aggression against Russia. According to General Vladimir Kulishov, head of the Federal Border Guard Service:

> We believe that the deliberate provocation of a 'migration crisis' on the Russian–Finnish border is necessary for the Finnish authorities to implement NATO's, and especially the US's, plans to deploy military infrastructure and station foreign troops on their territory, including in areas bordering Russia.[99]

Anti-migration sentiment was a significant factor behind surging electoral support for the Finns Party in the 2023 elections, described as Finland's most right-wing government ever. *© Takimoto Marina/SOPA Images/LightRocket via Getty Images*

This narrative may be hardly credible, but it still fits into the wider propaganda campaigns of the time. As with many of Russia's 'hybrid' measures, the goals and narratives derived directly from more hawkish Russian policymakers within the security community, such as FSB director Alexander Bortnikov and parliamentarian Andrei Lugovoi (accused of being one of the team that murdered defector Alexander Litvinenko in London in 2006[100]) whose perception was that Western states were weaponizing migration, and in particular interethnic hatred, to destabilize and divide Russian society. While these narratives were and are used primarily by lawmakers to crack down on 'fifth columnists' inside Russia, they also inform a defence and security policy focused on pre-empting real and perceived hybrid threats from the West. For example, in December 2024, Bortnikov made the following claim:

> Western intelligence agencies are also attempting to create artificial hotbeds of tension in Russia, primarily in regions with distinct ethnic and religious identities. Their actions are aimed at inciting protest sentiments and provoking acute conflicts leading to mass unrest and terrorist attacks.[101]

The vector of this alleged insidious destabilization campaign? Irregular migration, of course. According to Lugovoi, who since 2007 has been a member of the State Duma (the lower chamber of parliament) for the nationalist Liberal Democratic Party of Russia, 'Western intelligence agencies are using migration to destabilize Russia: they are inciting migrants, organizing illegal corridors, and infiltrating radicals.' He specifically blamed the British government and state-controlled NGOs for spending millions of pounds in Russia 'lobbying for the import of migrants, teaching a "tolerant attitude toward migration", and protecting terrorists, criminals, and religious extremists'.[102] Nonetheless, in and of themselves, these lines are not especially compelling for the domestic audience, except as part of a wider narrative that portrays the West as irredeemably Russophobic.[103]

The campaign was arguably counterproductive and far from being scalable, although, as one migrant said based on his own experiences, 'If Russia wants to drown Finland with refugees, it can. It can send tens of thousands of refugees.'[104] Efforts were made later to find other routes, including some people taking the dangerous option of trying to bypass Norwegian border security by sea. However, as things stand, it would be difficult to repeat such an operation while Helsinki and Oslo both retain their tough controls.

CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE CHALLENGES

You turn on and turn off the tap as you want, and you put European politics under pressure.

FORMER UNHCR OFFICIAL KILIAN KLEINSCHMIDT, 2025[105]

The fearful, the oppressed, the opportunistic and the ambitious will seek to move to richer, safer, freer parts of the world, even without any encouragement or support from third parties, taking huge risks and being willing to pay money they often can hardly afford. Somehow, many will find a way. In 2013, the Journey.asylum Facebook group, which no longer exists but in its day was a source of advice for Syrians eager to make their way to Europe, described the Norwegian border as impenetrable and made the outré suggestion that Syrians who had managed to reach Russia should buy a hot-air balloon and use that to fly to Norway.[106] As it was, a combination of market forces and political intent would mean that there would eventually be more mundane opportunities. The migrants themselves were simply looking for new, safer or more reliable routes into the EU. As one Tunisian who made it into Finland at the end of 2023 said, 'Everything else I tried before had failed [...] I didn't want to get here this way. But do you know how many times my visa applications got rejected without them giving me any reason why?'[107]

As Karen-Anna Eggen has noted, 'Russia has a long history of using human beings as instruments to further its interests,' citing Soviet forced colonization and Moscow's 'passportization' policy in Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Georgia or in occupied Ukraine to create constituencies and justifications for military action, but 'using third-country nationals as a form of pressure on neighbouring states is a less common contemporary Russian phenomenon'.[108] Nonetheless, this is now a weapon in the arsenal. Besides, Minsk and Moscow are hardly unique in such operations.[109] Between 2009 and 2013, more than 50 000 West Papuan asylum seekers reached Australia by boat, in an operation managed by criminal smugglers but under the wing of the Indonesian security forces as part of a campaign of political pressure.[110] In 2020, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan temporarily opened his border to Greece to leverage the EU to deal with the 3.6 million Syrian refugees who had entered his country.[111] Similarly, in 2024, the Moroccan government seemed to have encouraged a flood of migrants into the Spanish exclave of Ceuta to try and assert its claim that the city was, in the words of former Moroccan Prime Minister Saadeddine Othmani as 'Moroccan as the Sahara'.[112] Frontex has also noted that Morocco is just one of the countries that may be tempted to instrumentalize irregular migration further.[113] In short, where Russia and Belarus have gone, others almost certainly will follow.

The Storskog checkpoint at the Norwegian–Russian border, where Norwegian soldiers guard NATO's northernmost frontier. Following Russia's geopolitical migration tactics, Norway, like several other European countries, introduced much more restrictive border regimes. *© James Brooks/AFP via Getty Images*

Does it work?

There is room to question whether the operations discussed in this report could truly be considered successful. Finland and Norway introduced tougher and vastly more restrictive border regimes, as did Poland, Latvia and Lithuania. Finland (and Sweden) ultimately joined NATO:

> Russia's pilot project [in 2015] can be described as relatively successful in establishing coercive potential, but it came at a price. Russia's operation broadened Norway's and Finland's understanding of what tools Russia would be willing to use to assert pressure and influence in the region.[114]

Indeed, it has been claimed that 'Russia's action with asylum seekers and migrants may have been a gift to the anti-migrant agenda of the new government and the Finns Party', allowing the right-of-centre government that took power in Helsinki in 2023 to push forward with its agenda.[115] Although asylum and migration remain inflammatory and divisive issues across Europe, this is by no means solely, or even mainly, in connection with the Russian and Belarusian cases. Nonetheless, the damage done to relationships within the EU, from (for example) criticism of Polish and Lithuanian actions on human rights grounds, has not been fully healed. There are also more pragmatic grounds for disputes relating to the migration issue. In 2023, for example, Germany reintroduced temporary and limited checks on its border with Poland, and Warsaw reciprocated in 2025. This was blamed on concerns about irregular migration through the Schengen Area and Berlin's policy of returning asylum seekers to Poland. It has created difficulties for residents and daily cross-border activities in border towns and diplomatic tensions, as some Poles form citizens' patrols to watch for returned refugees.[116]

There is much hyperbole about the threat of weaponized migration and the degree to which Moscow, in particular, is behind it. For example, in 2023, as the number of migrants began again to rise, Maciej Wasik, Poland's deputy minister of internal affairs, said his country was again facing 'an operation organized by the Russian and Belarusian secret services, which is becoming more and more intense'.[117] In the following year, Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk alleged not only that migrants coming from Russia were a particular threat but that 'it is the Russian state, not some murky business, that is behind the organization of the recruitment, transport and attempts to smuggle thousands of people' into Europe.[118] Although Moscow may indeed be happy to see refugees continue to flock to Europe, the claim that state agencies are primarily involved rather than the underworld market in current irregular migration flows has not been proven and remains dubious.

There is also a potential intelligence advantage. After the 2015 crisis, the Norwegian Police Security Service concluded that Russians had recruited or coerced some of the migrants who had entered the country to gather intelligence.[119] Although more circumspect, the Finnish security service has admitted that there was a similar effort to use the migration wave to place intelligence assets inside the country.[120] Since then, the Czech and Polish security services have also accused the Russians of recruiting migrants, either while in transit or after they had made their way into Europe, as assets to gather intelligence or carry out sabotage and disruption.[121]

Yet, in the final analysis, what really matters is whether the Russian and Belarusian governments – and those of other states that may have observed with interest their activities (in particular Türkiye) – are of the opinion that weaponized migration still has value. Considering that the primary goal appears to be chaos rather than more purposeful political change, the assumption must be that, if the opportunity arises, either government may again adopt this tactic. Of course, it is impossible to know what Vladimir Putin thinks, but according to one well-placed Russian insider who regularly conducts projects for the Presidential Administration, 'Whether it generates the right dynamic in the long-term or not, the lesson seems to be that [it] is effective at creating short-term chaos and generating immediate political leverage.'[122]

Future threats

As a tactic, weaponized migration remains in both Minsk's and Moscow's armouries. However, Belarus's capacity to play the same card again is severely limited by the closure of so much of its border and the erection of higher, stronger frontier defences. Furthermore, as of writing, Lukashenko was also trying to restore damaged relations, especially with the US. For example, following the release of 52 prisoners in September 2025, the US government lifted some sanctions on national flag airline Belavia, enabling it to buy spare parts again for its fleet.[123] Some observers have speculated that this may deter the government from using the airline again to bring in migrants to launch at Belarus's neighbours.[124]

In contrast, especially until there is some kind of negotiated end to the war in Ukraine, Moscow has far fewer practical and political constraints, as it continues to try and bring pressure to bear on Europe. When asked about the prospects of the Kremlin using this approach again, a NATO official working on the issue of hybrid threats said the following:

> Common sense would suggest not, because it's difficult and has had led to considerable blowback. But at the same time, there is clearly a desire to cause trouble for Europe, to punish it for its support for Ukraine. I could see them trying to do something of the kind, even if it hurts them, too.[125]

Admittedly, the closure of so many border crossings and the erection of new barriers have severely curtailed Russia's capacity to throw human ammunition at the borders of Finland and Norway (and, for that matter, neighbouring Estonia and Latvia). Nonetheless, Moscow still has options, given the continued reach of its organized crime networks and political alliances, notably along five particular potential axes:

1. **The eastern Mediterranean route.** This route via Türkiye and Greece has seen diminishing numbers of irregular migrants (for example, Frontex recorded a 24% fall in the first half of 2025[126]) but remains significant. One potential pressure point for Moscow would be to encourage maritime migration routes through organized crime connections. For years, Russian nationals have played a disproportionate role in the maritime smuggling of migrants to Greece and through Greek waters, something highlighted in 2020 when two Russian sailors were each sentenced to 253 years in prison for transporting illegal migrants and human trafficking.[127] Although this remains one of the least likely scenarios, an Italian government migration analyst did posit that smuggling networks, which already have links to their Russian-based counterparts, currently suffer from 'a lack of channels to launder funds and convert payments into concrete assets such as boats', limiting the scale of their operations. These networks could be galvanized if Moscow directly or indirectly supported them. By providing money-laundering opportunities and better 'marketing' channels into Syria and Iraqi Kurdistan, 'the numbers could quickly be ramped up again'.[128]

2. **The Libyan tap.** In 2011, former Libyan dictator Muammar Gaddafi had threatened to 'flood' Europe with migrants if the EU continued to support the opposition.[129] Although Tunisia has recently become an increasingly important counterpart,[130] Libya's location has long made it a key staging post for migrant flows into southern Europe.[131] According to Frontex, in the first 10 months of 2025, the overall number of registered irregular entries into the EU declined by 22%, but the number coming through the Central Mediterranean route rose by 6%, with Libya accounting for 90% of them, and most originating from Bangladesh, Eritrea or Egypt.[132]

   Largely identified with Khalifa Haftar's Libyan Arab Armed Forces, Moscow has long been involved in Libya's turbulent politics, not least through the deployment of its Wagner Group mercenaries in 2019. The reasons are many, from interest in the country's oil to a desire to challenge Türkiye, which has been backing the rival Government of National Accord.[133] However, a concern is Libya's strategic location. Just as Italy's agreement (which has provided aid, funding and a degree of international legitimacy to coastguard agencies since 2017) has played some role in preventing irregular migration through the Mediterranean,[134] Russian control of all or part of the country and its coastline would allow it to 'turn the migrant tap on or off, as it pleased'.[135]

   In August 2025, the European Commission launched a probe into several flights operated by Belavia between Minsk and Benghazi, even though the airline does not technically offer commercial routes to Libya, due to concern that these flights might herald some new migration gambit.[136] However, of greater concern is Moscow coming to dominate potential migrant routes. In 2016, former Wirecard CEO Jan Marsalek, now a fugitive accused by the British police of being bankrolled by the Russian intelligence services and the subject of an INTERPOL red notice,[137] made an abortive attempt to set up a 15 000-strong mercenary force to control Libyan's land and coastal borders.[138] Since then, Russia has continued to play an active role in Libya, despite the logistical challenges created by the fall of the Assad regime in Damascus (which constrained its ability to stage supply flights through Syria), and the concern is that it could at some point gain greater access to that 'tap'.[139]

3. **The Balkan route.** The migrant smuggling route through the Balkans, typically from Türkiye through Greece and North Macedonia, and then often through Serbia, to enter the EU via Hungary or Croatia, remains important. In 2024, a quarter of asylum seekers who entered the UK across the English Channel had transited the western Balkans at some point in their journey.[140] Although numbers using this route fell after 2015, they have increased since 2019, with a particularly sharp rise in 2021 that coincided with the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan.

   Frontex has warned that both Serbia and Türkiye, for their own reasons, may weaponize migration as a means of bringing pressure to bear on the EU.[141] However, Moscow's complex but often productive relationship with Türkiye and even closer relationship with Serbia, with both countries also heavily penetrated by Russian organized crime, also provide Russia with options to support greater flows of migrants if it sees fit. These include providing support through money laundering and similar services, and could extend to helping gangs access practical supplies, such as the Chinese-made inflatable boats that are widely used to cross the Channel.[142]

   The potential for Moscow to facilitate migration through the Balkan route is not confined to these countries. For example, in 2025, Bulgarian Interior Minister Daniel Mitov claimed that 'neo-Marxist groups' with an ideological commitment to the freedom of movement were helping the Russian intelligence agencies to further 'illegal migration inflows' in order to 'destabilise the European Union and the United Kingdom'.[143]

   The role of Hungary, at least while Viktor Orbán remains is power, is also worth noting. Although Orbán is often described as 'pro-Moscow', it is more the case that he is often willing, for his own reasons, to side with Russia to bring pressure to bear on the rest of the EU. In 2015, Hungary was at the centre of a refugee crisis, which first saw it preventing onward travel into Germany and Austria, and then, under pressure from Berlin and Brussels, letting them continue onwards.[144] Nonetheless, this was leveraged by Orbán not just to justify sealing the Serbian–Hungarian border, but also to play to his domestic audience as the defender of the nation from EU-set quotas for accepting migrants.[145] An unlikely but not inconceivable concern is that Orbán or a similar figure could yet seek to spur a comparable crisis in the future for political reasons – a case of weaponizing migrants against his own people.[146]

4. **Weaponized advice.** One of the easiest and most cost-effective approaches to weaponizing migration is to spread disinformation – or entirely accurate information in some cases – encouraging would-be migrants to try and make a move. According to one migration consultant:

   > In 2019, just before the European elections, that there was a deliberate attempt to push a new wave of mass migration from Turkey, Greece and so on, in the direction of northern Europe [...] The wrong information was being spread by certain people, who we suspect are Iranian and Russian agent provocateurs, people who tried to push that and said Angela Merkel will open the border again.[147]

   Both Belarus and Russia exploited social media, from Facebook pages to messaging apps, to encourage and guide would-be migrants into their channels, while independent human smuggling networks eager to take advantage of the opportunities opened by both governments conducted their own marketing campaigns through both word of mouth and online platforms. This was part of a coordinated online and physical campaign. As one Europol analyst framed it, the concern is that 'the Russians – or the Iranians, or some other hostile power – could simply claim there are new opportunities in Europe to encourage people to start moving', even when such opportunities

may not exist, and offer 'advice on where to go, and what to say when claiming asylum'.[148] In this way, they could create new waves of migration without needing to go to the effort of opening routes into Europe and facing the potential diplomatic backlash.

5. **Ukrainian escapes.** There are already more than 4.7 million refugees from Ukraine in Europe, many of whom are unlikely to return home, even when the war ends.[149] A credible concern is that, especially if Moscow persists with its military campaign and makes further political or military breakthroughs, Russia could deliberately seek to drive more people into fleeing not simply westwards within the country, as is the case now (there are around 3.7 million internally displaced people), but further into Europe.[150] The aim would be both to destabilize Ukraine and impose costs and generate a political backlash in the country's neighbours and supporters. As of writing, after all, there are some signs that the initial welcome extended to Ukrainian refugees is wearing thin. Germany is reducing the level of support granted to Ukrainians to the same degree as it does to other refugees, and Poland now limits free access to state-run shelters to those considered vulnerable.[151] Indeed, cases of violence against Ukrainians are on the increase, in part because of a diminishing sense that they will return home, even if peace is achieved.[152]

   As of writing, Russia is carrying out a sustained campaign of attacks on Ukraine's power grid, intended to create blackouts at the height of winter. As one Ukrainian official admitted, 'If this escalates, it might create the kinds of conditions that force people simply to flee, and if there are no safe havens in the west of the country, then they will keep going.'[153] Alternatively – and less likely, given Russia's need for workers – some of the estimated 1.2 million Ukrainian refugees inside Russia could be forced or encouraged to seek refuge in Europe, taking advantage of the existing schemes that provide special opportunities for Ukrainian citizens.[154]

RECOMMENDATIONS

Weaponizing refugees and immigrants threatens the regional security of the European Union and constitutes a grave breach of human rights.

JOINT STATEMENT BY PRIME MINISTERS INGRIDA ŠIMONYTĖ (LITHUANIA), ARTURS KRIŠJĀNIS KARIŅŠ (LATVIA), KAJA KALLAS (ESTONIA) AND MATEUSZ MORAWIECKI (POLAND), 2021[155]

So long as there is a desire to build new lives in Europe, there will be organized and disorganized flows of people, including but by no means exclusively or primarily via Belarus and Russia. In 2024, for example, a multinational investigation coordinated by Europol broke up 'a criminal network composed of both Polish and non-EU nationals (from Ukraine, Belarus, Russia and Georgia) residing in Poland and other European countries' that smuggled migrants through Russia and Belarus into the EU.[156] Would-be migrants, largely from Afghanistan, Egypt, Iran, Iraq and Syria would legally travel to Belarus, be smuggled across the Polish–Belarusian border and then be moved on by car, paying more than €5 000 per person, depending on how far they were headed.

However, these are essentially criminal operations with little or no state involvement beyond the corruption of individual officials. The key problem is that the underworld market will have its way, creating constant opportunities for the instrumentalization of flows of people:

> Smugglers and migrants are adapting to circumstances by going north. The reason they are entering Russia in the first place is because European policy has made southern and eastern migration routes incredibly difficult and dangerous. If Putin is weaponizing migration, then Europe, in a very real way, is channelling ammunition to him.[157]

Furthermore, addressing the problem is never just a technical border control and law enforcement issue, but always a political and ethical challenge. As Anaïs Marin and Samantha de Bendern put it following the 2021 crisis:

> Lukashenka's action was aptly exploiting three key pressure points of the EU – as a normative power where the human dignity of migrants is overlooked while the European border and coastguard agency Frontex stands by, as a geopolitical actor seeking to externalize its migration problem by signing readmission agreements with transit countries, and as a community of values with the EU-Poland dispute over rule of law.[158]

Weaponized migration, which often involves sudden surges of irregular migrants and state efforts to facilitate and cynically exploit them to political ends, thus poses a particular challenge. What lessons can be learned to allow such efforts to be identified, disrupted and managed in the future?

The European Union and the international community

It is tempting to focus on the tactical responses needed in a crisis, such as pressuring airlines to stop bringing in migrants from hotspots and providing funds and direct border support in the moment, including through Frontex. There is also the fundamental issue of dangerous and impoverished parts of the world, from where people are willing to take huge risks and pay significant sums to escape. These are all important and certainly need to be considered, but they do not address specific issues relating to the challenge of weaponized migration. A series of responses are needed that consider both. These are measures that could be applied at the level of the EU or the wider international community or even, in some cases, at the level of individual states such as the UK.

Prepare contingency plans for potential crises. Contingency planning is crucial. As has been observed:

> It is easy to identify cases of [migrant instrumentalization] when they occur, but it is near impossible to predict them […] Belarusian President Lukashenko (himself a former border official) started threatening to push migrants into Western Europe as far back as 2002 but only followed through after two decades. Knowing when perpetrators will act is virtually impossible, but reacting quickly is remarkably easy.[159]

Rapid reaction may not be quite as easy as that, but it is crucial to do everything that can be done to ensure a quick response, given that weaponized migration often happens and escalates very quickly, overwhelming both national and international resources. Such planning is conducted by most (although not all) European states, but in the words of a Frontex official, 'not enough at the level of the [European] Union'.[160] A 2024 non-paper prepared for the Council of the EU by the Finnish and Italian governments and a 2025 position paper from the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, represent useful starting points, covering the broad topline issues. But to be operationalized, they will require detailed scenario modelling and consequent contingency planning.[161]

Develop and maintain the capacity to surge support. A key aspect of the last point is to ensure that, while allies and partners routinely provide a degree of assistance (for example, the UK has provided drones and night-vision goggles to help local border guards intercept irregular migrants in the Balkans[162]), robust agreements and contingency plans are needed to respond quickly in a crisis, as well as having the necessary resources available or knowing where to find them. As a Lithuanian Interior Ministry official noted:

> This means money, it means personnel, it means everything from replacement razor wire to tents for refugees; it can't all be sitting around just in case for ever, so we need proper inventories and understandings, so that if we need it all of a sudden, we at least know who to ask, and they know to let us have them.[163]

Balance security and prevention. The proposed EU Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) proposal for 2028–2035 envisages the tripling of funds for border management, with most (€48 billion) earmarked for policies related to police and border security.[164] There are fears that this will not be sustainable, considering that it may well come at the expense of social programmes.[165] Beyond that, given that in the previous MFF, the EU had for the first time committed itself to spending more on

migration control than on trying to secure and uplift Africa, the concern is that a 'Fortress Europe' approach is emerging, which means that efforts to reduce some of the pressures for migration will be neglected.[166] Of course, resources are always limited but, as one European Commission official who had previously been an aid coordinator in sub-Saharan Africa complained, 'It seems as if too many people in Brussels have given up on the idea of addressing migration at source.'[167]

Continue to reform Frontex. Frontex, more formally the European Border and Coast Guard Agency, has been bedevilled by allegations of 'scandals, cover-ups and human rights violations', and a general lack of accountability.[168] In particular, it has been accused of (at best) turning a blind eye to and (at worst) directly participating in human rights abuses of would-be migrants, all in the name of creating and maintaining a 'web of violent deterrence'.[169] To a degree, this reflects the practices in non-EU countries, with which Frontex must necessarily engage, but also extends to operations carried out by member states, about which the agency's former director, Fabrice Leggeri, stands accused of lying to the European Parliament.[170] In 2023, Leggeri was replaced by Hans Leijtens, a former Dutch gendarmerie commander, who has vowed to renew Frontex's commitment to migrants' rights.[171] However, progress has been limited, not least because the real initiative for border security operations rests with member states, and Frontex often has a limited mandate or power to influence them – and depends on their continued support.

In 2024, the European Commission president Ursula von der Leyen proposed the expansion of Frontex, which is already the EU's largest executive agency, to 30 000 staff,[172] up from its current strength of 2 500 personnel (only half the size of Lithuania's State Border Guard Service). This expansion may well be useful but, without continued and serious reform, is likely to be cost-ineffective and to facilitate the kinds of migrant abuses that ultimately do not dissuade future waves, but instead encourage them to turn to organized crime gangs who are able to facilitate their movement.[173] In the words of an Italian coastguard officer who had worked with Frontex, 'They can be useful providing extra manpower sometimes, and also new equipment, but their real role ought to be offering an example of professionalism and good, ethical practice. And there they still fall short.'[174]

Be ready to mobilize coalitions of origin countries. It is often assumed that governments of the countries of origin either do not care what happens to their citizens who opt to leave or are too disrupted to be able to do anything about it. This is not always the case. Many countries protest the abuses visited on their citizens and find their weaponization distasteful or, indeed, expensive: the Iraqi government, for example, was clearly unhappy with having to fly hundreds of stranded migrants back home from Belarus in 2021.[175] This opens up diplomatic opportunities to mobilize coalitions, especially of the more influential origin countries, to call out nations indulging in such gambits and inflict diplomatic costs on them.[176] Even if it does not change the situation on the ground at the moment, it may deter renewed use of migrants as tools.

State policy

Even within the EU, certain actions are best handled at the level of the member state, or by other European nations. For better or for worse, border control and migration policy are increasingly being determined at a national level, and while a renewed commitment to a comprehensive approach and standardized practices would undoubtedly be of value, politically speaking this does not seem viable at present. Rather than hanker after a policy that would take years – if ever – to formulate and navigate through Brussels, it is at the national level that the quickest and most effective reforms can be implemented.

Quick, clear and credible attribution. There is a balance to be struck between alarmism, the tendency to present any upsurge in migration numbers as the result of deliberate foreign machination, and the failure to address a real threat. Given that a strong response to weaponized migration depends on not only closing borders but also mobilizing both international and domestic support (especially where border closures may affect economic livelihoods), it is important that target countries present a clear narrative of the facts on the ground that is backed by evidence. One Polish official lamented that 'in 2021, we relied too heavily just on calling out Lukashenko as an evil man, rather than right from the start presenting this as a human tragedy for the migrants, who were being used'. In his view, this, combined with 'the images of frankly over-zealous border control measures', meant that 'some European partners, while sounding supportive, in practice were unsure whether we were trying to inflame the situation to our own ends', which reduced their enthusiasm to support Warsaw.[177]

Negotiate but with muscle. Neither Lukashenko nor Putin truly take the EU as an institution and European Commission bodies seriously, believing that the nation state is still the fundamental building block of the international system. As a result, direct diplomatic negotiations by states will be much more effective, especially if backed by a clear and demonstrable willingness to retaliate and impose diplomatic, political and economic costs unless there is a quick and satisfactory resolution. For example, the 2015 crisis on the Finnish border was controlled by the closing of crossings, but the final push for an end came when Finnish President Sauli Niinistö threatened to cancel a visit to Moscow, on which Moscow had set considerable store.

Develop strategies to deter weaponized migration. Deterrence theory posits two approaches: deterrence by punishment and by denial. The former relies heavily on sanctions, closures and pushbacks at the border and similar measures. However, if the EU or individual states rely too heavily on such measures, the danger is that they risk 'self-containment', wherein the target 'surrounds itself by fences and uses its economic ties with neighbours primarily for punishment and coercion'.[178] More to the point, authoritarian regimes, such as Russia and Belarus, are often hard to deter meaningfully through such direct measures, especially if they are already isolated and sanctioned, and there is a risk of public backlash at home.

Given that the primary aim of weaponized migration is to influence the target state's policies and its domestic politics, deterrence by denial can also be a powerful tool, as it essentially demonstrates in advance that such measures will not have the desired effect. Public statements have their place, but the best assurance is to build a national consensus in advance and openly discuss both the threat and the need to 'keep calm and carry on' in the face of a future crisis.

It is also worth highlighting the risks to countries that may be tempted to weaponize migration. In 2018, when the Turkish government tried to use the threat of migration as leverage with the EU, not least out of frustration at the accumulation of Syrian refugees within its borders, an estimated 30 000 of these refugees took the opportunity to head into Europe. Yet, as news of this spread, perhaps half a million more Syrians began heading towards the Turkish border, creating the danger that its total refugee population would actually increase.[179]

Provide adequate resources for border control. As a Finnish official noted, 'Border security is unglamorous, especially if is competing for resources with the military,' and can too easily be neglected until there is a crisis, at which point it is too late.[180] As noted above, the proposed EU MFF proposal for 2028–2035 envisages substantially more funds for border management. However, a concern is that individual states, most of which are committed to substantial increases in defence spending (NATO

members have formally committed to raise spending to a minimum of 3.5% of GDP plus another 1.5% on defence-related expenditures), will fail to address border security with the same urgency.[181]

Close the small loopholes. Legal and practical loopholes in border control may often appear trivial but risk opening up larger ones in the future. For instance, some intermediaries operating on the Belorussian–Lithuanian border made arrangements with officials on both sides to allow legal crossings to take place more quickly and smoothly. 'For an extra fee, I can arrange a special expedited corridor to avoid the queue,' one transport service operator said. Émigré Russians using this route describe being bused across the border with a registered disabled Belarusian who had a Schengen visa and had been hired to join the group, so that they could use a special fast lane. Of course this is a subversion of the regulations but, with suitable payments to the officials on both sides, happens on a near-daily basis.[182] On one level, this is a petty infraction but, when asked about this practice, a Frontex official was both furious and defensive, describing it as the 'thin end of the wedge – the kind of seemingly innocent practice that can lead to something much more serious [but also] difficult to police, so long as no one takes it seriously'.[183]

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