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## **Weapons of Mass Migration in the 21st Century: Russia, Belarus, and the European Union**

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# Weapons of Mass Migration in the 21st Century: Russia, Belarus, and the European Union

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## **I. Abstract**

In recent years, a debate has arisen about a controversial method of warfare – refugees and migrants who are exploited in multi-dimensional conflicts and humanitarian crises by state actors. The notion of ‘weapons of mass migration’, or a deliberate use of refugees and migrants as leverage against other nation-states, became one of the most prominent yet underappreciated theories in academic literature. But who actually availed themselves of the “weapons of mass migration” during the European migrant crisis, and how does migration fit into the realm of international relations today? My thesis aims to provide a detailed examination of the alleged weaponization of refugees and migrants practiced by Russia and Belarus during the 2015-16 European migrant crisis and the 2021-22 Belarus-European Union border crisis, respectively. The main factors analyzed include 1) the historical background of Russia and Belarus relations with the European Union (EU); 2) the different types of measures that the Russian and Belarusian government both relied on when weaponizing refugees and migrants; 3) to what extent did the “weapons of mass migration” affect the political developments in Europe; and 4) how successful Russia and Belarus were in doing so. In analyzing these factors, the paper concludes that ‘weapons of mass migration’ do exist. As in the case studies, migrants and refugees were created, manipulated, and exploited by these two regimes.

## II. Introduction

Forced or involuntary migration has become a severe global issue in the twenty-first century. The number of persons compelled to escape their homes owing to human rights violations, persecution, and other reasons that breach international law has risen considerably in recent years all over the world. The vast majority of those people are either labeled as refugees or asylum seekers. According to the 1951 United Nations Convention on the Status of Refugee, a refugee is a “person who is unable or unwilling to return to his or her home country because of a ‘well-founded fear of persecution’ due to reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion.”<sup>1</sup> Supported by the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights and reinforced by the 1967 Protocol, this treaty considers refugees as people who have no choice but to flee from their home countries and across international borders as an attempt to resettle in another country.

Based on the 1951 Convention, the definition of forced displacement has been interpreted differently by governments, NGOs, and other international organizations. The International Organization for Migration (IOM), for example, defines forced displacement as a phenomenon whereby people are trying to "escape persecution, conflict, repression, natural and human-made disasters, ecological degradation, or other situations that endanger their lives, freedom or livelihood"<sup>2</sup>. UNESCO similarly defines the term as "the forced movement of people from their locality or environment and occupational activities."<sup>3</sup> Out of all the main causes of displacement, conflicts stand on top of the list. Typically, conflict-induced displacement refers to instances in which people are forced to evacuate their homes due to political violence, such as civil wars,

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<sup>1</sup>“Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees.” United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. Accessed November 7, 2021. <https://www.unhcr.org/3b66c2aa10>.

<sup>2</sup> "What is forced migration? — Forced Migration Online". [www.forced migration.org](http://www.forced migration.org). Archived from the original on 2017-08-01. Retrieved 2017-01-17.

<sup>3</sup> "Displaced Person / Displacement | United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization". [www.unesco.org](http://www.unesco.org). Retrieved 2019-10-24.

ethnic conflicts, terrorism, and/or other violations of their human rights. Most conflict-induced displacement in the 21st century has occurred in war-torn countries, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East. A contemporary case study is the Syrian Civil War (which started on March 15, 2011). In the wake of the civil war, some 13.5 million Syrian migrants and asylum seekers have flooded to Europe, creating a humanitarian crisis as a result.<sup>4</sup>

One often unrecognized factor that helps to define a conflict-induced displacement remains to be unexplored: the involvement foreign of foreign regional and international state actors. But given how the most common causes of forced displacement primarily revolve around the migrants and refugees themselves, such as economic, environmental, social and political factors, it's all too simple to think that forced displacement is an inevitable result of conflict. Forced displacement, in actuality, is a subtle if unethical means to an end — one founded as a subsequent result of a sovereign nation's political decisions, frequently for specific political and/or economic ends.<sup>5</sup> In doing so, nation-states can avoid direct confrontation with others while progressing their agenda. Hence migration can actually be engineered and exploited by external nation-states in order to serve their own economic and political interests.

Much of the scholarly research into the European migrant crisis so far merely focuses on the successes and failures of the European Union's response to the migrant crisis. But trying to study the humanitarian aspect of the refugee crisis is a limited scope of analysis, and will not lead to a more useful understanding of how forced displacement not only affects the politics of nation-states, but their relations with other nations. The relevant literature on refugee politics has yet to investigate how forced migration impacts host state conduct and what this means for other

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<sup>4</sup> "Global Trends - Forced Displacement in 2015." United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), 2015. <https://www.unhcr.org/576408cd7.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> Greenhill, Kelly M. "Weapons of Mass Migration: Forced Displacement as an Instrument of Coercion." *Strategic Insights* 9, no. 1 (2010).

state actors whose major purpose in the international arena is to further their national interests and influence. These limited inquiries will be answered by applying the theory of “weapons of mass migration” in the case studies of Russia and Belarus in order to further explain how this phenomenon does exist in the 21st century.

First, I compiled existing research related to the “weapons of mass migration”, which serves as the foundation of the thesis. Then, I will examine Russia and Belarus to provide insight into the development and trajectory of their foreign policy, and how to interpret it through the alleged use of ‘weapons of mass migration’. Each case study presents the historical context of their relations with the European Union and the strategy they have used to weaponize mass migration movements. In conclusion, I argue that both Russia and Belarus are facilitating the migrant flows by means of unconventional methods in an attempt to undermine their European counterparts in the short-run while advancing their (geo-)political interests in the long-run.

### **III. Methodology and Limitations**

#### *A. Importance of case studies chosen – Significance*

The comparative analysis of Russia and Belarus within the context of the European migrant crisis will provide insight as to whether, how and why they utilized “weapons of mass migration.” The Russian Federation and the Republic of Belarus are important actors in the international realm, due to their status as authoritarian countries who possess tense relations with the European Union. These two countries – one under the impetus of Russian president Vladimir Putin and the other under Belarusian president Alexander Lukashenko – also share a common foreign policy of enhancing their (geo-)political influence across Europe. Both regimes have employed a shared doctrine of “weapons of mass migration”, although the two countries have used this weapon on different schedules. Whereas Russia has been accused by the European

Union of weaponizing refugees and migrants as far as back as the 2015-16 European migrant crisis, Belarus has been only recently accused by Poland, Lithuania and Latvia of doing the same since July 2021. As seen, these two nations are similar in many factors, yet the final outcome, its geo-political interests shifting towards the EU, is very different between the two. By selecting these two countries, I will try to evaluate the correlation of their use of the weapon and their foreign policies, as well as the implications it may have on the European Union.

*B. Method/organization of the paper*

This paper will first outline previous scholarly work on different interpretations of the “weapons of mass migration”, which provides context of Russia and Belarus’ involvement in the EU migrant crisis and their alleged exploitation of the mass migration movement. In the literature review, I propose that Russia and Belarus are indeed weaponizing refugees by using the apparent threat of a refugee crisis as a way to destabilize its European neighbors while gradually advancing their geopolitical interests. I will then discuss the Russian and Belarussian case studies. For each country, historical overviews, relations with the European Union, methods of weaponizing refugees, and their impact on the European Union will be outlined. Next, the analysis section will review the case studies and suggest some alternative perspectives that either support or contradict the existing research on my topic. Finally, my conclusion will summarize the arguments discussed and outline future questions to be researched in the 21st century-based field of European comparative politics and migration studies.

*C. Limitations*

The limitations of my thesis pertain to the difficulty in gathering concrete evidence that both Russia and Belarus are indeed weaponizing refugees against the EU. Both Russia and Belarus possess state-owned media, obstruct journalistic enquiry through widespread arrests and



threats, and actively limit access to information. In fact, most of the accusations of using “weapons of mass migration” are reported by the West, and hence can be ignored by the accused. In Russia’s case, most of the primary sources about the Kremlin’s alleged “weapons of mass migrations” mainly originate from Western European sources not limited to government publications, reports, newspapers, and scholarly articles. In the case of Belarus, these allegations have been recently brought up in the past couple of months since July 2021. Thus, most of the evidence about Belarus originates from Western secondary sources. Finally, this paper does not focus on the humanitarian aspect of the migrant crisis, as these events are not merely about migration. Overall, these are limits to the creation of a complete portrait of the concept at hand in regard to whether they utilize “weapons of mass migration.”

#### **IV. Literature Review**

To begin, it is important to first understand where the ‘weapons of mass migration’ come from. Myron Weiner (1993) and Michael Teitelbaum (1984) were the first scholars to challenge this theory by suggesting that population movements can be treated as a political means to political and military ends by nation-states. Both scholars also saw population movements as a potential security threat to the internal stability of countries who are on the receiving end.<sup>6</sup> Despite the fact that they introduced this phenomenon, the majority of International Relations scholars typically define migrants and refugees as nothing more than natural products of political violence. Teitelbaum even remarked in his own words how “the most striking weakness in migration theories drawn from the social sciences is their failure to detail in a serious way with government action in initiating, selecting, restraining, and ending migration movements.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Weiner, Myron. (1995) *The Global Migration Crisis: Challenge to States and Human Rights*. New York: Addison-Wesley

<sup>7</sup> Teitelbaum, Michael S. (2001) “International Migration: Predicting the Unknowable,” in Myron Weiner and Sharon Stanton Russell (eds.), *Demography and National Security*. New York: Russell Sage

James Hollifield (2000) and Robert Mandel (1997) also offered a theoretical explanation of migration movements by analyzing its security implications on receiving nations. Hollifield conceived and formulated a conclusion that forced displacement of migrants and refugees can be exploited for self-interest. By forcing migration into receiving states, they inflict a security threat. Supporting Hollifield's theoretical argument, Mandel highlighted some of the following causes of refugee-related perceived security threats: political instability, civil conflict/ethnic conflict, economic opportunity, environmental degradation/natural disaster and great foreign power rivalries and interventionist policies.<sup>8</sup> He also explained how this phenomena underlines the flaws of the modern nation-state while also questioning the future consequences of how migration will be treated in a globalized world. The main limitation of this research, however, is the lack of contemporary case studies to support this argument.

In her book, *Weapons of Mass Migration: Forced Displacement, Coercion, and Foreign Policy*, Kelly Greenhill (2010) offered a fresh perspective of migration by outlining different ways in which refugees and migrants have been weaponized by states in the post-World War II era.<sup>9</sup> Building on Weiner's and Teitelbaum's work, she labeled this phenomenon as strategically engineered migration – “out-migrations that are deliberately induced or manipulated by state or non-state actors, in ways designed to augment, reduce, or change the composition of the population residing within a particular territory, for political, economic or military ends.”<sup>10</sup> Although Greenhill has expanded on Teitelbaum's and Weiner's original work, she outlined seven different variants of strategically engineered migration which will be better explained in the theoretical framework. Christopher C Joyner (2006) also describes how a nation can exploit

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<sup>8</sup> Mandel, Robert (1997) “Perceived Security Threat and the Global Refugee Crisis,” *Armed Forces and Society* 24, no. 1: 77–103.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> Greenhill, Kelly M. (2008) “Strategic Engineered Migration as a Weapon of War,” *Civil Wars* vol. 10. no. 1.

migration in order to induce the political behavior of another state actor through the use of pressure, threats, and intimidation, and conventional military means.<sup>11</sup> But unlike Joyner, Greenhill explains how states can also use nonmilitary means to weaponize migrants.

Furthermore, her research breaks down the concept of “weapons of mass migration” by highlighting different types of nation-states who exercise strategically engineered migration: generators, agents provocateurs, and opportunists.<sup>12</sup> In this thesis, both Russia and Belarus are best seen as generators, or states who indirectly create the mass influx of refugees by any other means besides military involvement.<sup>13</sup> As so-called generators, Russia and Belarus attempt to dissuade other target states from acting accordingly to their migration policies by relying on unconventional mechanisms. The first one is power-base erosion, which focuses on using migration to impose negative implications on the incumbent government’s relations with its citizens. The second one is unrest, similar to the first mechanism, relies on targeting certain nations with messages highlighting existing domestic problems with migration that they created in the first place. Next is decapitation, or threatening its leadership’s sovereignty and national security. The fourth mechanism is weakening, which uses migration to induce social, political and economic problems within the country. And last but not least, denial is used as a coping mechanism for countries such as Russia and Belarus who sought to gain political victories without necessarily inciting direct confrontation.<sup>14</sup> According to this viewpoint, both countries made use of these mechanisms in order to alter the behavior of the European Union, their target.

Greenhill also recognizes a pattern whereby authoritarian regimes specifically target advanced liberal democracies. A key point is that advanced liberal democracies are likely to

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<sup>11</sup> Joyner, Christopher C. “Coercion.” *Max Planck Encyclopedias of International Law*, December 2006.

<sup>12</sup> Greenhill, Kelly M. “Weapons of Mass Migration: Forced Displacement as an Instrument of Coercion.” *Strategic Insights* 9, no. 1 (2010).

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Byman and Waxman, *Dynamics of Coercion*, 50.

succumb to strategically engineered migration for several reasons, each of which challenges the norms of the European Union with regard to refugee-related issues.<sup>15</sup> Before Greenhill, Sandra Lavanex (2010) and James Hollifield (1992) claimed how liberal democracies such as the EU asserted a mandate regarding refugee protection, as evident in the EU's commitments toward the 1948 Human Rights Declaration, the 1951 Convention, and the 1967 Protocol during the Cold War.<sup>16</sup> These commitments were interpreted as a sign of good faith that the democratic systems of the West would ensure refugee protection far more effectively than the communist regimes.<sup>17</sup> Florian Trauner (2016), on the contrary, offers a frightening interpretation of this circumstance. He concludes that the EU's strategy of containing refugees might have negative consequences in the future. These commitments gradually put pressure on the EU's responsibility to adhere to them without having a say in revising the mandate<sup>18</sup> This exemplifies the widening gap between claimed commitments and real political practice. Trauner also points out how the actual flaws of the EU asylum policy-making system can trigger or exacerbate conflicts both within states and between them.<sup>19</sup> Opposition parties within these member states would treat such circumstances as strong incentives to criticize the flaws of the current administrations' policy to accept refugees no matter the cost – hence in many cases the emergence of polarization and anti-European sentiments.<sup>20</sup> By making the EU look ineffective and disunified, such a crisis can provide an opportunity for external nations to take advantage of its weaknesses because they know that the union will sometimes impose the costs of hypocrisy. In my case studies, I wish to explore where

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<sup>15</sup> Greenhill, Kelly M. "Weapons of Mass Migration: Forced Displacement as an Instrument of Coercion." *Strategic Insights* 9, no. 1 (2010).

<sup>16</sup> James Hollifield, "Migration and International Relations: Cooperation and Control in the European Community," *International Migration Review* 26 (1992): 568-95.

<sup>17</sup> Lavanex, S. 2001. The Europeanization of refugee policies: normative challenges and institutional legacies. *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies* 39, no. 5: 851–74. 10.1111/jcms.2001.39.issue-5

<sup>18</sup> Florian Trauner (2016) Asylum policy: the EU's 'crises' and the looming policy regime failure, *Journal of European Integration*, 38:3, 311-325, DOI: 10.1080/07036337.2016.1140756

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

and how the EU's vulnerability during the refugee crisis turned beneficial for authoritarian regimes such as Russia and Belarus.

## **V. Theoretical Framework**

In order to thoroughly examine and understand Russia's and Belarus' use of “weapons of mass migrations”, we must employ a comprehensive taxonomy that includes seven variants of strategic engineered migration (as shown in Figure 1).<sup>21</sup> Based on Greenhill's past work, some of these types are comparable to asymmetric warfare in which governments and non-state entities try to influence or undermine their adversaries using unorthodox tactics. All of them will be further reviewed in the analysis section to confirm Russia's and Belarus's weaponization of migrants/refugees. However, because migrant movements may compromise many goals and aims, several of the following seven variables might be exercised by Russia and Belarus.

As shown in Figure 1, the first of the seven variants is coercive engineered migration, or cross-border population migrations that are purposefully manufactured by countries in order to persuade a target state to make certain political, military, or economic concessions.<sup>22</sup> The second variant is dispossessory whereby a country takes advantage of migration flows in order to take territories or natural resources from the target group to where migrants are fleeing. The third variant is exportive whereby a country seeks to politically undermine a rival power. The variant is economic migration, which describes when a country makes monetary gains by exploiting the migration outflow. The fifth column, which differs from dispositive, focuses more on weakening a target government by directly sending migrants to its territory. The sixth variant is militarized whereby a country can sabotage enemy activities or reduce military support by dispatching migrants to their territories so that the enemy is more concerned with the humanitarian response.

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<sup>21</sup> Greenhill, Kelly M. (March 2008). "Strategic Engineered Migration as a Weapon of War". *Civil Wars*. 10 (1): 8. doi:10.1080/13698240701835425. S2CID 145215754. Retrieved 20 August 2019.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

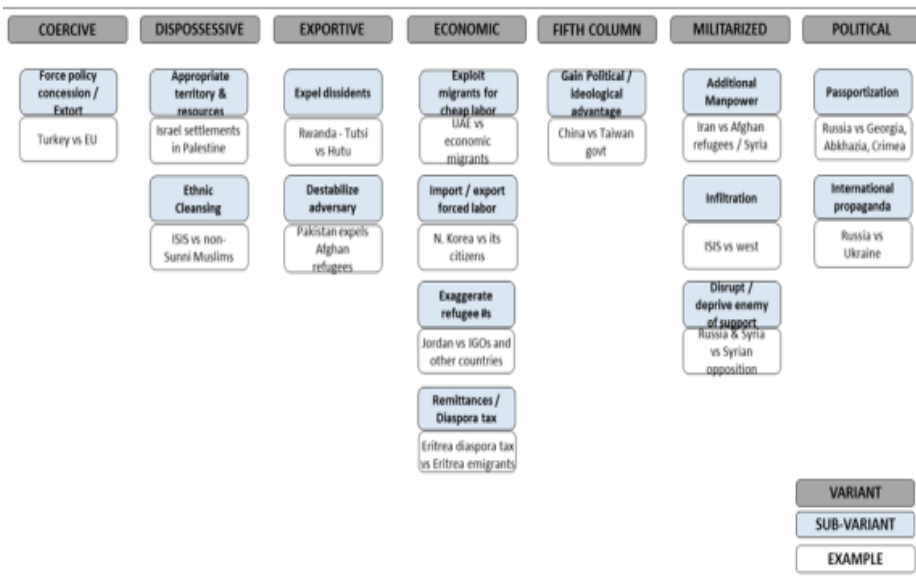


Figure 1: Seven Categories of Weaponized Migration, as presented in Kelly Greenhill's "Strategic Engineered Migration as a Weapon of War"

And last but not least, the seventh variant revolves around migration-related propaganda which countries can use to strengthen their perceived legitimacy on a regional or worldwide level while weakening their adversaries' in the process.

## VI. Case Studies

### Russia

#### I. Russia's Motivations: Putin's restoration of a lost empire

Russia has undergone two large implosions in the past century: the collapse of the former Russian Empire during the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917 and the dissolution of the USSR in 1991. Even though the fall of the Soviet Union ushered in a new age for Russia, the country now found itself at the mercy of sheer Western dominance. This event shaped the geo-political agenda of Vladimir Putin. In his own words, he termed the fall of the USSR as "a major geopolitical disaster of the 20th century" in his address at the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation on

April 25, 2005.<sup>23</sup> More than a mere mourning of a once powerful communist state, Putin's declaration can be seen in light of his desire to regain territories that the Russian Federation has initially lost and to reclaim its former imperial glory. He also sought to halt the advances of the West through Eastern Europe and formerly Soviet republics.<sup>24</sup>

To fulfill its geo-political agenda under the principle of the restoration of imperial glory, Moscow is waging two campaigns across the former Soviet Union: expanding its political, economic, and military clout; and countering Western and transatlantic institutions..<sup>25</sup> These objectives first took place in 1990 when the Eastern Bloc satellites started to abandon Russia and joined NATO. East Germany reunited with the Federal Republic of Germany and became part of NATO, followed by Hungary, the Czech Republic and Poland.<sup>26</sup> Putin initially acknowledged NATO, going as far as not ruling out the possibility of Russia joining the alliance.<sup>27</sup> NATO responded by establishing the NATO-Russia Council in 2002 in which NATO reassured the Russian Federation that it would continue to uphold its promise made during the 1990 negotiations between Western leaders and Mikhail Gorbachev, of not expanding "not one inch eastward".<sup>28</sup> Promises were made but not honored, according to Putin.

It became clear when seven more Eastern Bloc countries – Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia – joined NATO, later followed by Albania, Croatia, and Montenegro.<sup>29</sup> Russia considers the former Soviet republics, Eastern Europe and the Balkans

<sup>23</sup> Osborn, Andrew. "Putin: Collapse of the Soviet Union Was 'Catastrophe of the Century'." *The Independent*. Independent Digital News and Media, April 25, 2005.

<sup>24</sup> Dawisha, Karen. "Putin's Kleptocracy: Who Owns Russia?" New York: Simon & Schuster, 2014.

<sup>25</sup> Stronski, Paul, and Richard Sokolsky. "The Return of Global Russia: An Analytical Framework." *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, December 14, 2017.

<sup>26</sup> Adomelt, Hannes. "Gorbachev's Consent to Unified Germany's Membership in NATO." *German Institute for International and Security Affairs*, December 2006. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvx8b7c5.14>.

<sup>27</sup> Frost, David. "BBC Breakfast with Frost: Interview with Vladimir Putin." *BBC News*, March 5, 2000.

[http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/english/static/audio\\_video/programmes/breakfast\\_with\\_frost/transcripts/putin5.mar.txt](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/english/static/audio_video/programmes/breakfast_with_frost/transcripts/putin5.mar.txt).

<sup>28</sup> Sarotte, Mary Elise. "A Broken Promise? What the West Really Told Moscow About NATO Expansion." *Foreign Affairs* 93, no. 5 (2014): 90–97.

<sup>29</sup> "Member Countries." NATO, last updated: March 26, 2018.

[https://www.nato.int/cps/ua/natohq/topics\\_52044.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/ua/natohq/topics_52044.htm).

to fall under their sphere of influence. So it was with great concern that they watched Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia not only joined NATO, but some of them acceded to EU membership in 2004.<sup>30</sup> The line was eventually drawn once the European Union and NATO began to negotiate membership with Ukraine, Russia's most prized possession. This, combined with the incorporation of former Soviet satellites into the EU in spite of assurances to the contrary, was seen by the Kremlin as a challenge to its power. Russia was even more determined to prevent other neighboring countries from aligning with the West, and in the process, preserve its sphere of influence.

To do so, the Kremlin used every weapon at its disposition to influence both the public and political elites alike in Eastern European countries.<sup>31</sup> This included diplomatic and cyber intelligence efforts, as well as economic and trade incentives and flexing their military muscle. Political sociologist Larry Diamond notes that Putin's well-planned campaign included the invasion of Georgia (2008); attempts to include the former Soviet republics, such as Belarus, Kazakhstan, Armenia and Kyrgyzstan, in the Eurasian Economic Union; a successful attempt to have formerly Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich to refuse signing the Association Agreements (2014); invasions and annexation of Crimea and Sevastopol the same year, followed by the Russo-Ukrainian conflict which continues to this day.<sup>32</sup>

Despite tremendous progress in these areas, there have been setbacks in Moscow's efforts. All of which, without surprise, involved renewed conflict with the European Union. Consequently, these actions changed Russia's status as a strategic "partner" to a strategic "challenge". The EU condemned Moscow's attempts to further expand its sphere of influence in

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<sup>30</sup> Ivanica, Madalina. (2003) An Overview of the Treaty of Accession of Cyprus, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia to the European Union. EIPA Working Paper 03/W/03.

<sup>31</sup> Stronski, Paul, and Richard Sokolsky. "The Return of Global Russia: An Analytical Framework." Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, December 14, 2017.

<sup>32</sup> Diamond, Larry (2016-12-09). "Russia and the Threat to Liberal Democracy". The Atlantic. Retrieved 2021-03-06.



these countries as it violated the principle of rules-based international order which specifies that nations ought to respect the territorial integrity and independence of countries such as Ukraine.<sup>33</sup> On March 20, 2014, the EU took action by imposing economic and financial sanctions on Russian officials, banks, and businesses.<sup>34</sup>

## *II. Russia's Objectives: 2015-16 European Migrant Crisis*

The European migrant crisis of 2015-16 saw an upsurge in the movement of refugees and migrants fleeing political violence from the Middle East and Africa, with a record 1.3 million migrants seeking asylum in EU countries.<sup>35</sup> The main catalyst to this crisis was the ongoing Syrian Civil War, which began right after the Arab Spring protests of March 2011, and then escalated into a civil war between the Syrian government and anti-government rebel groups.<sup>36</sup> As shown in Figure 2, the civil war was backed by Russia and Iran who allied themselves with the Syrian government and by the United States, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and others who allied with the rebels.<sup>37</sup> As of December 2015, an influx of 600,000 million people have been displaced to the European Union, primarily to Germany, due to the multi-faceted conflict.<sup>38</sup>

As such, the migration crisis instantly posed a major challenge to the European Union. One might ask whether the migration flows to Europe could be part of Russia's strategy of "strategic engineered migration" in order to weaken the European Union, if not, some of the EU member states. The United States and the EU both suspected that Russia was deliberately

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<sup>33</sup> Stronski, Paul, and Richard Sokolsky. "The Return of Global Russia: An Analytical Framework." Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, December 14, 2017.

<sup>34</sup> "Russia's rouble crisis poses threat to nine countries relying on remittances Archived 9 December 2016 at the Wayback Machine". The Guardian. 18 January 2015.

<sup>35</sup> "Migrant Crisis: Migration to Europe Explained in Seven Charts." BBC News. BBC, March 4, 2016. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-34131911>.

<sup>36</sup> Yacoubian, M. "Syria Timeline: Since the Uprising Against Assad". United States Institute of Peace. January 1, 2021

<sup>37</sup> Beltyukova, Anastasia, and Henrik Pettersson. "The Free-for-all in Syria Will Make Your Head Spin." April 11, 2018. <https://www.cnn.com/2016/08/25/middleeast/syria-isis-whos-fighting-who-trnd/index.html>.

<sup>38</sup> "2015: The Year of Europe's Refugee Crisis." United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. <https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/news/stories/2015/12/56ec1ebde/2015-year-europes-refugee-crisis.html>.

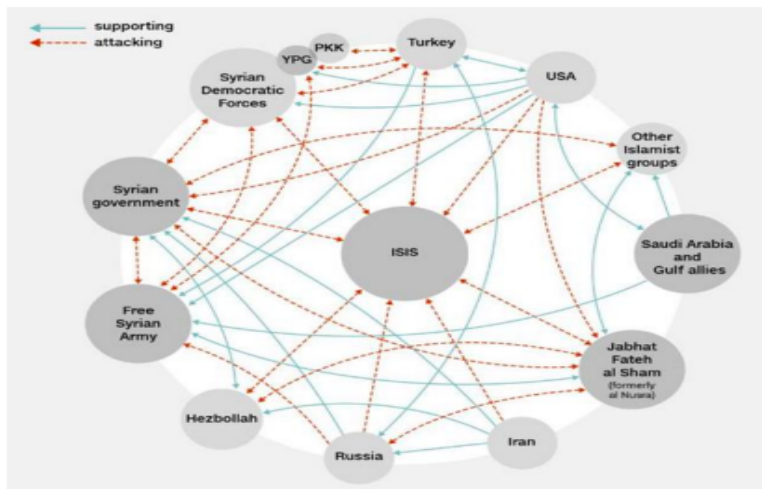


Figure 2: CNN Reporting of Foreign Involvement in Syrian War (Updated January 22, 2018)

manipulating and exploiting Europe’s migration crisis.<sup>39</sup> While the accusations have remained to be denied or downplayed by the Kremlin, there is evidence that Russia has leveraged the refugee crisis over the union’s weakness.<sup>40</sup> The Kremlins’ main objectives were to destabilize the European Union in retaliation for the 2014 sanctions; and to spread its sphere of influence across selected EU member states that are of high priority to Russia.

### III. *How Migration is Weaponized by the Putin Regime*

Such Russian objectives are fulfilled through Moscow’s use of “active measures”, a term first used by the USSR to describe covert subversive operations.<sup>41</sup> The Russian regime is trying to combat the European Union by applying these active measures which are used as a substitute for a direct act of war. These include propaganda and information operations, disinformation, deception, sabotage, and cyberattacks, along with (un-)conventional military operations.<sup>42</sup> The

<sup>39</sup> “Migrant Crisis: Russia and Syria 'Weaponizing' Migration.” BBC News. BBC, March 2, 2016. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-35706238>.

<sup>40</sup> Schoemaker, Hans. “Allegations of Russian Weaponized Migration Against the EU.” *Militaire Spectator*, July 26, 2019.

<sup>41</sup> Galeotti, Mark. “Active Measures: Russia’s Covert Geopolitical Operations.” George C. Marshall European Center For Security Studies, June 2019.

<sup>42</sup> Pettyjohn, Stacie L. and Becca Wasser, *Competing in the Gray Zone: Russian Tactics and Western Responses*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2019.

most recent case where Moscow utilized this covert form of warfare was 2014, the year Russia invaded Ukraine and annexed Crimea.<sup>43</sup> While the Russian government did not acknowledge its offensives in Ukraine, the fact remains that they used active measures, the same ones employed in the 2015-16 European migration crisis albeit in a different manner. The main distinction is that the Putin regime utilized these active measures by treating migrants as a foundation under the guise of fulfilling its political agenda of undermining the EU. These measures include:

*a. (Un-)Conventional Military Forces*

In September 2015, Putin declared that he would intervene in Syria at the request of Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad.<sup>44</sup> As a result of the increasing presence of ISIS in Syria, the United Nations Security Council unanimously endorsed Resolution 2249, which called for "all necessary measures" to prevent and repress "terrorist activities on territory under [ISIS's] control in Syria and Iraq by Member States with the appropriate competence."<sup>45</sup> In November, Russia began to carry out extensive airstrikes across the country. Despite Russia's assertions that their bombings in Syria are legal and sanctioned by UNSRC 2249 as part of the war against terrorism, the West has slammed the Kremlin for intentionally targeting civilians. As a member of the UN Security Council and as a signatory, Russia was expected to follow international humanitarian law, which mandates governments to use specific tactics of combat to avoid endangering civilians and civilian property.<sup>46</sup> The 1977 Protocols I and II to the Geneva Conventions, the 1972 Biological Weapons Convention, the 1980 Conventional Weapons Convention, the 1993 Chemical Weapons Convention, and the 2000 Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights

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<sup>43</sup> Abrams, Steve. "Beyond Propaganda: Soviet Active Measures in Putin's Russia." *Connections* 15, no. 1 (2016): 5–31. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26326426>.

<sup>44</sup> Segall, M. (2019). *The Rocky Marriage of Convenience between Russia and Iran in Syria*. Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, January, 29.

<sup>45</sup> International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) IHL Databases, "Rules of International Humanitarian Law and Other Rules Relating to the Conduct of Hostilities," accessed 2005.

of the Child are among the other treaties to which Russia has agreed.<sup>47</sup> Under the terms of the agreements, Moscow is barred from using specific weapons and fighting practices that might result in "accidental or excessive loss of civilian life, injury, damage, or displacement."<sup>48</sup> And airstrikes happen to be one of those weapons. However, Russia failed to comply with such laws in practice. On March 1, 2016, General Philip Breedlove, former Commander of US European Command and NATO Supreme Allied Commander, testified:

‘... I am seeing in Syria in places like Aleppo and others [...] what I would call absolutely indiscriminate, unprecise bombing ruffling (sic) major portions of a city. That does not appear to be -- to me to be against any specific military target because the weapons they’re using have no capability of hitting specific targets. They are unguided dumb weapons. And what I have seen in the Assad regime from the beginning when they started using barrel bombs which have absolutely no military utility. They are unguided and crude and what are they designed to do (sic) is terrorize the public and get them on the road.... Designed to get people on the road and make them someone else’s problem. Get them on the road, make them a problem for Europe to bend Europe to the will of where they want them to be.’<sup>49</sup>

His comment refers to the Russian bombing campaign in Aleppo where the Russian Air Forces carried out bombings and bombardments of civilian zones, as illustrated in Figure 3.<sup>50</sup> The Violations Documentation Center, a Syrian civil monitoring group, even reported how the Russian air campaign in the capital killed at least more than 440 civilians and displaced around 50,000 people.<sup>51</sup> According to the group, attacks were frequently indiscriminate with no evident military target, destroying medical institutions and schools via cluster munitions, incendiary weapons, and "bunker bursting bombs," among other weapons.<sup>52</sup> As a result, migration flows from Syria peaked in September 2015, when 60,000 asylum applicants came to Europe.<sup>53</sup>

<sup>47</sup> International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) IHL Databases, “Treaties, States Parties and Commentaries – Russian Federation”, accessed July 3, 2018,

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

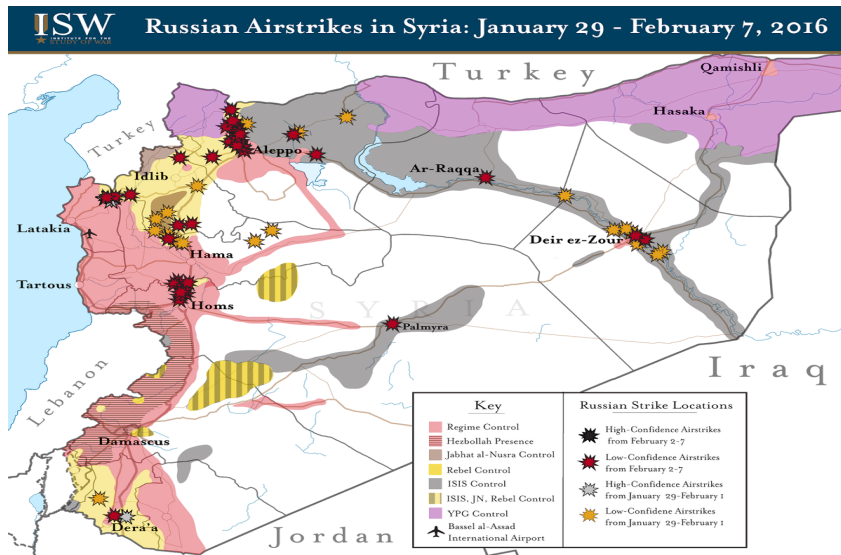
<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Lavrov, Anton. “The Russian Air Campaign in Syria: A Preliminary Analysis.” *Center for Analysis of Strategies and Technologies, Moscow*, June 2018.

<sup>51</sup> “Russian Airstrikes in Syria: ‘Shelling of Civilian Homes in the Northern Suburbs of Homs.’” The Violations Documentation Center in Syria, September 30, 2015. <https://www.vdc-sy.info/index.php/en/reports/1444252328>.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> “Record 1.3 Million Sought Asylum in Europe in 2015.” Pew Research Center’s Global Attitudes Project. Pew Research Center, August 2, 2020.



**Figure 3: Institute Study of War MAP of Russian Airstrikes in Syria (January 29 - February 7, 2016)**

*b. Political Influence & Propaganda*

Now that Russia had helped spark an immigration crisis that overwhelmed the European Union, the Kremlin saw this immigration crisis as the perfect catalyst for further action. The Kremlin's utilization of "weapons of mass migration" was embedded in an increasing rise of European extreme right wing parties and political figures. The parties share a nativist political agenda that included ultranationalism, anti-immigration, and populism.<sup>54</sup> But their most shared characteristic is opposition to the current European leaders and existing democratic institutions.<sup>55</sup> These movements were distrustful of the lack of unity among EU member states in the outbreak of the crisis, as well as stoking fear of increasing political and security concerns centered around a preconceived notion that refugees are to blame for the enormous spike of crimes and acts of terrorism. These movements and politicians used these circumstances as incentives to criticize

<sup>54</sup> GUIA, Aitana, The concept of nativism and anti-immigrant sentiments in Europe, EUI MWP, 2016/20 Retrieved from Cadmus, European University Institute Research Repository, at: <http://hdl.handle.net/1814/43429>

<sup>55</sup> Guia , Aitana. "The Concept of Nativism and Anti-Immigrant Sentiments in Europe." *European University Institute*, 2016. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781412971928.n8>.

the EU's incompetence in addressing migration challenges. Capitalizing on internal tensions within the EU member states, Moscow resorted to using migration via propaganda and financial operations to gain a foothold with the leadership of these movements. Such examples include:

*a. Germany*

In January 2016, a Russian state-run channel politicized the humanitarian crisis in Germany by reporting that a 13-year old Russian-German girl had been abducted and gang-raped by Muslim refugees.<sup>56</sup> Although the crime was reported to never have happened by the German police, this did not stop the Russian government from disseminating the story over social media and news outlets that consistently offered viewers an alternative view of Germany run by a depraved, undemocratic and incompetent government unable to deal with the uncontrolled influx of criminal and terrorist migrants.<sup>57</sup> As a result, right-wing populist groups such as *Alternative for Germany (AfD)*, *Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamicisation of the Occident (PEGIDA)*, neo-Nazi *National Democratic Party of Germany (NPD)*, and the post-communist party *Die Linke* who all expressed their distrust of the Merkel administration quickly rose in popularity. Furthermore, independent Russian-language media outlets in Germany including RT Deutsch and Sputnik, as well as pro-AfD Twitter accounts, who disseminated this false account left a profound impact on Germany's Russian-speaking diaspora of 3,166,000 (3.8% of the country's population).<sup>58</sup> Germany-based Russian sociologist Igor Eidman stated how Russian state media outlets crafted a sympathetic narrative that exaggerated the negative impact of the refugee crisis in those communities, causing the majority of German Russians to consider supporting or joining such parties like the AfD.<sup>59</sup> Supporters of the party were vocal in their opposition to Merkel's

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<sup>56</sup> Shuster, Simon. "How Russian Voters Fueled the Rise of Germany's Far-Right." *Time*, September 25, 2017.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>58</sup> Jolkver, Nikita. "Are Russian Germans the Backbone of the Populist AfD?" *Deutsche Welle*, April 14, 2019. <https://www.dw.com/en/are-russian-germans-the-backbone-of-the-populist-afd/a-48321687>.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

open-door refugee policy.<sup>60</sup> But the most important thing to consider is that one of the party's core pledges, besides their nativist stance against immigration, is to lift German sanctions on Russia and to seek warmer relations with Putin. In response to this show of loyalty, three AfD parliamentary deputies allegedly received funding of €25,000 (\$29,000) from Moscow.<sup>61</sup> This relationship shines another light on Russia's closeness with the AfD – in 2016 Berlin state elections where AfD came in second place is the AfD with 17.9% of the first vote and almost 20% of the second vote, as well as going from zero to more than 90 out of 631 seats.<sup>62</sup>

*b. France*

Since 2014, France has been plagued by acts of Islamic terrorism and violence, which became a huge concern. The fear of refugees among the French was instilled in the aftermath of the November 2015 Paris Attacks.<sup>63</sup> This is where Moscow began to befriend some of France's far-right wing parties as a means to create an anti-immigrant narrative. The Paris attacks gave a platform to right-wing populist parties such as the *National Front* (FN) to express their distrust of the current administration. Aside from its anti-immigration policies, one of the party's core pledges is being critical of the EU sanctions imposed against Russia and to support the establishment of a privileged partnership with Putin.<sup>64</sup> President of FN, Marine Le Pen, a staunch opponent of the EU, has even described Putin as a "defender of the Christian heritage of

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<sup>60</sup> Connolly, Kate. "'Merkel Muss Weg': Far-right Protests Target German Chancellor in Chemnitz." *The Guardian*. November 16, 2018.

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/nov/16/angela-merkel-greeted-by-far-right-protests-in-chemnitz>.

<sup>61</sup> Deutsche Welle. "Report: AfD members' flight sponsored with Russian money | DW | 22.05.2018". DW.COM. Retrieved 22 May 2018.

<sup>62</sup> Hansen, Michael A., and Jonathan Olsen. "Pulling up the Drawbridge: Anti-Immigrant Attitudes and Support for the Alternative for Germany among Russian-Germans." *German Politics and Society*, 2, 38, no. 134 (2020): 109–36. <https://doi.org/doi:10.3167/gps.2020.380205>.

<sup>63</sup> Hinnant, Lori. "2015 Paris Attacks Suspect: Deaths of 130 'Nothing Personal'." AP NEWS. Alex Turnbull, September 15, 2021.

<https://apnews.com/article/europe-france-trials-paris-brussels-f2031a79abfae46cbd10d4315cf29163>.

<sup>64</sup> "France to ditch NATO, embrace Russia if National Front comes to power". RIA Novosti. 13 April 2011. Retrieved 14 April 2011.

European civilisation,"<sup>65</sup> even going so far to praise the Putin regime for accepting fewer refugee statuses and sharing the party's view of the EU as "a meddlesome, US-controlled enemy of national sovereignty and destroyer of traditional religious and family values."<sup>66</sup> In this case, Russia has sought to generate sympathy among such French electorates by demonstrating that its "managed sovereign democracy" is a superior model to its European counterparts.<sup>67</sup> In return for their loyalty, the First Czech Russian-Bank, a private entity trusted by Russian elites, allegedly gave the FN a loan of €9.4 million in September 2014.<sup>68</sup> This relationship highlights Russia's closeness with the FN as it played a significant financial role in helping the party spread its campaign during the 2015 French regional elections; the party scored just over 28% of the first round of ballots and claimed a lead in 6 of 13 regions in mainland France.<sup>69</sup>

## Belarus

### *I. Belarus's Motivations: Lukashenko's control over "Europe's Last Dictatorship"*

Belarus is a former Soviet republic that declared independence following the end of the Cold War. Although officially declared a "democratic, social state", Belarus is categorized by the Country Report on Human Rights as "an authoritarian state in which elections are orchestrated and civil liberties are restricted."<sup>70</sup> It is currently run by President Alexander Lukashenko who is regarded as the "last dictator in Europe".<sup>71</sup> Soon after Lukashenko came into power in 1994, he

<sup>65</sup> Lichfield, John (27 November 2014). "€40m of Russian cash will allow Marine Le Pen's Front National to take advantage of rivals' woes in upcoming regional and presidential elections". *The Independent*. London. Archived from the original on 11 February 2015.

<sup>66</sup> Smith, Evan Roth, and Douglas E. Schoen. *Putin's Master Plan: To Destroy Europe, Divide NATO, and Restore Russian Power and Global Influence*. Encounter Books, 2016.

<sup>67</sup> Conley, Heather A., Ruslan Stefanov, James Mina, and Martin Vladimirov. "Russian Political Influence: Eroding Democratic Institutions." *The Kremlin Playbook: Understanding Russian Influence in Central and Eastern Europe*. Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), 2016. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep23311.8>.

<sup>68</sup> Smith, Evan Roth, and Douglas E. Schoen. *Putin's Master Plan: To Destroy Europe, Divide NATO, and Restore Russian Power and Global Influence*. Encounter Books, 2016.

<sup>69</sup> Todd, Tony. "French 'Shock' as Far Right Dominates Regional Polls." *France 24*, December 7, 2015. <https://www.france24.com/en/20151207-shock-across-french-political-spectrum-far-right-lepen>.

<sup>70</sup> "Belarus: Freedom on the Net 2021 Country Report." *Freedom House*. Accessed December 29, 2021. <https://freedomhouse.org/country/belarus/freedom-net/2021>.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*



created an autocratic system in order to maintain his regime while minimizing any potential threats to his rule. In 1996, he passed a referendum on revising amendments of the 1994 constitution that strengthened the power of the presidency<sup>72</sup>, and further extended his term in office to 2001.<sup>73</sup> This amendment remained intact as he was reelected in 2001 and passed another referendum in 2004 that allowed him to seek additional terms.<sup>74</sup> Under these new amendments, Lukashenko managed to bestow upon himself the right to be Belarus's president-for-life.<sup>75</sup>

A key turning point came at the end of the 2020 Belarussian presidential elections, when Lukashenko was declared the winner of a sixth term in power, with 80 percent of the vote.<sup>76</sup> The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) concluded that the election.<sup>77</sup> This outcome, along with his overt reputation for electoral fraud in prior elections, triggered one of Belarus' biggest anti-government protests. From May 2020 to March 2021, tens of thousands of civilians gathered in protest demanding he President's resignation.<sup>78</sup> Lukashenko responded by officially launching a "unprecedented and systemic" state-led campaign of human rights breaches to silence those he sees as a security threat, according to the UN's Special Rapporteur.<sup>79</sup> Lukashenko passed legislation into law on May 17, 2021, allowing law enforcement agents to use weapons and military equipment to physically attack demonstrators.<sup>80</sup> This bill was part of a larger effort to limit civil liberties and information access.<sup>81</sup> As a result, the government has

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<sup>72</sup> Human Rights Watch Republic of Belarus - Background. Published in 1999. Retrieved June 7, 2007.

<sup>73</sup> CNN Belarus president convenes new parliament. Published November 26, 1996. Retrieved June 7, 2007.

<sup>74</sup> Sannikov, Andrei. "The Accidental Dictatorship of Alexander Lukashenko." *The SAIS Review of International Affairs* 25, no. 1 (2005): 75–88. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26999249>.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> "Belarus Election Commission says Lukashenko was re-elected". Reuters.

<sup>77</sup> Wesolowsky, Tony (2020-08-06). "Five Factors That Ensure Lukashenka Wins Every Election In Belarus". Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> "Belarus: 'Full-Scale Assault' Ongoing against Civil Society amid Massive Human Rights Violations." United Nations. UN News Service, July 5, 2021. <https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/07/1095302>.

<sup>80</sup> "Lukashenka Signs Law Allowing Belarusian Police To Use Firearms Against Demonstrators." RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty, May 18, 2021.

<https://www.rferl.org/a/belarus-police-allowed-shoot-protesters/31260911.html>.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

jailed over 35,000 individuals, with 887 people currently being held as political prisoners.<sup>82</sup>

The European Union has resisted the Lukashenko regime's attempts, as it has resisted Putin's. EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell and European Council President Charles Michel said that the EU will penalize a significant number of Belarusian officials for "violence, repression, and electoral fraud." These events marked a new low point in Belarus-EU relations. In May 2021, Lukashenko responded to these proposals by threatening the EU, saying that he would "allow migrants and drugs to flood into Europe by no longer taking action to prevent illegal crossings across the border in his country."<sup>83</sup>

## *II. Belarus's Objectives: 2021 Belarus-European Union Migrant Crisis*

The 2021 Belarus–European Union border crisis involves a significantly increased movement of tens of thousands of immigrants who are pouring into Lithuania, Latvia, and Poland via their borders with neighboring Belarus (as shown in Figure 3).<sup>84</sup> In contrast to the 2015-16 European migrant crisis, this one comprises mainly Iraqi Kurds, Iraqi Arabs, Syrians, and Yemenites.<sup>85</sup> Furthermore, the majority of them originated from the Kurdistan Region where they were forced to flee the violent conflict between Kurdish resistance fighters and ISIL since the Syrian Civil War.<sup>86</sup> Although this conflict was mainly political, they were also attracted to Germany's open-door policy due to scarce economic resources in the region.

Although the crisis initially began in July, it became a serious issue in October when an

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<sup>82</sup> "Over the Past Year, More than 35,000 People Have Been Arbitrarily Detained in Belarus, Special Rapporteur on Belarus Tells Human Rights Council." Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, July 5, 2021. <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/Pages/NewsDetail.aspx?NewsID=27266&LangID=E>.

<sup>83</sup> Evans, Joe. "Belarus Dictator Threatens to 'Flood Eu with Drugs and Migrants'." *The Week*, May 28, 2021. <https://www.theweek.co.uk/news/world-news/europe/952979/belarus-dictator-threatens-flood-eu-with-drugs-migrants-avoid-sanctions>.

<sup>84</sup> "Belarus border crisis: how are migrants getting there?," BBC Reality Check, 22 November 2021

<sup>85</sup> Thebault, Reis; Dixon, Robyn. "Why are so many migrants coming to one of Europe's smallest countries? Blame Belarus, officials say". *The Washington Post*. Archived from the original on 1 August 2021.

<sup>86</sup> Arraf, Jane, and Elian Peltier. "Migrants Say Belarusians Took Them to E.U. Border and Supplied Wire Cutters." *The New York Times*, November 13, 2021.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/11/13/world/middleeast/belarus-migrants-iraq-kurds.html>.

estimated 20,000 migrants and asylum seekers were present in Belarus alongside 5,000 migrants who remained stuck on the Poland-Belarus border.<sup>87</sup> Poland, Lithuania and Latvia, all of them being EU member states, responded by accusing the Lukashenko regime of facilitating the entry of migrants into these countries. In this respect, it should be discussed whether the migration flows could be part of Belarus's strategy of weakening the status of the EU asylum policies. While the dictatorship continues to deny these instances, it is important to recognize that there is evidence that Belarus is using the refugee issue to gain leverage against the EU.

### *III. How Migration is Weaponized by the Lukashenko Regime*

Belarus's strategy is almost akin to that of the Putin regime: (1) to exploit the inherent weaknesses within the European Union over uncontrolled migration; and (2) to legitimize Lukashenko's presidential elections in 2020 and to lift the EU sanctions. The main distinction between the Putin regime and Lukashenko regime is that the latter selectively targeted Poland, Latvia, and Lithuania, all of them being EU member states, rather than the union as a whole. Similar to the Kremlin's active measures, the Lukashenko regime weaponizes migrants and refugees by means of non-conventional elements of "hybrid warfare", a framework consisting of irregular warfare and cyberwarfare alongside other influencing methods, such as disinformation, lawfare, political destabilization campaigns, and so forth.<sup>88</sup> Such examples are as follows:

#### *a. Coordination with Flight Agencies*

The Lukashenko regime prioritizes and actively organizes a campaign to invite refugees from the Middle East to come to Belarus and take them to the borders of Poland, Lithuania, and from the Middle East to come to Belarus and take them to the borders of Poland, Lithuania, and

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<sup>87</sup> Pérez-Peña, Richard. "How the Belarus Standoff Is Unlike the Recent Migrant Crisis." *The New York Times*, November 17, 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/article/belarus-poland-border-migrants.html>.

<sup>88</sup> Hoffman, Frank (2007). *Conflict in the 21st Century: The Rise of Hybrid Wars*. Arlington, Virginia: Potomac Institute for Policy Studies.

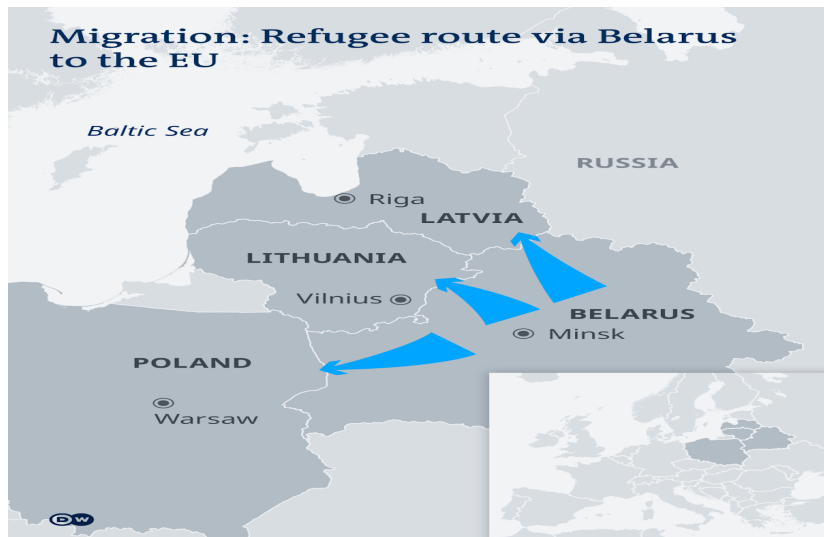


Figure 4: Refugee routes via Belarus to the European Union (Deutsche Welle)

Latvia.<sup>89</sup> In July 2021, when the migration crisis received minimal to no attention, Belarusian tourism companies began collaborating with local airlines operating in the Middle East, notably in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Syria.<sup>90</sup> As shown in Figure 4, migrants and refugees were provided one-way tours to Minsk, the capital of Belarus.<sup>91</sup> The number of direct flights include Baghdad—Minsk operated by Iraqi Airways, Fly Baghdad, and Jood Land; Istanbul—Minsk flight operated by the Turkish Airlines; and Damascus—Minsk operated by the Syrian Cham Wings Airlines.<sup>92</sup> These travel agencies were linked to its Belarusian counterparts, such as Belavia, Umno Tury, Oskartur, and Tsentr Kurort. All of them are directly administered and overseen by the Ministry of Sport and Tourism of the Republic of Belarus.<sup>93</sup> A challenger, according to Greenhill, seeks not only to destabilize a target administration via the use of

<sup>89</sup> Baranowska, G., Başıdaş, B and Welfens, N. (2021). The Dangerous Politics of Framing: The Situation at the Polish-Belarusian Border.

<sup>90</sup> "Гибридная агрессия". Как мигранты стали оружием в противостоянии Лукашенко с Западом". BBC News Русская служба. 2 August 2021. Archived from the original on 6 August 2021. Retrieved 2 August 2021.

<sup>91</sup> "Trafficking Channel for Refugees from Syria to Belarus." InformNapalm, November 12, 2021.

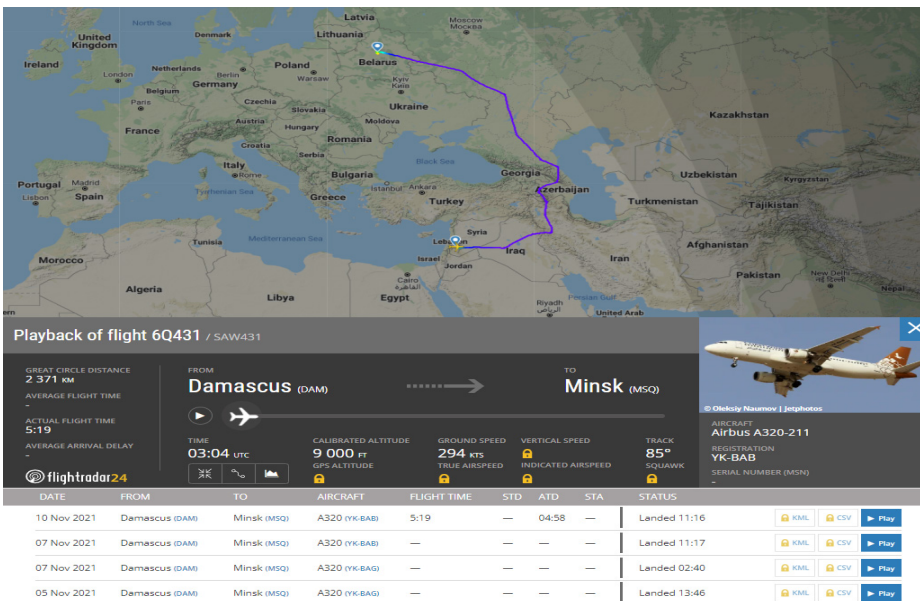
<https://informnapalm.org/en/trafficking-channel-for-refugees-to-belarus/>.

<sup>92</sup> Tondo, Lorenzo, and Martin Chulov. "Tourist Visas and Flights from Syria – the Route to Europe via Belarus." The Guardian. Guardian News and Media, November 12, 2021.

<sup>93</sup> Whitmore, Brian. "Belarus Dictator Escalates EU Border Migrant Crisis." Atlantic Council, August 18, 2021.

<https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/belarusalert/belarus-dictator-escalates-eu-border-migrant-crisis/>.

migrants, but to also create influence and perceived legitimacy among the migrants.<sup>94</sup> Minsk is not the ultimate destination for the refugees; they were attempting to migrate to Germany. In this case, Belarussian travel agencies seemed to provide a safe passage to unsuspecting refugees whose main objective is to head to Germany by providing a list of seven-day package tours consisting of “non-refundable one-way air tickets, insurance, hotel accommodation and excursions.”<sup>95</sup> The Belarussian government also loosened the tourist visa procedures for Iraqi citizens, allowing them to easily secure a seven-day residence in Minsk.<sup>96</sup> The major downside is the price of the tourist visa migrants which cost somewhere between USD 2,000 and \$14,000 per person, roughly thirteen times more than its initial price of \$90.<sup>97</sup> These procedures were



**Figure 5: Volunteers of InformNapalm international intelligence community noticed that the private Syrian airline Cham Wings Airlines has operated 4 direct flights from Damascus International Airport to Minsk. The peak of flying was observed on November 7, 2021**

<sup>94</sup> Greenhill, Kelly M. “Weapons of Mass Migration: Forced Displacement as an Instrument of Coercion.” *Strategic Insights* 9, no. 1 (2010).

<sup>95</sup> Arraf, Jane, and Elian Peltier. “Migrants Say Belarusians Took Them to E.U. Border and Supplied Wire Cutters.” *The New York Times*, November 13, 2021.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

implemented to easily facilitate the movement of migrants and refugees by providing them attractive incentives with the hopes of amassing revenues for the Belarussian economy.<sup>98</sup> As such, the majority of the migrants paid somewhere between \$14,000 to \$17,000.<sup>99</sup> In spite of the cost, the flights to Belarus were considered to be the most convenient route to get to Europe.

*b. Political Destabilization*

The spread of violence across borders, which occurs when the underlying conflict extends from migrant-sending nations to migrant-receiving countries, is the worst case scenario for any humanitarian disaster. Poland is an excellent example of a migrant-receiving nation that has suffered from Lukashenko's "weapons of mass migration" among the EU member states participating in the border problem. Due to the increasing number of refugees crossing the Kuznica-Bruzgi border, Polish President Andrzej Duda accused the Lukashenko administration of weaponizing migrants (as shown in Figure 5).<sup>100</sup> As the number of migrants present at the border increases, member states will have to follow EU standard law in upholding responsibility of admitting and integrating the population. On the other hand, Warsaw reversed this duty by declaring a state of emergency at the request of the Council of Ministers of Poland.<sup>101</sup> One of the goals of the state of emergency was to legalize the policy of "pushback", a term that refers to "a series of governmental policies that will send refugees and migrants back across a border without Polish Defense Minister Mariusz Błaszczak authorized the deployment of more than 900 troops of the Polish Army to support the Border Guard, the state security agency tasked with patrolling

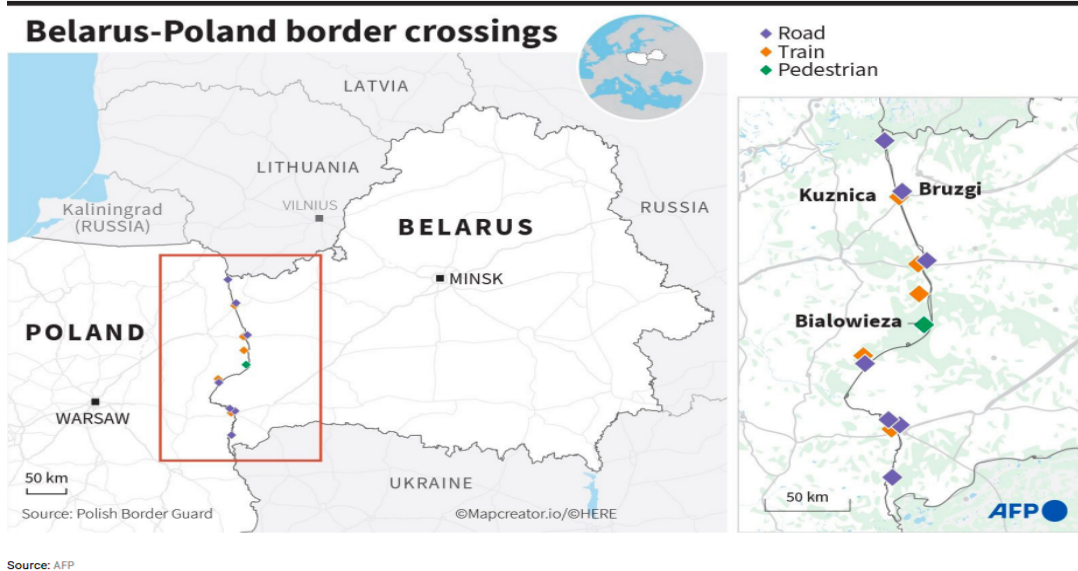
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<sup>98</sup> Gerdžiūnas, Benas; Makaraitytė, Indrė; Juknevičiūtė, Rūta; Čeponytė, Jurgita; Botane, Kareem; Maglov, Michail (15 July 2021). "Baghdad to Lithuania: how Belarus opened new migration route to EU – LRT Investigation". lrt.lt. Archived from the original on 4 August 2021. Retrieved 11 November 2021.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> "Migration Crisis on the Belarus-Poland Border." Assessment Capacities Project (ACPS), December 2, 2021. [https://www.acaps.org/sites/acaps/files/products/files/20211202\\_acaps\\_briefing\\_note\\_belarus\\_poland\\_migration\\_crisis\\_on\\_the\\_border\\_0.pdf](https://www.acaps.org/sites/acaps/files/products/files/20211202_acaps_briefing_note_belarus_poland_migration_crisis_on_the_border_0.pdf).

<sup>101</sup> "Stan wyjątkowy na granicy z Białorusią. Jest decyzja prezydenta". Polska Agencja Prasowa SA (in Polish). Retrieved 2021-09-02.



**Figure 5: Agence France-Press Mapping of Belarus-Poland border crossings**

the border, to push back any migrants who attempt to enter Poland back to Belarus.<sup>102</sup> Human rights groups such as Amnesty International reported evidence of Polish soldiers enforcing police violence by means of tear gas, stun grenades, and water cannons.<sup>103</sup> Other amendments of the policy include the action of temporarily closing the railway checkpoint in Kuznica, limiting the freedom of assembly, as well as restricting human rights activists and journalists from reporting the crisis.<sup>104</sup> The European Court of Human Rights has charged Poland's Constitutional Tribunal, the government's judicial body in charge of supervising laws, as a result of this occurrence.<sup>105</sup> Poland infringed on Protocol 4 of the European Convention on Human Rights, which forbids

<sup>102</sup> "Poland sends troops to Belarus border as migrant numbers surge". Reuters. 18 August 2021. Archived from the original on 24 August 2021.

<sup>103</sup> Roth, Andrew, and Lorenzo Tondo. "Polish Police Fire Tear Gas at People Trying to Cross from Belarus." The Guardian. Guardian News and Media, November 16, 2021.

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/nov/16/polish-belarus-border-police-teargas-please>.

<sup>104</sup> "Medycy apelowali o dostęp do strefy stanu wyjątkowego. Jest odpowiedź MSWiA. Odmowna". gazetapl (in Polish). Archived from the original on 15 November 2021. Retrieved 15 November 2021.

<sup>105</sup> Cameron, David R. "EU Charges Poland's Constitutional Tribunal with Violating EU Law." The MacMillan Center. Yale University, January 3, 2022.

"collective pushbacks of migrants and refugees alike."<sup>106</sup> The Constitutional Tribunal was also convicted of violating specific protections in the 1951 Convention prohibiting the expulsion of refugees,<sup>107</sup> and "the principle of non-refoulement".<sup>108</sup> This disregard for EU legislation poses a problem for both Poland, individually, and Europe as a whole, as its recent actions illustrate not only the shifting view of the target's inability to cope with an inflow, but also the union's political divisiveness.

## VII. Analysis

This section illustrates the similarities and differences in the motivations, objectives, and different types of mechanisms that the two countries use when resorting to "weapons of mass migration" by discussing their efforts in the 2015 European migrant crisis and the 2021 Belarus-European Union border crisis. Russia's involvement in the crisis was the most recent example of a time in which human migration could possibly become a weapon for countries to achieve political and economic ends. This model also serves best for Belarus, an authoritarian regime that is possibly using a similar playbook to that of the Putin regime in facilitating the displacement of migrants. For the purpose of this research assessment, we will study Russia's and Belarus's situation in reference to their involvement in the migration crisis. We will then be able to confirm if Russia and Belarus are weaponizing migrants, and if so, to what extent they have been successful in doing so to achieve their objectives.

Both the Putin regime and the Lukashenko regime have the same historical motivations and comparable objectives. Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, both regimes have been characterized by authoritarianism in the eyes of Western states and institutions. The two regimes'

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<sup>106</sup> Council of Europe. 1988. "Protocol to the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (European Convention on Human Rights) as Amended by Protocol No. 4." Council of Europe Treaty Series 155. Strasbourg: Council of Europe.

<sup>107</sup> Article 32, 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid*, Article 33



current aim is to prevent any disturbance in the status quo, which would contribute to sustaining their regime and achieving their objectives. However, there is one main distinction between the two regimes. The Kremlin, on one hand, sought to expand geographically by incorporating neighboring states and European countries. Hence, the Putin regime's motivations for retaliating against the European Union are primarily geopolitically driven. The Lukashenko regime has desperately sought to maintain a stronger handle on its domestic affairs. As such, the regime's motivations for weaponizing migrants are politically driven as Lukashenko has sought to ensure that his leadership continues without any forms of interruption. In both situations, one can say that their motivation is also economically driven since both regimes' ambitions have been temporarily disrupted by sanctions imposed on them by the European Union. As such, they are potentially treating migration both as a political instrument designed to destabilize the EU from within and as leverage to force the EU to reverse its economic sanctions.

A continuation of the regimes' similarities is their use of military, political, and/or economic measures. First and foremost, the two regimes' weaponization of migration fits under the propaganda variant. Both regimes utilized technological outreach to either incite political polarization in European countries. In Russia's case, the outbreak of right-wing parties and politicians amid the humanitarian crisis was influenced by the Russian government's ability to make full use of its national and international television broadcasts within EU member states. As shown in Germany and France, the Kremlin not only framed migrants and refugees, but to treated them as a result of the European Union's own incompetence to handle the humanitarian crisis. As such, the Kremlin targeted right-wing parties who oppose the current administration and are sympathetic to the Russian state, driving a major wedge within the EU in the process.

Although Lukashenko's Belarus was not in the same position of total control as the

Kremlin, the regime's use of disinformation embedded in-flight agencies were specifically targeting the migrants and refugees themselves rather than European populations. In the first step, false or misleading content was created by Belarusian state-owned travel agencies with the cooperation of Middle Eastern counterparts. Second, force multipliers, such as travel packages and tourist visas, were disseminated by the Belarusian government, adding legitimacy to the migrant journey. But regardless of the difference, both created a similar level of disinformation by endorsing a problem definition or causal interpretation of their respective migration situation. This method also falls under the economic variant. More and more migrants were relocating to Minsk once the regime began to open up these travel opportunities. When they couldn't access legitimate migration channels, the Lukashenko administration took advantage of a significant number of migrants prepared to incur risks in quest of a better life. As a result, migrants are at risk of being exploited economically; one might call this action a smuggling endeavor.

Secondly, the two regimes' weaponization of migrants fall under the exportive variant. Russia, on one hand, attempted to influence the European population most by conducting certain political influence activities across certain countries. As evident in Germany and France, these influence activities were attributed to Russian strategic objectives: predominance outside of Russia and world-power status for Russia. The major objective of Russian influence activities was to weaken the EU. In the shorter term, it is to lift the sanctions imposed by the EU after the Russian intervention in Ukraine in 2014.<sup>109</sup> As shown in the case study, the Kremlin has been able to target the West through a divide and rule approach, primarily using financial and technological means.<sup>110</sup> For example, the Lisa F. case in Germany allowed Russia to appeal the incapability of the German government to the Russian-speaking German diaspora, encouraging

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<sup>109</sup> Karlsen, G.H. Divide and rule: ten lessons about Russian political influence activities in Europe. *Palgrave Commun* 5, 19 (2019). <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-019-0227-8>

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*