Hybrid warfare: weaponized migration on the eastern border of the EU?

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Abstract

After a forced landing of a Ryanair flight which was carrying a journalist and opposition activist highlighting the human rights violations in Belarus, the EU decided to expand the sanctions against the Belorussian regime. The sanctions have been increasing since the disputed re-election of President Alyaksandr Lukashenka. After the introduction of the last wave of sanctions, the Belarus-EU migrant crisis started. This article provides an overview of the migrant crisis on the Belorussian border with the EU, in the beginning of summer 2021. The research explores the possibility that this increase in irregular migration is an attempt to destabilize the states receiving the migrants. The theory of hybrid warfare suggests that striking a state's weakest link is an efficient way to destabilize it. This article seeks to answer if Belarus is using tools of hybrid warfare as a response to the EU sanctions.

Keywords: Belarus; Poland; Latvia; Lithuania; European Union; Hybrid warfare; irregular migration.

Introduction

The eastern border of the European Union has been gradually shifting eastward ever since the end of the Cold War (Ikonomou et. al 2017, p. 2). The external border progressed to the east when Finland joined the alliance in 1995 and created an EU-Russia land border for the first time (ibid. p. 27). It took 9 more years until the "Eastern enlargement" pushed the border even further to the east, causing the EU to gain two new neighbors in Belarus and Ukraine (Ceka & Sojka 2016, p. 483). The 2007 enlargement saw Moldova become a neighbor of the EU as well, yet after this, more than 14 years have passed since the last shift of the eastern border of the EU. This has caused this border region to become more established and concrete, giving more opportunity both for cooperation and antagonism to the direct neighbors.

Historically, the EU has had troubled cooperation with Russia, when comparing it to the rest of the neighboring states, since it has similar ambitions in the region to the EU (Klinke 2012, p. 930). While 'The West' still views Russia as a threat (European Parliament 2019, p. 3), a new concern has been emerging in the last few years – Belarus. Although the state has been led by the same leader since 1984, the EU-Belarus relations have rapidly deteriorated in the last two years (Whitmore, 2021). The tensions between the sides have only been escalating since the heavily disputed 2020 presidential election of Belarus, which is widely believed to be fabricated (Simmons 2021; Bayhan 2020; Mills 2021, p. 7). Not long after the election, the EU decided to impose sanctions against Belarus, as its leader Alyaksandr Lukashenka showed no signs of stepping down or having another election that could be proven to be legitimate (Council of the European Union, 2020). As the situation after the election only worsened in Belarus, with mass riots and protests emerging all across the state, both sides took action. The EU kept increasing sanctions, while Belarus detained increasing amounts of opposition activists (Yahorava and Gadina, 2020).

The constant sanctions and condemnation of the disputed regime pushed Lukashenka even further, forcing him to show his power in unprecedented and unexpected manners. One of the ways the Belorussian leader demonstrated his capabilities was by forcing a commercial *Ryanair* flight to land in Belarus on the 23rd of May, 2021. The

plane intended to fly from Greece to Lithuania, briefly crossing the Belorussian airspace, yet it got intercepted by a Belorussian fighter jet ordering it to land in the capital of Belarus immediately. After the forced landing of the flight, a couple were arrested and detained – a dissident journalist Roman Protasevich with his Russian girlfriend (Quemener, 2021). This was not taken lightly by the West, causing nearly all flights over Belarus to cease, as well as a new round of sanctions to occur from the EU, and other western-aligned actors like the UK, Canada, the US, and Norway (Smith et.al, 2021). Soon after this wave of Western retaliation to Lukashenka's regime, the Belarus-EU migrant crisis started. An unprecedented amount of migrants started flowing from Belarus to Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia (Grzywaczewski, 2021).

This article will explore the reasons behind the Belarus-EU migrant crisis, how it started, and try to investigate the possible correlation between the sanctions against Belarus and the start of the crisis. To further understand the current situation, the conditions that led to the tensions between the EU and Belarus are briefly examined. Inspecting events like the disputed Belorussian presidential election, the widespread protests afterward, as well as the imprisonment of hundreds of opposition activists, are crucial for understanding the case. Using the theory of hybrid warfare, the paper intends to either affirm or deny the possibility of this being a hybrid attack from Belarus to the EU. The article relies both on qualitative and quantitative data to analyze the possible correlation between the two events.

Statistical data is used to compare the migratory trends on the borders between Belarus and the EU, while statements from Belorussian politicians are taken into consideration to determine whether or not the crisis is manmade. The hypothesis of the paper is that the Lukashenka regime has deliberately supported and made the situation opportune for a migration crisis to occur on the border to the EU as an act of revenge against the sanctions imposed on the state of Belarus. Thus, the article's research question is the following: *Has the Belorussian regime aided the development of the migration crisis in a significant way, and if it has – can this be considered hybrid warfare?*

The last dictatorship in Europe

Oftentimes the current ruling regime of Belarus is called a dictatorship - and its president, the last dictator in Europe (Nikolayenko 2015, p. 231; Frear 2021, pp. 1470-1473). Although on paper the framework of the Belarusian government indicates that the country is a presidential republic with a bicameral parliament, the reality seems rather different. The head of the state, Alyaksandr Lukashenka, holds nearly unlimited power within the country. His authoritarian ways allow him to imprison those who oppose the regime, as well as control the economy, and media (Marples 2009, p. 756).

Lukashenka's reign started after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The authoritarian rose to power by defeating the candidate of the Communist party, gaining 80% of the vote in the 1994 presidential election (Merkushev, 1994). While he was perceived as both a populist at the time, he did not come to power completely without a plan. He introduced many elements of the now-collapsed Soviet Union, ensured close collaboration with Russia, and gradually increased political repression (Nechyparenka 2011, pp. 12-14). All of this was done to construct a system that can only function with him at the top of the pyramid.

The assumption that Lukashenka is the last dictator in Europe has been around at least since 2001 (Mulvey, 2001). Despite this, only recently the pressure from the West and the citizens of Belarus had escalated to such a level that forced Lukashenka to demonstrate his power internationally (Staheev, 2021). The Western pressure did not come randomly – in fact, it had been there all along (European Parliament, 2006). The EU has been condemning the regime for a long time, yet the recent increase of Belarusian opposition activity demonstrated that the people have grown tired of the dictatorship. Already before the 2020 presidential elections, protesters against human rights violations and the current regime were detained (Viasna, 2019). This only riled the masses more, as information about Lukashenka's atrocities was being spread through various social media platforms like "Telegram" (Gerdziunas, 2020). Social

media was not only used to put Lukashenka under a magnifying glass, it was also a way to organize protests. Both before and after the 2020 presidential election, mass riots took place all around Belarus. This led to an ever-increasing number of political prisoners, which led to even more demonstrations (Buzgalin & Kolganov, 2021). Svjatlana Tikhanovskaya was forced to flee after she tried to claim victory in the 2020 Presidential elections (Hopkins, 2021).

The repression of dissidents does not stop with detaining rioters. Torture, humiliation, and even murder are some of the allegations made against the regime. A well-known opposition activist Vitold Ashurak suddenly died from a heart attack while imprisoned. Beforehand, he had written a letter stating that political prisoners are forced to wear yellow patches to distinguish them. After two weeks, he collapsed in his cell, without any previous health concerns (Bialiatski, 2021). Gender-based torture, like sexual violence against female detainees, has also been reported by several prisoners (HFHR, 2021). Due to this situation, an international reaction was provoked and sanctions invoked. On the 21st of June, 2021, the EU imposed more restrictive measures – the 4th package of sanctions towards Belarus (European Council, 2021).

Hybrid problems call for hybrid solutions

The 21st century has seen the least amount of state-based battle-related deaths in history (Koehrsen, 2019). Conventional warfare as we know it has been eradicated almost entirely. Since World War II, there have been only a handful of conflicts where global superpowers have been involved. Conventional warfare is no longer the main form of settling disputes, as states seek new ways to influence global affairs. One of the strategies that has emerged in the 21st century is called hybrid warfare. It is believed that the term first was coined less than 15 years ago when the military strategy was described by Frank Hoffman in his "Conflict in the 21st Century: The Rise of Hybrid Wars" (Hoffman, 2007). Although this particular theory is very recent, others are rather similar. Concepts like asymmetric warfare, irregular warfare, or ambiguous warfare carry a similar meaning to hybrid warfare. Thus, some scholars

argue that the theory is "neither new nor unusual" (Paul, 2016). Others have even gone as far as saying that hybrid warfare and asymmetric warfare are actually the same concept – two sides of the same coin (Weissmann 2019, p. 19). Albeit this theory does not lack critics, it can be useful in explaining modern and past conflicts. For this article, it is perceived that hybrid warfare and asymmetric warfare fits well.

Hoffman has stated that hybrid warfare "incorporates a range of different modes of warfare including conventional capabilities, irregular tactics and formations, terrorist acts including indiscriminate violence and coercion, and criminal disorder" (Hoffman 2007, p. 8). This implies that the concept of "hybrid warfare" is adaptable depending on the situation and current needs. What makes it so versatile and dangerous is that the strategy can be implemented on different frontiers at the same time, effectively striking a state's weakest links. As this approach can be both regular and irregular, it can be hard to counter it. The Russian example of annexing Crimea demonstrated that the combination of both regular and irregular warfare methods can reap great rewards. Albeit in this particular example, it seemed like the events unfolded in an extremely short period, but it was only the tip of the iceberg. In reality, it was a carefully sculpted plan designed to strike the weakest parts of the system with varying levels of intensity, culminating in the annexation of a part of Ukrainian territory (Rusnakova, 2017).

The whole essence of hybrid warfare is to use the state's strengths, simultaneously taking advantage of the opponent's weaknesses. Modern-day military capabilities are vast, especially for great military powers. So, the concept explains how attacking less developed points can be beneficial, even though they are not viewed as traditional ways of offense. This strategy is especially convenient for states that are smaller, weaker, or economically less developed than the opponent, as it focuses on gradual destabilization rather than swift conquest.

The theory emerged as one of the "leading" theories of modern warfare when it was widely used to explain the Russian success in annexing Crimea in such a short period (Renz 2016, p. 284). With the majority of scholars writing about hybrid warfare in

Russia, many states that have also used and are using similar elements of the strategy have been left unseen (Renz 2016; Friedman 2018; Eberle & Daniel 2019).

Common tools for hybrid warfare include cyber-attacks, as well as information warfare (Rusnakova 2017, pp. 359; 361). Usually, cyber-attacks focus on infrastructure, while information warfare is directed towards the masses. Both means are effective tools to destabilize a state. These are only a couple of examples, as theoretically there are innumerable ways to wreak chaos, thus weakening the state. The dangerous nature of hybrid warfare relies on hybridity itself – it is versatile and can adapt.

As targeting the weak spots is the focal point of the strategy, according to Dr. Viljar Veebel, controlled migration can be used as a tool of hybrid warfare (Veebel 2020, p.47). Although it is hard to prove that a state is blatantly using migrant flows as a tool to weaken another state, in theory it can be used as one of the paradigms of hybrid warfare. If a state is forced to receive numerous migrants it had not been anticipating, the system can slow down or even stop functioning. This can potentially lead to public unrest, which is one of the goals of hybrid warfare (Ibid.)


European migrant crisis part two?

In 2015, the EU had to deal with something it was not politically and structurally prepared for. Approximately 1.3 million people requested asylum in the EU, Norway, and Switzerland (Connor 2016, p. 4). Most of them arrived via sea through the Mediterranean or by land through Turkey (Buonanno 2017, p. 100). The EU was not prepared to sustain such levels of immigration and several states like Hungary were not willing to work with the EU to accommodate the migrants (Weaver & Siddique, 2015). It caused one of the most prominent crises the EU has had to endure, which is referred to in the media as the 'refugee crisis'. According to the UNHCR, within two years (2015 - 2016), approximately 5.2 million refugees arrived in Europe (UNHCR, 2019). Based on the 2015 example, a refugee crisis is a way to destabilize an entire union of countries. Not only were the European and national migration response

systems overloaded, but it also wreaked chaos between member states with different opinions and ideologies (Erlanger & Bilefsky 2015).

Although migration to the EU and especially the wealthier states like Germany has decreased drastically, it is still ongoing. Migrants and refugees of various backgrounds keep finding new ways to reach the EU (Grieshaber & Gera, 2021).

## Figure I. Migration routes to the EU
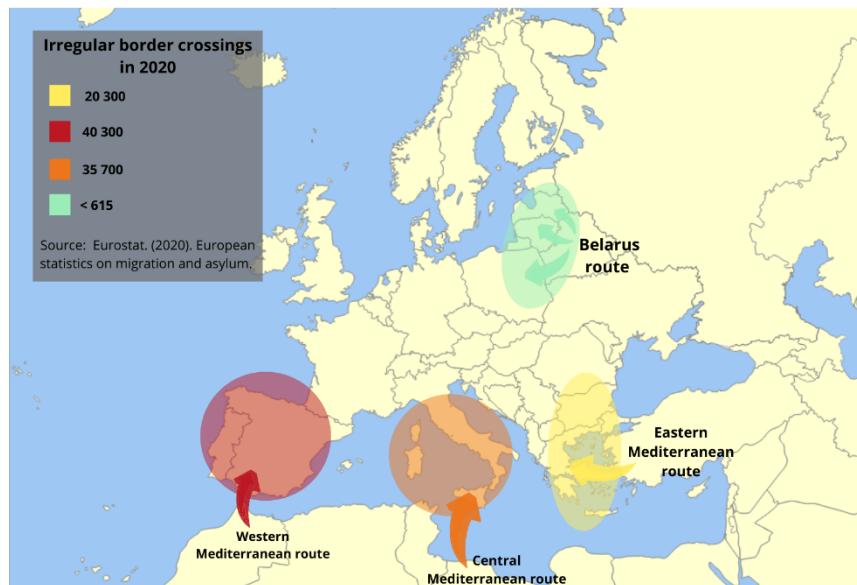
Source: Eurostat,

https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/promoting-our-european-way-life/statistics-migration-europe_en

In Figure I, one can see an illustration of the most common irregular migration[1] paths to reach the European Union. The Mediterranean was still the most commonly used way to reach the EU in 2020. According to Eurostat, there were less than 615 documented cases of irregular migration towards the EU through the Belarus route. The number seems vague, as the EU did not have a particular focus on this area in 2020. Instead, the 615 migrants were all documented to be using the "Eastern Border Route", which includes reaching the EU through Russia, Belarus, Ukraine, and Moldova. This indicates that the Belarus route was used rarely, especially in comparison to the three routes in the Mediterranean. Eurostat has also observed that irregular crossings on the Eastern Border route have decreased by 4% when compared to data from 2019 (European Commission, 2020).

If we focus on the Belarus route in particular, and take data from respective national border guard databases and independent news sources, we can get a clearer picture regarding the developments in irregular migration patterns.

Figure II. Irregular migration trends through the Belarus route
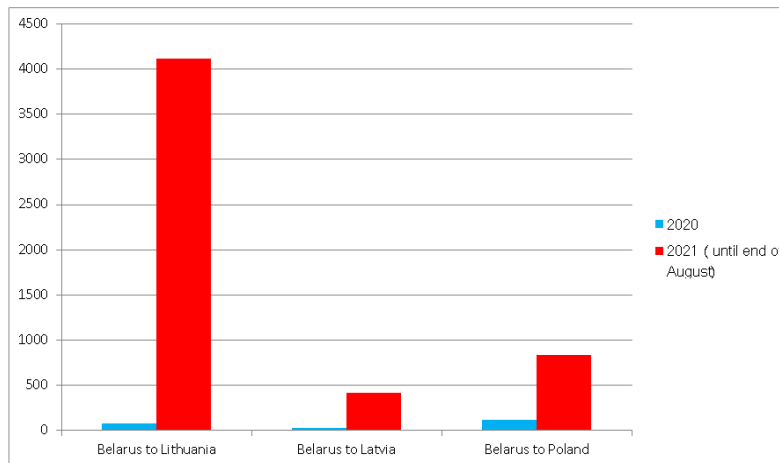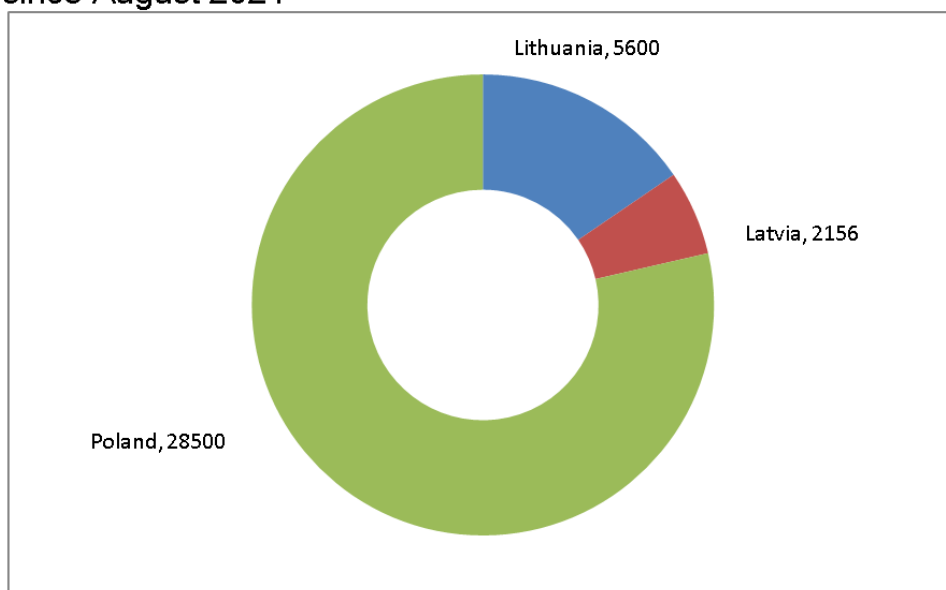

Source: Reuters, Latvian State Border Guard

As stated in Figure II, the number of documented cases of irregular migrants increased drastically in 2021. We can observe that there is a 1700% increase in documented cases of irregular migration from Belarus to Latvia, almost 600% increase to Poland, while nearly a 5000% increase in irregular migration to Lithuania. The 2020 figures were the recorded cases throughout the entire year, while the 2021 figures represent only 8 months. Based on the information provided by the media, the highest number of these cases has been observed in the summer months of 2021 (Thiebault & Dixon 2021; BBC 2021). It is also worth noting that even though the percentage increase might seem unusually high, it likely marks the start of a pattern, as previously there were drastically less irregular migrants arriving through the Belarus route.

Most of the data available are divided into two categories: before and after August 2021. This is due to the fact that all three states receiving the migrants declared a state of emergency at different times in August (Kaczynski 2021; Henley et.al 2021). This changed many things, but the most relevant for the international audience is how the migrants were treated afterwards. Due to the overload of the system, all three states decided to stop accepting migrants. Temporary fences were built up to stop the migratory flows. As stated in Figure III, since August 2021, thousands of migrants

were told to turn back. Since the three states made the decision to refuse entrance to these irregular migrants, the data seen in figure III is only for the months of August, September, and October. Thus, in a quarter of a year, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland have seen disruptive amounts of migrants. Although from a human rights point of view it is devastating that the migrants are told to turn back, the EU firmly believes that this sudden influx of irregular migration is Belarus-made (Shotter & Seddon 2021). According to the theory of hybrid warfare, this is a way to create chaos in the EU, as there were previously no problems with irregular migration in these states, thus it was uncharted territory. By striking a less developed part of the system, the offender has a good chance to disrupt it and wreak havoc.

At this point in the paper, we have pinpointed that the migration flow through Belarus has increased drastically in 2021, but that is not enough evidence to state that the regime of Lukashenka is practicing hybrid warfare against its neighbors. To further examine the situation, we have to analyze what the authoritarian leader is stating, and practicing. First of all, there have been a number of videos and photographs taken of Belorussian soldiers forcing migrants towards the borders of the EU (Berkhead 2021; Latvian Army 2021; Roth 2021). This indicates that there is a Belorussian involvement in forcibly motivating the migrants to breach the EU borders.

Figure III. Irregular migrants who were denied border crossing since August 2021

Source: Polish National Border Guard, Latvian State Border Guard, Infomigrants

Although it was not clear how these numbers of third-state migrants arrive in Belarus, the Lukashenka regime has made it easier for migrants arriving from Iraq, Syria, and other third-states to acquire visas by outsourcing the visa applications to numerous travel agencies (Mudge, 2021). This not only has greatly increased the number of visas distributed but also made it seem like it is not the fault of Belorussian embassies. Albeit outsourcing visa applications is not unheard of, it does raise questions why it happened right after the EU sanctions were imposed. This might imply that it was a reaction to the sanctions. A hybrid adversary needs to adapt quickly, responding to every single provocation to maintain the irregular momentum of the conflict.

Lukashenka himself indirectly has affirmed that the recent migration flow is impacted by Belarus. He stated: "We will not hold anyone back. We are not their final destination after all. They are headed to enlightened, warm, cozy Europe" (Lukashenka in: Kuznetsov, 2021). By stating this, he at the very least indicates that the migrants are not his immediate concern. While comments like this would not be significant in a vacuum, when the context is taken into consideration, it can be perceived as a warning. By saying "We will not hold anyone back", Lukashenka is testing the limits of the 'gray zone' between war and peace. His implication is expressed neutrally, as if it was not his concern. One could assume that if he had used a different tone to express the same thing, he might have angered his Western neighbors even more. This is important because Belarus needs to remain in the gray zone. They do not want active warfare, they want to 'poke' the other side, as if waiting for retaliation from them. Hybrid warfare tends to fluctuate in activity, thus the authoritarian needs to balance the amount of pressure he applies.

If Belarus was using hybrid warfare, they would be attempting to destabilize Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland, as well as the European Union. Lukashenka has been recorded blaming the three aforementioned states by noting: "But in fact, these (migration) centers are transit points. They deliberately release these people from the camps, knowing that their final destination is not Poland or Lithuania. Nor Belarus. They have reached this point and want to go further. They are bound for Germany, 'warmer' countries, as they say," (Lukashenka in: BELTA, 2021). Whether or not the leader of Belarus is speaking the truth, if such phenomena are proven, it would most definitely

destabilize the relationship between the three states and the rest of the EU. This statement from Lukashenka highlights a key part of hybrid warfare – to create internal distrust. The goal of a hybrid adversary is to slowly weaken the structure. Therefore, his announcement does not blatantly advocate for Lithuania and Poland to be expelled from the EU. It more implies that there should be caution between Germany and 'warmer countries,' and the easternmost members of the EU.

Conclusion: Hybrid warfare or basic retaliation?

This article has explored the following key arguments: Firstly, the irregular migration levels on the Eastern border of the EU have reached levels that can be compared to those of the Mediterranean migration route of 2015-2016. This is an extremely alarming fact since the migration crisis of 2015 destabilized the EU by costing the member states financially (Park, 2015). The 2015-2016 refugee crisis was addressed by the EU with the enforcement of the EU-Turkey deal. One lesson from the 2015-2016 refugee crisis would be that the EU needs to get in control and act faster. They must either adopt a stance that the migrants are not welcome and declare that they will not be accepted or the exact opposite – open the borders for the migrants to safely cross into the EU. Albeit the latter might be an improbable scenario, it would support the humanitarian narrative the EU is sculpting.

Secondly, it has been observed that Belarus is not setting any obvious obstacles while these migrants are trying to reach the EU. By relieving the issuance of visas, and its support for the migrants' attempts to reach the border, the Belorussian regime is showing its position towards the EU and its neighbor states.

Thirdly, based on the statements from president Lukashenka, we can assume that the authoritarian leader has no intent to stop the migrants from coming to Belarus. Even though the EU member states bordering Belarus are refusing entry to the migrants, Lukashenka's regime is still amassing more people whose target is to get to the EU. If this continues, numerous people can lose their lives, as the weather conditions in eastern-northern Europe are getting harsher by the day. If this is a deliberate attempt to destabilize the EU as a response to the sanctions, it will only benefit the

Belorussian case, as the EU will be portrayed as the villain for not rescuing the migrants.

In conclusion, we have explored how the Belorussian regime is aiding the migration crisis in a significant way, thus confirming the first part of the research question. All signs point to Alyaksandr Lukashenka using this strategy to knowingly direct the migration flows towards the EU, as he witnessed what the last migration crisis did to the EU.

Analysing the connection of whether Lukashenka is waging hybrid warfare against the EU is harder. Albeit he is weaponizing the migrants, hybrid warfare is a complex strategy consisting of several streams of offense, but we have only pinpointed one. Something that does support the hypothesis is the forced landing of the Ryanair flight back in May 2021. Although it happened before the border crisis started, it was a breach of jurisdiction, causing the EU to look weak. If this is the case, then the hybrid war had started before, and the migration crisis was not the first strike. Another incident supporting the hybrid warfare argument took place recently – Lukashenka threatened to cut off the gas supply to the EU (Treeck, 2021). Currently, it might be too early to completely confirm that Lukashenka is waging hybrid warfare against the EU, but if the threats of cutting off the gas materialize – that could be a whole different story.

Endnotes

1. According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), irregular migration is movement of persons that takes place outside the laws, regulations, or international agreements governing the entry into or exit from the State of origin, transit or destination.

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