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Disinformation at the EU's Eastern Border

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*Pledge of Honesty*

On my honour as a student of the Diplomatic Academy of Vienna, I submit this work in good faith and pledge that I have neither given nor received unauthorized assistance on it.

Stanislav Vasyliuk

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## Abstract

This research analyses how the weaponization of migration with digital disinformation constitutes a critical aspect of the Russian strategy of hybrid interference against the European Union. The existing scholarship has largely treated the border crisis in Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia (2021-present) in isolation, focusing on physical breaches while overlooking the information operations in the background. Using the Polish-Belarusian border as a case study, this research expands this literature by providing a comprehensive understanding of how narrative construction through disinformation is being used to amplify the effects of escalating border tensions. The qualitative discourse analysis of Russian state-controlled media outlets revealed three dominant narratives used. First, Poland is treated as the perpetrator of systematic brutality. Second, it is being labeled ineffective and corrupt, failing to generate an adequate response. Lastly, Poland's actions are considered to lack autonomy, with the Warsaw government regarded as a Western puppet. These narratives work less to construct a coherent account than to polarize Polish society and fracture EU cohesion. Drawing on the theory of hybrid interference, the research argues that engineered migration flows observed at the EU's Eastern border in combination with disinformation campaigns, serve as wedge factors at both the domestic and regional levels. A strategy of weaponizing migration that fulfils objectives within a broader hybrid interference framework. Building on this, the thesis proposes a new category of *subversive* weaponization of migration to capture a strategy whose primary objective is destabilization rather than explicit coercion.

## Abstrakt

Die vorliegende Arbeit untersucht, die Instrumentalisierung von Migration mittels digitaler Desinformation als einen zentralen Aspekt der russischen Strategie der hybriden Einflussnahme auf die Europäische Union. Die bisherige Forschung hat die Grenzkrise in Polen, Litauen und Lettland (seit 2021) weitgehend isoliert betrachtet und sich auf Aspekte wie Grenzübertritte konzentriert, während die begleitenden Informationsoperationen weitgehend unterbelichtet blieben. Am Beispiel der polnisch-belarussischen Grenze zeigt diese Arbeit, wie die Konstruktion von Narrativen durch Desinformation die Wirkung der eskalierenden Grenzspannungen verstärkt. Die qualitative Diskursanalyse staatlich kontrollierter russischer Medien ergab drei dominante Narrative: Polen als Verursacher systematischer Brutalität und einer humanitären Krise; Polen als ineffektiv und korrupt, unfähig zu angemessener Reaktion; und schließlich Polen als handlungsunfähiger Akteur, dessen Regierung als Marionette des Westens dargestellt wird. Diese Narrative zielen weniger auf eine kohärente Darstellung als auf die Polarisierung der polnischen Gesellschaft und die Schwächung des EU-Zusammenhalts. Gestützt auf die Theorie der hybriden Einflussnahme argumentiert die Arbeit, dass die orchestrierten Migrationsströme an der Ostgrenze der EU in Verbindung mit Desinformationskampagnen als spaltende Faktoren auf innerstaatlicher wie regionaler Ebene wirken. Darauf aufbauend entwickelt die Arbeit das Konzept einer subversiven Instrumentalisierung von Migration, deren primäres Ziel nicht expliziter Zwang, sondern Destabilisierung ist.

## 1.0 Introduction

Since the summer of 2021, the migration crisis at the European Union's Eastern border has become a problem of perpetual nature. With varying degrees of intensity, thousands of people began to attempt to illegally cross into the EU from Belarus. Border checkpoints that have previously processed close to zero asylum claims on an annual basis were suddenly overwhelmed with the influx of applications (Koinova 2024; Grzywaczewski 2021). In nearly five years, the unnatural flow of people, mostly foreigners from the Middle East and Africa, has slowed down only periodically. Poland, Latvia, and Lithuania, being the border states, found themselves at the forefront of confronting the escalating situation. From the outset, the three countries rapidly launched new initiatives aimed at reinforcing perimeter defences and declared a state of emergency in the affected regions (Kibrik et al. 2025; Cielemecka and Laine 2026). This, however, proved insufficient in reversing the growing trends as the flow of migrants persisted despite the costs and dangers associated with making the trip. Memories of the crisis of a similar character that occurred at the Russian borders with Finland and Norway in 2015-16 led to an overarching consensus that the mass appearance of migrants in the Eastern frontier was not a coincidence but in fact an engineered operation (Eggen and Lavikainen 2025; Miholjic 2022). The further investigation into the matter revealed that Moscow was behind organizing recruitment, establishing transportation channels, issuing visas, and, with state services, bringing the people to the border. Questions emerged regarding Russia's objectives and the threat the EU is increasingly incapable of concealing (Dyner 2023; Horncastle 2023; Talik 2024).

This research thus proposes to zoom in on the critical aspect of Moscow's toolkit: the weaponization of migration. Migration policy has, over the past decades, become one of the most discussed issues in contemporary European politics. The debate is flooded with polarizing opinions, where moderate proposals often end up disregarded as either inefficient or, on the contrary, overly restrictive. The radical far-right groups specifically leverage migration to their advantage, attempting to boost popularity ratings by leaning in on the nationalist angle, calling for border closures, deportations, and a return to the so-called "Christian Europe" (Ruzza 2019; Mandelc 2025). The clash between anti and pro-migration wings has, in many instances, crippled institutional and domestic processes of Member States. Countries end up entangled in populist politics, unable to agree on necessary countermeasures, leading to an overall weakened geopolitical position of the EU itself (Braithwaite, Salehyan, and Savun 2018). The further Member States drift apart on the migration policy, the more the risks of a dysfunctional decision-making mechanism become apparent, having dire consequences for regional defence and security. With this in mind, Russia has consistently aimed to create conditions where such institutional degradation would come to fruition (Mikić 2024). To this end, previous scholarship has meaningfully engaged with Moscow's usage of engineered migration flows as a strategy of a hybrid nature aimed against the EU and the collective West (Dyner 2023; Cielemecka and Laine 2026).

Importantly, however, Russia does not use migration in isolation and combines it with a set of measures that act as force multipliers. One of such measures is an elaborate web of disinformation campaigns that, through narrative and frame construction, seek to achieve reflexive control over EU decision-making, attempting to bring European leaders into facilitating their own demise (Thomas 2004; Potîrniche 2019). Nonetheless, an intersection of overarching Russian strategy, weaponization of migration, and digital propaganda remains a severely understudied subject. When examining crises in Poland, Latvia, and Lithuania, media campaigns that accompanied them end up being overlooked, with focus directed to what physically occurred at the borders (Zdanowicz 2023; Graban 2023; Kibrik et al. 2025). This is precisely the gap this research seeks to address, allowing for a more complete and nuanced understanding of Moscow's actions. As a consequence, there are two primary levels of analysis. First is related to the question of how disinformation has been used by Russia to support the effect generated by the engineered migration flows. Second takes it further by analysing how identified operations fit within a broader Russian strategic approach. Theories of media narrative construction and framing have been selected as primary methods of discourse analysis that allow for a clear definition and conceptualization of information campaigns (Entman 1993; Matthes and Kohring 2008; Garrett 2018; Hellman 2024a). Additionally, Wigell's (2019) hybrid interference and Greenhill's (2010) weaponization of migration theories are used to tie the findings to the overarching Russian strategy. Poland has been chosen as a case study, since the nature and features of weaponized migration are identical to the cases of Latvia and Lithuania. Focusing on one of the three allows for a more detailed and nuanced analysis without compromising the overall utility of the research. The structure of the thesis is the following. The first section is going to elaborate on past theoretical contributions on the matter and the frameworks chosen for the empirical analysis. This will be followed by the explanation of the chosen methodology. Subsequently, the background to the engineered border crises is provided, tracking the history of similar Russian campaigns. Then, in the empirical section, the analysis engages with gathered border data and articles published in Russia's state-controlled resources (Sputnik and Pravda Network). Closing the research are two sections that tie the findings back to the theories of hybrid interference and weaponization of migration. Overall, this research aims to effectively answer the question of how the engineered migration flows and state-sponsored media narratives fit into Russia's strategy directed against the EU.

## **2.0 Literature Review**

### *2.1 Migration theory*

Weaponization of migration is neither new nor is it uniquely used by modern-day Russia (Başer 2022). In fact, it has been an active part of the foreign policy domain for at least the past several centuries. The Westphalian state system, established through the 1648 peace agreement, created perfect conditions for engineered flows of people to be used for various political objectives. Through the delimitation of clear territorial boundaries, governments

became bound to their responsibility to protect them, and as such, susceptible to external pressure (Croxton 1999). The further rise of nationalism elevated the importance of borders to one's own identity. A breach became not only a question of dispute amongst the elites, but an attack on the nation itself (Adamson 2006). Through this evolution of international affairs, migration flows stopped being purely a natural phenomenon and instead turned into a tool of advancing geopolitical interests. An instrument that proved to be highly dangerous and effective, and yet for the longest time overlooked by many in academia and policy-making worlds.

Its theoretical conceptualization started only in the late 20th century. Michael Teitelbaum (1984) was among the first to challenge the notion that migration remained a purely humanitarian question, identifying three ways in which foreign policy and migration are linked. First, mass movements of people can be a direct byproduct of political decisions, specifically in the military domain. Second, migratory flows could be operationalized to achieve unarmed conquest, destabilization, or discredit the system of adversaries. Third, once settled, migrants get the ability to create new political groups and, as a consequence, put pressure on policymakers through lobbying efforts. States, therefore, do not always act as purely reactive entities. They are able to purposefully generate waves of refugees to satisfy their objectives in the international arena. Teitelbaum highlighted that accounting for such a factor has to be an integral part of any strategic planning for foreign policy professionals.

Tackling the question of effects caused by the engineered migration flows, Weiner (1995) brought the argument further by focusing on ways migration impacts the security of the receiving state, its toll on psychological cohesion, and vulnerability of liberal democracies. He recognized the capacity for political instability through the generation of perceived threats. Large migration flows can be portrayed as a challenge to the receiving state's identity, undermining the traditional way of life and culture. This could, in turn, generate domestic unrest and, as a consequence, imperil national security. At the core, it creates tension between state interests, international stability, and human rights. Specifically for the liberal democracies, the need to uphold their international image constrains their own capacity to respond to migration crises (Booth 1994; Huysmans 2006). Failure to do so over time can lead to a potential radicalization of a society, which foreign actors would seek to leverage.

Because of this, Weiner (1995) argued, mass migration flows often end up being a major source of conflict between nations. From one perspective, a sending state may purposefully open its borders to extract concessions or destabilize its neighbor, overall seeking to achieve a behavioural change. On the other hand, the receiving state may decide that an intervention is necessary and use migration flows as a justification for military action. Especially if the cause of the mass exodus of people is violent domestic policies of a sending state, such as ethnic cleansing. Overall, both Teitelbaum (1984) and Weiner (1995) were pioneers in the approach to international relations that moves beyond defining refugees and migrants only as natural products of state violence or economic crisis. Instead, they offered a new perspective, one

that takes into account the possibility of artificially engineered migration movements through strategic use of both military and non-military means.

Robert Mandel (1997) further theorized the mechanism through which refugee flows translate into political danger by challenging the existing idea of what protecting national security means. He pointed out that large-scale migration has the capacity to influence developments in international relations not because of physical impact, but due to the construction of a perceived threat. This means that a sending state does not need to generate a real threat but instead can focus on narrative construction. If the arriving migrants are seen as a fundamental risk to national identity, actual statistical measurements matter little. If the constructed narrative is effective, the public fear will eventually result in policy change through the bottom-up relationship with the government (Buzan 1998; Jervis 2017). This makes liberal democracies particularly vulnerable to instrumentalized migration, and as further research will show, they appear to be the primary targets of coercive instrumentalization.

Threat perception, whether real or manufactured, generates three primary behavioral consequences that have direct strategic outcomes: confrontation, avoidance, and discrimination (Mandel 1997). The mere fact of migrants crossing the border could lead to a confrontation between sending and receiving states, as well as an intra-state level conflict. During the 1971 Indian intervention into the Pakistani Civil War, the refugee influx served as a primary *casus belli* due to the threat to the economic and social fabric (Myard 2010). Inability to resolve the issue leads to social fragmentation, with groups avoiding one another and prioritizing nativist politics at the expense of democratic norms. In West Germany, the economically beneficial Gastarbeiter recruitment program was terminated in 1973, following a period of political turmoil over the oil crisis and the permanent settlement of Turkish and Yugoslavian populations (Herbert 1990). Lastly, in an increasingly fractured societal dynamics, minority communities end up being discriminated against with deepening division dictating domestic politics. Palestinians, despite representing 20% of the Kuwait population during the 1970s and 80s, were denied citizenship and property ownership rights, creating a system to protect native privilege against a perceived demographic threat (Ghabra 1987). Such increasing prevalence of the intersection of migration politics, foreign policy, and threat perception led many scholars to engage with the subject over the past decades, often analysing individual cases to develop the theory further.

Taken together, these foundational contributions reshaped how migration is understood within international relations. The authors established that population movements can be deliberately engineered as instruments of statecraft, and that their political effects depend less on the absolute scale of the flows than on the perceptions, vulnerabilities, and identity dynamics of the receiving society. Subsequent case-based scholarship has refined this insight, demonstrating that materially weaker states are often able to extract significant concessions from more powerful counterparts through the strategic use of migration (Paoletti 2011; Tsourapas 2018; Miholjic 2022). What remains comparatively underdeveloped, however, is



the question of how weaponised migration operates when it is no longer deployed as a stand-alone coercive instrument but is instead embedded within a broader non-military strategic domain pursued by a major revisionist power. Approaching this question requires moving beyond migration theory in isolation and situating engineered migration flows within the wider strategic doctrines of the states that employ them.

## *2.2 Russian hybrid strategy*

The question of how the weaponization of migration fits within a broader Russian strategy can explain both the motivation and objectives Russia sets behind its engineered migration flows. Academic understanding of Russian strategy, however, is a multifaceted subject that has many perspectives and has continuously evolved over the past decades. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, scholars identified a transition in Moscow's approach. The argument centered on the idea that the Kremlin's political decision-making process stopped being dictated by ideology and transitioned to a cynical definition of national interest, with active competition amongst various elites. Some began to romanticize the possibilities of Russia's integration into the West, believing in the gradual democratization of its political system (Lo 2008; Tsygankov 2013). Nonetheless, the doctrine of Yevgenii Primakov, Russia's second foreign minister, quickly shattered the hopes of rapprochement (Rumer 2019). Under Primakov, Russia made a clear commitment towards multipolarity, rejecting American hegemonism and, as a consequence, viewing NATO and the EU as rivals rather than potential allies. At the turn of a century, scholars started to recognize a neo-imperialist course of Russia's policy, specifically towards post Soviet countries, viewing this as the Kremlin's return to great power politics (Dawisha and Parrott 1997; Kubicek 1999). The rise of Vladimir Putin in 2000, however, brought back a certain level of optimism. He was viewed as a leader more susceptible to cooperation, who, despite his KGB background, could stabilize Russia and, through economic progress, bring the country closer to a real democracy. There were those who compared Putin to Augusto Pinochet, arguing that the Russian president was a version of a liberal autocrat, whose modernization policies would result in political liberalization (Piñera 2000; Rutland 2000). The realisation of Putin's nature, however, partially came in already in the mid 2000s, where election scandals and direct interference in foreign countries started to shed light on the Kremlin's developing doctrine. Scholars started treating Russia as a militarized police state, where authority was maintained through unconstitutional arrests and repression (Kryshtanovskaya 2003; Kubicek 2006; Soldatov and Borogan 2010). The land invasion of Georgia in 2008, which was combined with cyber attacks and disinformation campaigns, gave ground to the idea that Russia was a revisionist power, seeking to restore its status and confront those who oppose it (Allison 2008; Thomas 2010).

There was, however, little understanding of the overarching Russian strategic approach, and specifically its aims vis-à-vis the European Union. The annexation of Crimea in 2014 served as a catalyst for an unprecedented study of the Kremlin's foreign policy doctrine. The usage

of boots on the ground and the escalating war in Ukraine's Donbas created a sense of real danger, forcing scholars to reevaluate conventional beliefs. Many researchers attempted to conceptualise Moscow's strategy as something unique using the term "hybrid warfare" (Galeotti 2019; Bērziņš 2020; Renz 2018). The term itself originated from the work of Frank Hoffman (2007), a retired U.S. Marine who defined it as "incorporating 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 grounded his argument on the idea that contemporary and future warfare would not feature a distinction between regular and irregular theaters, but would rather be a complex combination of a full range of modes and methods. Using the work of Chinese Colonels Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui, Hoffman adopts their concept of the war beyond limits, which extends to non-military combat areas like the economy, culture, and religion. An implication for the future is that technological superiority no longer guarantees victory, and countries must be prepared to confront unconventional threats and develop their own hybrid capabilities.

In 2014, Russia's simultaneous usage of hard military power, separatist proxy groups, disinformation, economic blackmail, and cultural subversion brought analysts to the conclusion that "hybrid war" best describes Moscow's hands-on approach (Renz 2018). NATO adopted the idea, wording it as "hybrid threats", a mixture of "military and non-military as well as covert and overt means" (Dyner 2023). The transition of terminology from warfare to threats primarily signaled an understanding of the continuous nature of sub-threshold competition. While warfare often features a definitive timeline, threats may also arise during times of peace on a varying scale. This was NATO's development of Hoffman's thinking, resulting in concrete institutional changes. In 2018, the alliance set up Counter-Hybrid Support Teams that have already been deployed to counter multiple instances of Russian hybrid attacks. Moreover, Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 elevated the importance of countering hybrid threats to the top of the organization's list of priorities, with the latest development being the establishment of the Special Coordinator for Hybrid Threats position in 2025 (North Atlantic Treaty Organization 2026).

The problem many academics found both with the original and adopted NATO description was its vagueness (Libiseller 2023). If hybrid warfare or hybrid threats can mean anything from terrorist activity to military invasion to using disinformation on Facebook, what exactly is the value of using these terms for analytical purposes? In the context of Russian activity, Galeotti (2019) called it a misunderstanding of Russian strategy, since, aside from being too broad, the proposed terms also overlooked Russia's own perception of the world and its actions. Others suggested that the concept itself does not convey something unique, and wars of the past have already utilized a combination of both kinetic and non-kinetic means (Wigell 2019). Thus, according to such definitions, hybrid war is just another way to describe indirect and limited military action (Charap 2015). Seely (2017) also highlights that elements of the Russian approach to dealing with their adversaries, such as the usage of proxy groups, denial of culture, economic blackmail, and the use of information as a weapon, have long been a

part of foreign policy since the Soviet era. In an attempt to make the theory more usable, some have suggested breaking it down into more precise concepts, such as information warfare or economic warfare (Wigell 2019). Yet doing so would make it practically unapplicable for conveying information about a broader strategic approach.

What emerges from these debates is less a settled vocabulary than a shared analytical concern. Whether labelled hybrid warfare, hybrid threats, or any other applicable term, the scholarship discussed above consistently identifies a dangerous pattern in Russia's conduct. That is a calibrated combination of conventional and unconventional instruments deployed below the threshold of open war. Within this combination, the manipulation of information has come to occupy a position of growing centrality. Across otherwise competing conceptualisations, there is broad convergence that disinformation constitutes one of the most cost-effective and strategically versatile instruments at Moscow's disposal. Its significance has further expanded with the digitisation of public discourse. A closer engagement with the literature on disinformation, and with the mechanisms through which it operates, is therefore warranted before the analytical framework of the present study can be properly constructed.

### *2.3 Media disinformation and propaganda*

The past studies on disinformation, its characteristics, and related components are extensive, and there is a wide variety of literature to draw upon. Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) define it as “Information that is false and deliberately created to harm a person, social group, organization, or country”. Utilized as an overarching, prolonged communication effort, disinformation constitutes propaganda. Disinformation and propaganda are thus directly related and differ only in scale. Historically, both have been employed far prior to the digital era, with the type and extent of their application being determined by the technological advancements of the time, military strategies, and people’s relationship with the political elites (Ingram 2016; Mareš and Mlejnková 2021). The core features of propaganda are separated between external and internal attributes. External attributes refer to the way propaganda is shaped and its application. It must be addressed towards both an individual and the masses simultaneously, while in the meantime, be continuous and seek to provoke an immediate, irrational reaction. Effective propaganda would also utilize available means of communication, seeking to punch through the information noise and reach the target. Internal attributes highlight the characteristics of those organising the campaigns. Propagandists must be deeply knowledgeable of the social realities of a country or group of people they seek to influence. The information should be timely and related to specific events that dominate the news at a given moment in time. Importantly, it does not necessarily have to rely fully on lies and can combine factual information with strategically placed distortions to influence how the topic is perceived. Propaganda can be of a political and sociological nature. Political propaganda would be employed directly by the government or parties to achieve concrete objectives. Sociological, instead, refers to an unconscious, slow adaptation by individuals to a certain way of life. Its form of distribution can be horizontal, spread through grassroots

movements and peer-to-peer communication, or vertical, utilizing mass media to manipulate the crowds from above (Ellul 1968).

One inseparable part of disinformation or propaganda is the creation of coherent and strategically placed narratives and frames. Narratives in the broad understanding refer to a form of storytelling. Consisting of “material signs, the discourse, which convey a certain meaning, the story, and fulfilling a certain social function”, narratives are characterized not simply as a physical text, but through a cognitive effect they invoke in the mind of the reader (Garrett 2018). Text, as such, does not inherently have narrativity. It is instead attributed to it by the reader, and the perceived narrative depends heavily on the personal experiences and beliefs of the target audience (Fludernik 1996). In another work, Toolan (2001) defined narrative as “a perceived sequence of nonrandomly connected events, typically involving, as the experiencing agonist, humans or quasi-humans, or other sentient beings, from whose experience we humans can learn”. This adds sequencing as a necessary feature of building a narrative, arguing that it is precisely this temporal dynamic that distinguishes narrative from purely descriptive or expository texts. Narratives themselves have two fundamental levels: story and discourse. Story refers precisely to the sequencing feature, any relevant actions, setting, and characters. Discourse, meanwhile, represents the nature in which the content is communicated. The relationship between these two elements is what formally defines a narrative (Amerian and Jorfi 2017). For propaganda, the story itself does not necessarily have to be manufactured. Instead, it is more effective if some of the underlying components are factually true and consistent. What turns a story into propaganda is, in fact, the way discourse is used to shape the reader’s perspective. Through language, selective choice of facts, and omission of unfavorable information, an originally truthful story can turn into an effective propaganda communication material (Entman 1993; Schiappa 2003). Crucial here is the emotional framing (Gross and D’Ambrosio 2004). The same story, for instance, can be communicated in hopeful or depressing tones, resulting in contrasting feelings evoked in the reader.

With the appearance of the internet and social media, the effectiveness and ease of crafting propaganda stories, and as a consequence, the scale of disinformation amplified exponentially. There is an undeniable degradation of international norms around journalism that were established over the course of the last century, and a growing range of threats to objective, fact-checking institutions (Bennett and Livingston 2018; Bakare-Fatungase and Nosakhare Okuonghae 2025). First of all, in the digital era, the ease of entry into the sector due to reduced costs allowed for the creation of numerous online news websites that saturated the market and undermined the integrity of information (Moore 2019). Second, the reduction of interest in traditional media resulted in a shortage of funding, opening additional space for malicious actors to occupy (Pickard 2020). Lastly, artificial intelligence eased the process of crafting propaganda materials to an unprecedented level, allowing it to operate at a mass-production scale even with limited finances and human resources (Goldstein et al. 2023). Already in 2016, the data suggests that an average American encountered up to three

artificially crafted stories from non-traditional publishers in the lead-up to the presidential elections. This trend has since then only intensified, eroding the trust in news coverage and damaging traditional relationships between government, media, and the population (Lazer et al. 2018). In 2026, in the United Kingdom, around 45% of adults reported encountering fake news on a daily basis (Kumar 2026).

When analysing the reasons for such rapid growth in fake and manipulative content, scholars suggest that false information generally spreads faster and deeper compared to accurate facts. Amongst the reasons for such a phenomenon, some point to the importance of novelty and emotional framing. Deceptive information, while being falsified, often offers an unexplored perspective that attracts additional attention, especially in relation to controversial social issues. It, furthermore, evokes strong emotions amongst both the believers and those recognizing its falsehood, leading to heated debates. This, as a consequence, pushes the story to the top of online charts as a dividing issue (Vosoughi, Roy, and Aral 2018). In an attempt to conceptualise the rise of disinformation content, the study conducted by Sijing Chen, Lu Xiao, and Akit Kumar (2023) reveals that there are source-related, message-related, receiver-related, and context-related factors that drive its spread. Source-related factors refer to the sender's perceived credibility and popularity. The better the reputation, the higher the chance that the information will be shared by the reader. Message-related factors speak to the importance of the way the content is presented. Essentially, this is the framing part of discourse construction. Receiver-related factors, in the meantime, depend on individual susceptibility to fake or manipulative content. In this regard, education, previous experiences, and cognitive abilities play a decisive role. Lastly, context-related factors represent the information environment itself. The way networks distribute content and the background algorithmic processes are detrimental in explaining why some media campaigns succeed while others fail.

Studies highlight that with digital disinformation, the primary target is public perception, with a high prevalence of election manipulation campaigns (Howard 2020; Chen, Xiao, and Kumar 2022). The success and popularity of this strategy are driven not only by smart communication but also by platforms themselves, incentivising deception. Content algorithms fragment audiences into separate clusters, making it easy for disinformation to reach the intended social group. The extracted user data ends up shared and sold for revenue, even further amplifying the ability of hostile actors to utilize information manipulation campaigns through online resources (Cinelli et al. 2021). Additionally, since emotionally charged content generates the most engagement, even legitimate businesses and lawful countries are being pushed towards exaggeration and lying (Ruiz 2023).

Taken together, the literature surveyed above outlines a contemporary information environment in which disinformation has become both more potent and more difficult to counter. Contemporary disinformation cannot be analysed as a matter of isolated false claims, but only as a structured communicative practice. Alongside the preceding discussions of

migration theory and Russian strategic conduct, this points to a clear analytical task. Studying Russia's weaponisation of migration requires engaging with the three dimensions at once. The foreign policy logic of engineered migration flows, the broader strategic architecture within which they are deployed, and the disinformation operations through which they acquire political traction. The following chapter draws together the specific theoretical contributions that provide the conceptual tools for analysing these three dimensions that are then used in the empirical analysis of this study.

### **3.0 Theoretical framework**

#### *3.1 Weaponization of migration*

Kelly Greenhill (2010) was the first scholar to conceptualize the term “weaponization of migration” and conduct a comprehensive cross-case study of its application. Defined as “the manipulation of population movements as operational and strategic means to political and military ends”, Greenhill proposed to view the weaponization of migration primarily as a mechanism of foreign policy. In the book *Weapons of Mass Migration*, Greenhill (2010) presents a robust collection of cases when migration has been used to achieve political objectives in the past. She unsurprisingly focuses on the post-World War II years since they were marked by the establishment of international norms regarding the treatment of migrants and refugees. In the period between 1951 and 2006, Greenhill distinguished 64 cases in which, through either the use or threat of use of migrant movements, states tried to influence others. Some, like the 1994 Cuban Raft Crisis, the 1999 Kosovo conflict, and the North Korean migration into China, are examined in detail to trace specific causal mechanisms. Others are used to map the conceptual framework for analysing reasons behind the usage of weaponized migration.

While the established classification distinguishes between sending and receiving states, Greenhill splits sending states into three distinct categories: generators, agents provocateurs, and opportunists. Generators act as the most direct and active party to the unfolding migratory movements. They create or threaten to create population outflows to achieve set foreign policy objectives. Such states have control over the volume of migration and use it as a point of leverage against their target. While they bear the most reputation costs, states acting as generators often have little regard for liberal democratic values to begin with. This makes their visible but powerful position particularly effective as they incur little domestic opposition. For instance, through permitting unrestricted emigration in 1980, Fidel Castro was able to create a domestic crisis in the United States and, in turn, extract diplomatic recognition (Engstrom 1997). The second type, agents provocateurs, take a more passive role by inducing others to take action that leads to generating population movements. They are often weaker states and political entities, such as rebel groups or independence movements, that do not have the capacity to independently pursue a weaponized migration strategy. By positioning themselves or their group as victims of state brutality, agents provocateurs

cultivate moral outrage and international sympathy. Belarus already in 2004 signaled a commitment to relax border controls during a dispute with the EU to provoke a reaction and extract financial concessions (Haseborg 2005). Lastly, opportunists do not take part in engineering the crisis, but utilize their position to nonetheless exploit the migration flow to their advantage. They identify existing migration movements and position themselves as gatekeepers. For their services of containing population inflows, opportunists demand financial incentives through increased foreign aid or lifting of sanctions. Such states incur the least reputation costs as they do not take part in orchestrating a crisis, but merely utilize their geographic positioning. In 2014, Turkey leveraged its territorial location during the Syrian refugee crisis to demand a significant increase in EU support, culminating in the €6 billion deal (Miholjic 2022).

Moving beyond state classification, Greenhill identifies four distinct types of weaponized migration based on overarching objectives: dispossessive, exportive, militarised, and coercive. Dispossessive is primarily associated with territorial occupation, consolidation of power, and resources. Through dislocating the local population, the sending state aims to assume effective control. Often, this can lead to what is commonly referred to as ethnic cleansing, where one group is being replaced with another, more loyal to the controlling government. During the Bosnian Civil War (1992-1995), the ethnic dimension of the conflict resulted in warring parties resorting to the creation of ethnically homogenous territories as a way of cementing their own control (Toal and Dahlman 2011). Exportive strategy seeks to strengthen the domestic political situation by ridding the state of opposing social groups. Additionally, an objective might be to weaken the target country's domestic political cohesion by foisting these individuals upon it. When Fidel Castro opened the gateway to the US by allowing Cubans to leave through the port of Mariel, he did so not only to extract concessions from Washington but also to ease the rising domestic legitimacy crisis. Castro even went as far as allowing those imprisoned to leave to ease the strain on governmental facilities (Masud-Piloto 1996). Militarised migration flows, on the other hand, focus on undermining the command and logistics structure of an enemy. This strategy is utilized during an active conflict phase to gain operational advantage, as it overwhelms the opponent while clearing additional space for military maneuvers. During the Biafran War (1967-1970), the commander of the breakaway Nigerian region deliberately undertook actions that led to increased internal displacement. This allowed separatists to survive longer than anticipated (Thompson 1990). Lastly, a coercive strategy is employed whenever the sending state wants to extract concessions or change the behaviour of the receiving state. For it to succeed, the coercer needs to be in full control over the scale and timing of migration flows. As an example, in 1972, Uganda's President Idi Amin ordered the expulsion of over 50,000 British passport-holders in an attempt to force Britain into retracting their decision to halt military assistance to his government (Curtis 2008).

These four distinctions serve as the foundation of an operationalized conception of weaponised migration, and allow for comparing and analysing various instances of such

activities in the past. Nonetheless, the limitation of the existing literature becomes apparent in application to the Russian case, as Greenhill's classifications prove to be inadequate in fully explaining the objectives behind Moscow's actions. The instances of weaponization of migration by Moscow, as during the Finland-Russia border crisis in 2015-16 or the ongoing situation on the Polish-Belarusian border, cannot be fully considered as examples of dispossessive, exportive, militarised, or coercive behaviour. Firstly, dispossessive migration would imply relocation of local European populations in an attempt to assume control over the territory. Secondly, the migrants arriving in the EU are mostly non-Russian nationals, with many having primary residences in the Middle East, making exportive strategy an ill-fitted explanation. Thirdly, the lack of active war between the EU and Russia and the scale of migration are not nearly enough to generate any meaningful result from a militarised standpoint. Lastly, Russia has not voiced any official demands from the EU or individual member states, disqualifying the coercive weaponized migration approach. (Schoemaker 2019). It is, thus, necessary with this research to further expand the classification of various types of weaponisation of migration by drawing on Russia's distinct strategy as a primary example of its application.

### *3.2 Hybrid interference*

This research proposes to use the definition and conceptualization developed by Wigell (2019). The key theoretical contribution made by the scholar is the distinction between hybrid warfare and hybrid threats, described as hybrid interference, defined by Wigell as "the synchronized use of multiple non-military means of interference tailored to heighten divisions within target societies." Particularly, this concept is focused on the wedge factor strategy, aimed at distancing different social groups of the target country from one another, consequently reducing their ability to resist or counterbalance. A state engaged in hybrid interference would seek to gain reflexive control, meaning to shape the target's perception to make them voluntarily follow the interfering state's agenda. Such a theoretical conceptualization allows for the discussion to remain within the hybrid domain while reducing the threshold below military means. This gives hybrid inference a more analytical rigor, since it binds the concept to a concrete foreign policy realm.

As core elements of hybrid interference, Wigell singles out clandestine diplomacy, geoeconomics, and disinformation. Clandestine diplomacy refers to "cultivating a network of subversive organizations, movements and individuals to exacerbate existing tensions within the target country." The core aim is to use the existing division of society to further push the groups apart. This can be done through supporting opposition parties, demonizing different religious or ethnic minorities, or any other way leading to polarization of the country. In essence, actors cultivate a "fifth column" to steer public sentiment from inside, a strategy widely used and theorized over the course of the 20th century. States using these methods often enjoy a certain level of deniability, since such operations are done covertly through intelligence services and secret contacts with relevant groups. In a recent case, Russia created



a so-called "Victory" bloc in Moldova, a political alliance that received funding from Moscow to bribe voters and promote pro-Russian candidates in the lead-up to the 2024 elections (Wethington 2025). In some instances, this may involve working with an underground society, represented by criminal organizations and local gangs that are utilized as proxy groups. There is a proven record of Russia resorting to such means to achieve its objectives in Europe. The biker gang Night Wolves has, according to numerous reports, been widely involved in spreading Russian propaganda and defending anti-Western parties in the Western Balkans, aiming to undermine the EU and NATO accession processes (Galeotti 2017; Kleiner, Gregor, and Mlejnková 2023). China, too, has in the past resorted to the services of criminal triads to undermine democratic movements in Taiwan (Cole 2021). Clandestine diplomacy thus represents a wide variety of instruments that work towards an overarching goal of destabilising the target country.

Geoeconomics, in Wigell's (2019) definition, speaks about a more subtle form of economic coercion other than sanctions. Instead, the goal is through the selective application of economic benefits to antagonise target groups against one another. The divider state would provide economic incentives to one group while excluding the other. Internally, this could cause friction and disunity even amongst previously aligned communities. In a bilateral setting, this would constitute funneling money to specific political parties or lobby groups, making selective investments, and cultivating loyal business networks. When dealing with complex regional organisations, such as the EU, the target would be to make selective trade deals with Member States to undermine intra-organizational relationships. As a resource-rich country, Russia found itself in a beneficial position, with immense natural reserves to leverage and even cultivate economic dependency. The success of this strategy has been on full display since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, when countries like Hungary and Slovakia started to openly prioritize their economic benefits from dealing with Moscow over upholding international law and maintaining allied relationships with other member states. As a consequence, these two countries have been consistently undermining aid packages to Ukraine and the European sanction regime (Laryš 2024; Madlovics and Magyar 2024). This signals that geoeconomics in itself can be an extraordinarily powerful tool, especially when applied through the export of valuable commodities.

The last element of hybrid interference is disinformation. It refers to the purposeful spreading of false information through various communication channels to advance one's own objectives. Disinformation is not a uniquely modern phenomenon, and has long been part of the foreign and domestic policy toolkits of all types of governments. During the Cold War era, newspapers served as its main vessel (Rid 2020). Now, the digital sphere has drastically changed both its costs and effectiveness. Broad reach and ease of use through social media allow states to utilize disinformation as one of the primary instruments that make hybrid interference successful. By influencing public opinion through information campaigns, there is a possibility to antagonize social groups against one another, as a consequence, driving a wedge within a target society. Disinformation itself can be focused on any range of relevant

sensitive topics, but would also often involve eroding the trust in democratic institutions and the rule of law. Russia has utilized the openness of the EU's legislation on free speech to exploit and worsen internal divisions. Some of Moscow's favourite tools of influencing the European information ecosystem are state-owned channels (RT, Sputnik), local online outlets, armies of bots and trolls, as well as prominent public figures (Gérard and Audinet 2024; Henriksen et al. 2024). The Kremlin has been consistently aiming to steer European policymaking into a preferred direction either through targeting individual member states or the EU bureaucracy as a whole (Nitszke 2022).

The combination of clandestine diplomacy, geoeconomics, and disinformation makes hybrid interference a particularly useful concept in analysing and defining Russian strategy. Russia has been able to leverage vulnerabilities of the EU and utilize its resources within these three components to gain strategic advantages. It is, however, beyond the scope of this research to examine the connection between Moscow and European political parties or existing economic dependencies. Because of this, the analysis will not engage in studying the extent of clandestine diplomacy and geoeconomics, and will focus only on the third pillar. It is the belief of the author that disinformation represents a central part of the Russian hybrid operations directed against the EU, and its detailed study will allow for mapping of where the Russian weaponization of migration stands as a strategic operation. The attention will be particularly devoted to the connection between irregular border crossing and accompanying media campaigns.

### *3.3 Narratives and frames*

Identifying disinformation as the pillar of hybrid interference most relevant to this study raises a further question of how its operation can be analysed in concrete terms. Building on the broader media and communication literature, the concepts of strategic narrative and framing are selected as the analytical instruments through which the discursive dimension of Russia's weaponisation of migration is examined. Strategic narrative is defined as the “a means by which political actors attempt to construct a shared meaning of the past, present, and future of international politics to shape the behavior of domestic and international actors” (Miskimmon et al., 2017). The “strategic” component refers to the clear intent, determination, and objective of the narrator. The goal is not just to tell a story, but through this to force a tangible change within the target country. Standard narratives can emerge organically and be formed through nuanced shared experiences. Strategic narratives are deliberately engineered by political actors, and often make clear definitions of who is an ally or an enemy. They are effective in constructing value systems and ideologies that have deep and lasting social impact. Furthermore, strategic narratives provide templates for understanding contemporary events, allowing the narrator to shape the public perception and opinion (Livingstone and Nassetta 2018). To increase the effectiveness, the narrators often rely on what personally resonates with the readers and evokes the strongest emotions. Meanwhile, scientific facts, statistics, or expert opinions remain overlooked or completely disregarded. As a consequence,

this degrades the quality of the debate, leading to the limitation of rational discourse and marginalization of opposing views. Strategic narratives seek to dominate the information ecosystem, simultaneously shaping the past, present, and future. In security studies, utilized as a means to erode opponents' capabilities, narrators would rely on crafting stories that polarize society (Hellman 2024a). Making people doubt their own political system and distrust their neighbours becomes the ultimate goal of public communication, which, if achieved, can have major ramifications.

Narratives, whether strategic or not, consist of story and discourse. While, as previously mentioned, the story might remain the same, changing the way it is being discussed can turn the public perception on its head. Framing of the discourse is thus an inseparable component of effective narrative construction, no matter the underlying objectives. According to Robert Entman (1993), “to frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described.” Entman elaborates that, at the core, framing is about focus. It does not necessarily have to involve lying and instead can be done through shifting the attention of readers to specific components of a story discussed. Frames help people to relate information to their own personal experiences, resulting in an amplification of effects (Tankard 2001). Additionally, framing can be complex and multifaceted. A single narrative might have several frames supporting it, coming together into a coherent strategic effort to shape public opinion. Overall, there are four functions that a frame performs in the context of policymaking. First, it identifies what the actual problem is and what the associated costs and benefits are. Second, it makes a diagnosis of what is causing the problem to arise, providing readers with a clear scapegoat. Third, it evaluates the overall morality of the described act, providing a value-based judgement. Lastly, according to the established realities, it gives a justification for a solution that is portrayed as the only viable option (Matthes and Kohring 2008). Previous researchers engaged with disinformation have identified several prominent frames often used by interfering actors. These include, amongst others, describing the society as dysfunctional, shaping any disagreement as the people versus the elites contest, highlighting a danger to national identity, and attributing responsibility for problems to marginalized groups (Wodak 2021). Overall, framing is a vehicle of bringing people to your side and, as a consequence, a way of gaining power. Some describe the contemporary media ecosystem as a continuous framing contest, where an effective communication strategy is more important than having accurate and representative facts (Anderson 2014). As a consequence, the study of disinformation and propaganda becomes impossible without strategic narrative and framing identification.

In the context of this research, Russian disinformation is described as a deliberate propaganda strategy of a political nature that employs vertical channels of communication to achieve the desired effects. The empirical section will focus in detail on Russian media resources, aiming to define the relation of digital disinformation and propaganda to the illegal migration crisis

happening at the Polish-Belarussian border since 2021. The above-mentioned theories of Matthes and Kohring's (2008) four-function model of framing and the concept of strategic narrative developed by Miskimmon et al. (2017) are going to be leveraged to study the connection between physical action and attempts to shape the public perception.

#### **4.0 Research methodology**

Russian weaponization of migration represents a multifaceted subject that, combined with propaganda and disinformation, constitutes a strategy of a hybrid nature. Because of this, to successfully answer the research question and address the limitations of the literature, this study uses a combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches. Additionally, the Polish-Belarusian border crisis (from 2021 onwards) is singled out as a representative case study allowing for a necessary analytical depth. While, as the further background section will show, there have been numerous instances where Russia used migration to destabilize the EU political cohesion beyond Poland (borders with Finland, Latvia, and Lithuania), these cases follow a similar pattern and utilize identical communication strategies. For this reason, Poland, as the largest EU country to directly experience Russian-engineered migration at its borders and where an elaborate disinformation network is present, has been selected for further analysis.

The first empirical part involves quantitative data analysis to establish the physical realities on the ground. This component relies primarily on descriptive statistics, summarizing the scale, timing, and composition of border crossings rather than testing for statistical inference. Two primary data points were of interest: the number of attempted illegal and registered border crossings. Not every migrant attempting to cross the border is apprehended and processed. Because of this, identifying the distinction between "attempted" and "registered" in data collection gives a necessary analytical nuance. Data on attempted crossings allows for evaluating the scale, intensity, and timing of migration flows. In the meantime, data on registered offenders provides other information, such as migrants' countries of origin, useful for further analysis of narratives and frames.

From the gathered border data, October 2021 and May 2024 have been identified as the peaks of activity and points of interest for studying the digital landscape and media campaigns accompanying escalating tensions. Additionally, January 2024 is examined as it represents the lowest rate of border engagement. For these three months, it was imperative to evaluate the discourse in a selected number of Russian-controlled media sources. It gave an opportunity to determine how the increasing border activity was represented by the prevalent narratives and frames, providing insights into Moscow's objectives and shaping of the political discourse. Particularly, articles published for these three months have been retrieved from Sputnik Polska (for October 2021) and Pravda Network (for January and May 2024). Sputnik Polska represents a major Russian-controlled digital outlet that publishes in the Polish language, directly targeting local audiences. Since the webpage of Sputnik Polska was

banned in 2022 and later discontinued entirely in 2024, articles were accessed through using the Wayback Machine. Given that by 2024, Sputnik Polska had already been taken offline, its articles are used only to study the disinformation campaigns in the initial stage of the border crisis. Pravda Network, on the other hand, continues to operate to this day and is openly accessible in many EU countries despite the sanctions regime. It appeared as another extension of the Russian disinformation network following the collapse of the RT and Sputnik system in the EU (Willaert et al.). For this reason, articles published there are particularly helpful in understanding how the narrative and frame construction evolved over the years. Overall, 58 articles were collected from Sputnik Polska for October 2021, as well as 51 articles for Pravda Network for January and May 2024. The articles were then translated into English for coding purposes.

The qualitative analysis represents a second empirical component. First and foremost, the gathered articles are individually assessed, allowing for the identification of the most prevalent frames and strategic narratives. Defined narratives can be characterised as having a clear intent, binary framing, emotional appeal prioritized over facts, and the objective of dominating the information ecosystem to shape public perception and force tangible behavioral change. They construct value systems and ideologies that polarize society while simultaneously providing templates for understanding contemporary events. Within the identified narratives, various framing angles are explored. Tying it to Matthes & Kohring's (2008) framing characteristics, each article is coded based on problem definition (what is the issue?), causal interpretation (who is responsible?), moral evaluation (who represents the good and the bad?), and treatment recommendations (how to solve the problem?). Each article is assigned to a single narrative but to an unlimited number of accompanying frames, allowing for a systematic yet flexible evaluation.

The identified narratives and frames are then linked to Wigell's (2019) hybrid interference and Greenhill's (2010) theory on the weaponization of migration. These two theories are the foundation for understanding and conceptualizing the Russian strategic approach, tying together the analysis of Russia's disinformation with a broader strategic effort at destabilising the EU system. The aim is not only to look at stories, but to understand how discourse patterns attempt to force the EU into a reflexive policy change. The first part looks at how engineered migration flows combined with disinformation campaigns constitute what Wigell describes as a wedge factor strategy, aiming to create division within the target society and in this context, the European political family. The framing analysis provides the data that proves these wedges are being driven into specific societal cracks. The second part examines the way identified frames and narratives serve as the empirical basis for challenging and expanding Greenhill's typology of weaponized migration. Since the existing classifications (dispossessive, exportive, militarised, and coercive weaponization) are unable to satisfy the nature of ongoing confrontation, coining the term of subversive weaponization of migration becomes essential not only for this research, but for any future studies in the related matter. Crucially, the treatment recommendation variable was utilized as the primary litmus test for

Greenhill's coercive model. By specifically coding for the presence or absence of clear diplomatic or political demands within the Russian discourse, the research provides empirical evidence for the transition from coercive to subversive weaponization.

The objective of the research is to make contributions to the two fronts. On the one hand, the findings will allow for understanding the contemporary strategy of Russia towards the EU and the place of weaponized migration within the broader approach of hybrid interference. On the other hand, the research seeks to expand the existing theoretical literature on the topic, ensuring that the conceptual framework evolves alongside the shifting realities of 21st-century statecraft.

## **5.0 Background to the crisis**

First, however, it is important to map out the instances of weaponization of migration against the EU and their development over the years. This section seeks to provide a background to the most prominent cases before the empirical analysis. Russia, while currently being the largest proponent of such a strategy, is not the first country to have done so. Previous studies identify numerous instances of weaker states using migration flows to extract concessions from far stronger European economies. During the crisis in 2015-16, Turkish President Erdogan threatened to keep borders open if the EU refused to send Turkey a large aid package (Adamson and Tsourapas 2019). The strategy proved to be successful, costing the EU six billion euros and weakening the position vis-à-vis Ankara in the Middle East (Miholjic 2022). Similarly, in the 1990s, Albania was able to extract economic and humanitarian aid from Italy to stop mass migration to the peninsula. Furthermore, Muammar Gaddafi, while ruling Libya, used his authority and threatened to open the maritime route across the Mediterranean for African migrants, going as far as stating that the EU should pay if it wants to avoid "black Europe" (Paoletti 2011; Başer 2022). What unites these cases is that the weaponisation of migration was used by economically and militarily weaker countries as a method of coercion. Greenhill (2010; 2022) specifically highlights that for coercive weaponization to be effective, one does not have to overpower an opponent in every regard. Instead, the core determinant of success is the vulnerability of the target political system, rather than the financial or military capabilities of the sending state.

What differs from the Russian weaponization of migration from the examples listed above is the absence of the coercive element when targeting the European Union and NATO countries. Former Commander of US European Command and NATO Supreme Allied Commander General Philip Breedlove was the first high-profile figure to bring public attention to the matter in 2016. Referring to the civil war in Syria, General Breedlove stated that "Russia and the Assad regime are deliberately weaponizing migration from Syria. In an attempt to overwhelm European structures and break European resolve. These indiscriminate weapons used by both Bashar al-Assad and the non-precision use of weapons by the Russian forces, I cannot find any other reason for them other than to cause refugees to be on the move and

make them someone else's problem" (Schoemaker 2019). At its core, General Breedlove's argument stressed that the influx of Syrian refugees in 2015 that overwhelmed the EU was, in fact, a deliberate strategy. Breedlove viewed Russia's bombardment not as a standard military operation, but as an attempt to forcefully displace the population and create a political crisis. Despite the severity of accusations, hardly anyone amongst European policymakers and journalists paid attention to this topic or addressed it in any meaningful way.

While there is still a lot to be written about and investigated regarding Russia's actions and strategy in Syria, it falls beyond the scope of this research. It is a case study of a different nature, since it was implemented during wartime and did not involve the borders of the EU controlled by Russia or its subordinate states. The primary focus is on instances of engineered migration flows at the Finnish, Norwegian, Latvian, Lithuanian, Estonian, and Polish borders, where Moscow follows a similar behavioral pattern and seeks to achieve one overarching objective of political destabilization.

### *5.1 The 2015-16 case of Finland and Norway*

Karen-Anna Eggen and Jyri Lavikainen (2025) conducted a comprehensive analysis of the strategic use of the Northern route (Finland and Norway) by the Russian government during 2015-16. The initial phase began in early 2015 at the Norwegian Storskog crossing with the sudden arrival of third-country nationals. Because under normal conditions, Storskog processes nearly zero asylum seekers on an annual basis, the unorthodox activity immediately raised the alarms. Until August 2015, the situation worsened dramatically, with thousands of people attempting to enter Norwegian territory. In response, the Norwegian government, for the first time since World War II, heightened its military readiness level, which, however, did not result in the stopping of the Russian campaign. In the meantime, Moscow justified its stance on the issue as a matter of upholding international migration law that supposedly prevented Russians from detaining arriving migrants. The crisis continued through the fall of 2015, and in October, foreign ministers of Russia and Norway met for the first time to discuss the ongoing situation at the border. With no tangible agreement reached, Norway tightened its protocol in early November, prohibiting any entry without proper documentation. This was followed by amendments to the Immigration Act later that month, classifying Russia as a "safe country" to facilitate faster returns. This removed the legal roadblock that constrained Norwegian border services, and as a result, some migrants ended up stranded for days in the no-man's land between the borders (Virkkunen and Piipponen 2021). At the end of November, the Norwegian side further announced that they would start physical border patrols and would prevent any crossings by third-country nationals. By November 30, 2015, the flow of migrants had suddenly stopped, dropping to zero within a week. Importantly, the Russian side had not issued any ultimatum, nor did they elaborate on the reason why the crossings had stopped.

This was, however, only the first stage of the operation, and as the activity on the Norwegian border dwindled, the number of migrants attempting to cross into Finland rose exponentially in December 2015 in Salla and Raja-Jooseppi (Eggen and Lavikainen 2025). Given the recent experience of their neighbors, the Finnish Border Guard reacted swiftly, identifying the surge of activity as part of Russia's hybrid strategy. In a matter of days, Finland began restricting the border traffic, thoroughly checking any approaching vehicle. This led to a peculiar response. Russians started giving out bicycles to migrants, arguing that European states were encouraged to facilitate bicycle border crossings under the Vienna Convention on Road Traffic. Finland, in turn, banned cycling across the border altogether, noting that it had become a method of illegal entry into the country (Piipponen and Virkkunen 2017). Especially given the severely cold winter conditions, there was no natural reason to use bicycles as a means of transportation. The ban forced Russia to switch its approach, and migrants started arriving in convoys of cars and applying for asylum to overwhelm the processing system. As the situation dragged on, the Prime Ministers of both sides met in Russia at the end of January 2016. The diplomatic engagement, however, failed to produce any results. The issue was by then elevated to the highest level, with many high-ranking Finnish officials, including the President, attempting to use their communication channels to reach an agreement with their Russian counterparts. Despite this, similarly to Norway, the migration flows did not stop as a result of high-level negotiations. Instead, they abruptly ended by the end of February, before the presidents of both countries were scheduled to meet and discuss the border crisis (Eggen and Lavikainen 2025). This left many in Finland puzzled as to what was the reason for such turmoil, and what role the Russian state apparatus plays in engineering the migration flows.

Further investigations into the matter revealed a direct involvement of Russian governmental agencies in preparing and executing border operations in the case of both Finland and Norway. There is clear evidence of Russian full control over migration flows and strategic motivation behind the operation. Firstly, it is important to highlight that at every border crossing affected, there was an unnatural upsurge in activity that has never been recorded, pointing to the organized effort behind it. Given thorough and tight control Russia traditionally has over its border crossings, the sudden arrival of thousands of migrants could not have possibly happened without state backing (Virkkunen, Silvan, and Piipponen 2024). Agents of the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) were continuously sighted assisting migrants in reaching their destination, and provided them with the necessary means of transportation. Additionally, while some migrants were reported to be residents of Russia, many have been flown from the Middle Eastern, South Asian, and African countries (Virkkunen and Piipponen 2021). Through interviews with Finnish officials, researchers were able to confirm that Russia employed the so-called “travel agencies” that offered people, for a price of up to 17,000 USD, a ticket to the European Union. This was combined with an instrumentalization of local Russian courts, which issued deportation orders for those at the border to force Norway and Finland to accept them. On top of this, in the lead-up to the operation, the Russian Foreign Ministry has been giving out visas on a far larger scale to



ensure the smooth arrival of migrants to the European borders. Little control was left in the hands of migrants themselves, who, despite legitimately seeking a better life, were used as instruments of destabilization and forced to cross the borders without a clear explanation of the unfolding operation (Eggen and Lavikainen 2025).

The whole situation left Finnish and Norwegian authorities confused, as no clear demands were made. Similarly, the migration flows stopped abruptly without any concrete agreement reached. Because of this, the conclusion of Eggen and Lavikainen (2025) highlights that this incident fits Greenhill's (2010) criteria only partly, since it does not include an element of the criterion. What Russia achieved is less tangible and not clearly observed. It tested the institutional responses of both the EU and NATO, as well as put pressure on the internal unity of these two organizations. In retrospect, the crisis of those years can be observed as a pilot project, a preparation for an operation on a far larger scale that will begin in 2021 at the borders of Poland, Latvia, and Lithuania.

### *5.2 The 2021 crisis at the Eastern border*

July 2021 marked the second large-scale test of the European Union, this time, on its eastern flank (Filipec 2022; Yeliseyeu 2024). Since Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia experienced an unorthodox arrival of thousands of migrants roughly simultaneously and continue to confront weaponized migration with combined effort to this day, their collective borders with Belarus will hereafter be referred to as the Eastern border. Additionally, Given the subordinate relationship between Belarus and Russia, Belarus is treated throughout this research as an extension of the Russian foreign policy apparatus rather than as an independent actor (Marin 2026). It is widely recognized within contemporary security studies that the Minsk government can hardly be considered autonomous on consequential foreign policy matters, where decisions of strategic weight are made by superiors in Moscow (Hancock 2006; Banasik 2022; Molis and Pastorello 2024; Liubakova 2025). This is not to suggest that Belarus is entirely without agency. Lukashenko openly articulated sanctions-linked grievances in May 2021, and the Belarusian government took the initial steps of introducing visa-free regimes and arranging direct flights from Middle Eastern capitals through Belavia. The operation as it has unfolded since 2021, however, cannot be explained by Belarusian initiative alone. The continuation of the campaign through 2024 and 2025, well after sanctions relief had become politically unattainable, further indicates that whatever coercive logic motivated the early Belarusian phase was absorbed into a broader Russian strategic effort. It is not the purpose of this research to track the relationship between the two authoritarian states, which is why, in line with observation by other scholars, Belarus is considered a proxy, while Russia is an architect behind the engineered migration flows.

Nonetheless, the background, or rather one of the justifications used for the arrival of migrants in 2021, has a deep relation to the Belarusian political dynamics. In 2020 Belarussian President Lukashenko, despite widespread opposition, rigged an election and

declared victory with over 80 percent of the vote (Leukavets 2026). Many European states, as well as the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), openly criticised Belarussian leader for preventing the democratic transition of power. Belarusians themselves were outraged, resulting in the mass protests demanding Lukashenko's resignation. In response, Lukashenko used state security services to suppress the population, jailing over 35,000 individuals. The EU rapidly issued sanctions against the Belarusian autocrat, which were viewed in Minsk as interference in their internal affairs. This unwillingness of Lukashenko to step down and continuous state repressions led to a final rupture in relations between Belarus and the EU (Kłysiński 2021; Boels 2024). Especially given the severity and openness of human rights violations, the situation became impossible for the West to overlook. The boiling point was reached in May 2021, when Belarus forced a Ryanair public flight to land in Minsk because one of the passengers was a famous Belarusian opposition journalist. The aircraft was traveling from Greece to Lithuania, and once it entered the Belarusian airspace, it was escorted to an airport in Minsk by a military fighter jet using a false bomb threat as a pretext. Such blatant violation of international law demanded a response, and in June 2021, the EU increased its sanctions targeting entire sectors of Belarussian economy (Whartnaby 2023).

Therefore, the arrival of migrants to the EU border later that summer was, as some put it, primarily a response to the elevated sanctions regime (Horncastle 2023; Grzywaczewski 2021). In May 2021, Lukashenko openly stated that "we stopped drugs and migrants. Now you will eat them and catch them yourselves" (Talík 2024). The first wave arrived as early as June 2021, primarily along the borders of Poland and Lithuania. In a matter of months, the number increased from a couple of hundred to tens of thousands across the Eastern border. The arriving migrants were primarily from the Middle East, dominated by the Iraqis, Syrians, and Yemenites. By October, the situation had severely deteriorated, with at least 20,000 people camping inside Belarus and over 5,000 trapped in the no-man's-land. Those who ended up stranded in between the borders were denied entry by the European states and later refused by the Belarusian side, leading to often prolonged periods of limbo (Filipec 2022; Yeliseyev 2024). Such dynamics are characteristic of the border activity that goes on to this day, with new migrants arriving every single month.

In executing the operation, similar tactics were used as during the 2015-16 Northern border crisis. There are a number of indicators that point to the fact that it was far from spontaneous and was prepared well in advance. Talík (2024) highlights that it was a well-coordinated and planned effort that involved a complex network of state-owned companies and agencies. First, Belarussian government, mirroring its Russian superior, introduced visa-free entry for over 70 countries, facilitating a smooth arrival of those seeking to cross the border (Yeliseyev 2024). This served as both a pull factor that helped Russia fulfil its objective, as well as a push factor that gave migrants a chance to escape their harsh realities. Second, Belarusian state-owned travel agencies were involved in organizing flights and accommodation. Migrants were taken to the hotels, later transported to the border, and told that another car

was waiting for them on the other side. Additionally, new direct airport connections were established from Middle Eastern capitals. Some described it as “asylum tourism,” where, for a sizable fee, people were brought to the EU borders from different parts of the world (Talík 2024; Kibrik et al. 2025). Importantly, many of those targeted by Russian and Belarusian agencies were from conflict-torn countries. This gave an opportunity to leverage people’s devastation and insecurity to promise them a chance for a better life. As a result, those arriving did so willingly, deciding it was better to try their luck despite all the risks and costs involved. Importantly, once migrants reached Belarus, it was state security forces that assisted them in reaching their final destination and helped navigate the border landscape (Yeliseyeu 2024; Ancite-Jepifánova 2025).

The response to the unfolding crisis can be analysed from the two levels: individual and institutional. Individually, Poland, Latvia, and Lithuania approached the situation with clear resolve and willingness to prevent border breaches. Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki promised to “defend Poland’s border with full determination” (“Poland Slams” 2021). His Lithuanian counterpart, Prime Minister Ingrida Šimonytė, further stressed that they “see the whole process as hybrid aggression targeted against not Lithuania but the entire European Union” (“PM Announces” 2021). Latvian Prime Minister Arturs Krišjānis Kariņš, too, was clear in his rhetoric, stating, “We will be sticking together, keeping our composure, but we will be acting very resolutely” (“EU Will” 2021). All three countries declared a state of emergency in their respective border zones, rapidly blocked the border with barbed wire, and began the construction of a steel wall. To ensure that those breaching the barriers are prevented from entering the EU, the affected countries made legal changes in what tactics border guards can employ. They officially introduced the policy of pushbacks that forcefully returned migrants without processing their asylum claims (Baranowska 2022; Broks et al. 2024). Such harsh policies were justified by the need to defend against the rising hybrid threats. For Poland, Latvia, and Lithuania, Russian imperial ambitions have always been looming over the horizon, which explains their rapid realisation that this is not a matter of migration. Instead, it is a direct threat to the national security not only of individual countries, but also of the whole European Union (Filipec 2021). Migrants, they argued, were only instrumentalized to achieve geopolitical objectives, which demanded rapid countermeasures. Poland, for instance, deployed its armed forces to support the border guard units. They were authorized to use non-lethal weapons to deter arriving migrants, leading to widespread condemnation from international human rights groups (Stępka and Mazurkiewicz 2024). Latvia and Lithuania have taken similar measures. Overall, the three countries continue to be aligned in their approach, also reflected by the establishment of more direct communication and data sharing channels between border guard units.

Institutionally, the response of the EU this time was more aligned compared to previous instances of a similar threat. Member States generally agreed that it was a version of a hybrid attack that had to be dealt with. This lowered the supposed hypocrisy costs that Russia tried to impose by making the EU conflicted between the need to take action and uphold its own

laws (Mészáros and Toca 2023; Moloney 2026). Initially, there was an attempt to cut off the means of transportation to halt the flow of people. Under international pressure, airlines from Turkey and Iraq reduced the number of direct flights and restricted certain nationalities from flying into Belarus (“Belarus to Stop” 2021). This, however, only led to a rerouting through Russian territory. To keep the intensity and ensure continuity, Moscow was accommodating people first before transporting them into Belarus and towards the Eastern border (Talík 2024). To resolve the situation, the EU as a bloc approached Belarus and Russia, trying to ease the tensions through diplomatic channels. Germany's Chancellor Angela Merkel specifically had personal phone calls with Lukashenko, trying to leverage her relationship with Moscow and Minsk to diffuse the crisis (“Merkel and Lukashenko” 2021). However, with diplomatic engagement leading nowhere, the initial alignment between the EU and Eastern states started to fracture. Specifically, the pushback tactics introduced by Poland, Latvia, and Lithuania were met with criticism by many in Brussels (Koinova 2024). EU Home Affairs Commissioner Ylva Johansson, for example, criticized Eastern countries for using questionable methods against arriving migrants, violating the European and international law (Sanderson 2022). Similar remarks were made by several members of the European Parliament.

As a consequence, while the EU attempted to limit its hypocrisy costs, it was unable to avoid them altogether. More arguments began to revolve around the questions of morality and norms. Critics highlighted that the EU has a responsibility to uphold its human rights commitments, which Eastern states violated in their response (Koinova 2024). Because of this, the European Commission was reluctant to provide funds for border protection initiatives. The Commission's spokesperson stated that they “do not finance fences”, displaying a disconnect between realities on the ground and the perceived situation in Brussels (“Brussels Will” 2021). As a result, Poland, Latvia, and Lithuania encountered internal roadblocks in their attempt to confront weaponized migration. Funding was not provided to the demanded extent and the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) intervened and requested that the border countries provide food, water, clothing, medical care, and temporary shelter to those stranded at the border (Grześkowiak 2022; “EU and UNHCR” 2022). The Russian invasion of Ukraine, however, changed the security calculus of those in the West, making both the policymakers and the population realize a life-threatening threat of disregarding national defence (Trauner and Wolff 2024). For Poland, Latvia, and Lithuania, this meant a more supportive EU that has since then prioritised the protection of member states borders. In May 2024, under the EU's new Pact on Migration and Asylum, official crisis measures were introduced (Gambazza 2024). Specifically, providing member states with the ability to temporarily derogate from procedural asylum rules if a situation constitutes a case of engineered migration flow. In practice, this led to the normalization of pushback tactics, giving the border states a legal instrument of justification (Stiller 2025). Despite this, the relations between the Eastern states and Brussels remain strained over the question of migration. The new Pact, for instance, is viewed negatively in Poland since, aside from strengthening several border measures, it also introduced the relocation mechanism,

which would mean Poland would either have to pay or proportionally house asylum seekers on its territory.

In analysing Russia's motivation and objectives, the literature points in several directions. First, there is a claim that weaponized migration was a response to the sanctions the EU introduced against the Lukashenko regime after its crackdown on protestors and anti-democratic power grab (Koinova 2024). This line of thinking, however, has several crucial limitations. It does not account for the level of coordination and planning that was observed. The tight network of state agencies, security forces, human smugglers, and airline companies points to a thorough preparation process that would not have been possible if the crisis on the Eastern border was merely a direct response to the European sanction regime. Additionally, if this strategy of engineered migration was aimed at forcing the EU to lift its sanctions, it would be accompanied by a political communication between both sides, with Russia and Belarus issuing clear ultimatums. There is, however, no indication that such a demand was ever made, which dismisses the border crisis as being part of coercive diplomacy. The second, and far more applicable explanation, highlights the hybrid nature of the campaign, with a multifaceted set of aims and milestones (Filipec 2022; Dyer 2023; Marin 2026). The primary objective was a political disruption by driving a wedge between the member states. This has largely been successful in the first year of the campaigns, since many in the EU approached the crisis from different perspectives compared to the border countries. The media angle of weaponized migration, and specifically its relation to the information campaigns, however, remains an underexplored subject in the literature. This gap is precisely what the empirical analysis seeks to address, tying together in detail Russian objectives and media framing, which will give insights into how the engineering migration flows at the Eastern border fit within a broader hybrid interference strategy.

### *5.3 Russian disinformation and propaganda*

Disinformation and propaganda have been one of the cornerstones of the Kremlin's foreign policy, far beyond contemporary use in hybrid interference operations. Characterized by the term "active measures," the Russian strategy of spreading fake news is far from spontaneous and constitutes a methodological operationalization of a large intelligence network (Rid 2020). It often relies on blending facts with fiction, and is most effective when accurate information is merged with manipulative narratives. Its targets are in many cases liberal democracies, with campaigns aimed at undermining epistemic order. They seek to slowly erode trust in the institutions, specifically the judiciary and the press, as they are the primary source of factual authority. If successful, the information vacuum is then filled with Russian-controlled sources (Treyger, Cheravitch, and Cohen 2022; Stewart et al. 2024). Importantly, the Kremlin's operations are of a covert nature and rely on prolonged and gradual generation of effects (Darczewska 2019). This makes them particularly difficult to detect and measure, as their impact is practically impossible to isolate.

Tracking the origin of the Kremlin's disinformation operations, researchers have identified the 1920s and 30s as the most instrumental years when the first Soviet secret police was established and continued to rise to prominence (Rid 2020; Horbyk, Prymachenko, and Orlova 2023). From the outset, it was responsible for identifying counterrevolutionaries, feeding forged data to Western spies, and cultivating communist movements around the world. With time, it grew into an enormous organization whose agents were present on all levels of civil society and government. After the beginning of the Cold War, the need for an elaborate global disinformation network only increased, and in 1954, the Committee for State Security (KGB) was created as a new state institution to take over internal and external influence operations. Throughout the decades, the KGB has been actively infiltrating Western societies, orchestrating targeted and often successful operations. With Operation Denver, for instance, the Soviets were able to plant the idea that AIDS was a virus created by the United States, leading millions of Americans to believe in the hoax for years to come (Selvage 2019). In the 80s, they were publishing books in 84 foreign languages, distributing the disinformation on a global scale. With the fall of the Soviet Union, however, the West made a major miscalculation and believed the Soviet-era active measure campaigns were a phenomenon of the past. As a consequence, by the turn of the century, countermeasure infrastructure stopped being developed, and in many instances was dismantled. When Putin took power in 1999 and started to rebuild the information warfare apparatus, the topic of disinformation had largely faded from the agenda of Western security establishments (Cull et al. 2017). This led to years of failed assessments of Russian foreign policy, since under Putin, Russian secret services returned to the same doctrinal principles and objectives that animated Soviet strategy (Mareš and Mlejnková 2021).

As a consequence, the contemporary Russian propaganda system has a lot in common with the KGB-era operations. It is first and foremost characterised by an elaborate network of governmental institutions that are directly responsible for the fabrication and spread of necessary narratives. At the top of the network are the Federal Security Service (FSB), the Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR), and the Main Directorate (GRU). Their operatives treat disinformation as one of the primary methods of pursuing Russian national doctrine and countering Western influence. It is both a weapon and a shield that gives opportunity to influence target societies while, in the meantime, creating an internal information bubble. The capabilities of state institutions are then complemented by mass media government-funded broadcasters, such as RT (formerly Russia Today) and Sputnik (Horbyk, Prymachenko, and Orlova 2023; Yang, McCabe, and Hindman 2024). They publish online articles and broadcast their channels translated into the most dominant foreign languages, aiming to reach as wide an audience as possible. In periods of power transition, Russia specifically uses these networks to promote favourable candidates or parties. Some countries even rely on Russian sources to cement their power in perpetuity. In Serbia, both Sputnik and RT have been active in creating content in the Serbian language specifically to maintain the popularity of the current Moscow-adjacent government and prevent EU accession (Zweers, Drost, and Henry 2023). Furthermore, the Kremlin also relies heavily on civil society, and in particular on loyal

grassroots movements that are often deliberately cultivated to create a false sense of broad public support. This includes pro-Russian social media channels, influencers, and often political initiatives. In West Africa, such groups were instrumental in shifting public opinion in favour of a Russian partnership in the wake of military coups. Their advocacy efforts have helped transform countries that were once traditional allies of France and the West into staunch supporters of the Kremlin's foreign policy (Africa Center for Strategic Studies 2024; Vasyliuk 2026). Lastly, there is an element of the Russian diaspora that is utilized to either openly or covertly promote pro-Kremlin narratives and recruit foreign citizens (Kanet 2024).

As this study is focused on digital propaganda campaigns, Russian networks and publishers, such as RT and Sputnik, present a central research interest. In 2005, the pioneer channel of Russia's online presence was RT (known as Russia Today at the time). Initially, its operations resembled those of similar Western broadcasters, focusing on soft power rather than strategic information manipulation. This, however, was merely an illusion that quickly faded as Russia invaded Georgia in 2008 and began utilizing RT to shape the narratives about the war in Western societies (Gulenko 2024). By the time Russia invaded Crimea in 2014, RT's disinformation initiatives were complemented by a new mirroring service called Sputnik. Sputnik proved to be a more niche network, targeting smaller countries and cultures. Unlike RT, Sputnik began publishing in non-global languages, such as Polish, Finnish, Estonian, etc. The specific focus was on Russia's immediate neighborhood and post-Soviet states (Hellman 2024b). As the extent of Russia's disinformation became more apparent, and its dangers highlighted by a full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the EU made a move to ban all the variations of RT and Sputnik. The result was a forced but sophisticated evolution. First, Russian agencies launched what is known as a doppelganger campaign. This involves cloning the exact web design and creating similar URLs of legitimate Western media outlets to deceive readers into believing the published disinformation (Gergelewicz 2024). Second, instead of trying to workaroud bans with RT and Sputnik's domains, Russia launched what is known as Pravda Network. In its essence, Pravda Network is not a media of its own; instead, it is an automated infrastructure designed to gather and translate news articles into European languages. Pravda Network does not employ journalists or reporters and simply copies content from sanctioned Russian publishers (Willaert et al. 2026). As a result, European readers and AI chatbots can easily consume Russian disinformation from Pravda Network's websites (which remain openly accessible in the EU), bypassing the sanctions regime. This is the primary reason why this research analyses not only the Polish version of Sputnik, but also its successor, Pravda Network PL.

## **6.0 Empirical analysis: Border data**

The first stage of the empirical analysis engages with data gathered from the Polish Border Guard. Table 1 showcases a volatile but continuous flow of illegal migrants at the Polish-Belarusian border. First and foremost, it signals a deliberate effort of the Russian government to maintain the activity over the years, despite financial and reputational costs.

There wasn't a single month when the number fell to zero, although late autumn and winter appear to be the calmest phases. Additionally, there is a clear indication of an elaborate transportation network that managed to keep up the arrivals despite travel bans and international pressure. As mentioned earlier, Russia took on a large chunk of "asylum travel" on itself, using its wide web of governmental institutions to lure people into paying for a supposed ticket to the EU. This allowed an uninterrupted flow of people, which, as a consequence, put extra pressure on the member states. It is also evident that Russia makes targeted hikes in activity, with October 2021, May 2024, and August 2025 standing out as the periods when the count of migrants showing up at the border reached well beyond the median threshold.

Table 1. Monthly frequency of attempted illegal border crossings

| Month     | 2025        | 2024        | 2023  | 2022  | 2021         |
|-----------|-------------|-------------|-------|-------|--------------|
| December  | 218         | 499         | 486   | 1500  | 1700         |
| November  | 447         | 1073        | 1500  | 2214  | 8900         |
| October   | 1957        | 1430        | 2158  | 2539  | <b>17300</b> |
| September | 2620        | 2980        | 1077  | 1298  | 7667         |
| August    | <b>5570</b> | 2291        | 2826  | 896   | 3500         |
| July      | 4130        | 1318        | 3943  | 914   |              |
| June      | 4496        | 4037        | 2866  | 596   |              |
| May       | 4310        | <b>6747</b> | 2959  | 913   |              |
| April     | 3420        | 4593        | 2456  | 1071  |              |
| March     | 3000        | 3667        | 2651  | 1747  |              |
| February  | 569         | 356         | 1460  | 489   |              |
| January   | 268         | 87          | 1440  | 1024  |              |
| Total     | 31005       | 29078       | 25822 | 15201 | 39067        |

Source: Polish Border Guard; author's elaboration.

The three peaks appear not to be coincidental. Nearly 18,000 illegal attempts in October 2021 happened after months of diplomatic rupture and failed negotiations over the events around Belarussian elections. While this served as a catalyst, the continuity of a strategy shows that Russia used it only as a pretext, where engineered migration flows appear to be a part of a larger, more complex calculus. The sudden surge in May 2024 and in the months prior



corresponds with two important political developments. First, it was the time when the EU was negotiating a Pact on Migration and Asylum, which aimed to seriously strengthen Member States' ability to defend their borders and overall migration governance (González Enríquez 2024). Second, the European Parliament elections were scheduled for June 2024, and ramping up the illegal migration threat could have been part of a larger effort to propel Russia's adjacent parties to power. Parliamentary elections of that year were viewed as one of the most critical political battles that could radically reshape the European landscape (Cunningham et al. 2024). If Russia succeeded in helping elect the majority loyal to Moscow, this would, for instance, hinder the EU support for Ukraine, leading to consequences of frightening scale. Lastly, the rise of activity in the spring and summer of 2025 may be directly related to domestic Polish developments. Presidential elections were held in May, and increasing the flow of migrants could have been considered a way to influence prevalent narratives and debates, shaping the desired outcome.

The data on registered illegal migrants provides additional insights. Table 2 groups by country those apprehended and processed by the Border Guard. From the outset, it is undeniable that migratory flows are far from natural. Out of the ten most represented nationalities, nine are from Middle Eastern and African countries. Belarussian and Russian are the minority, comprising only 5,9% of the total cases. This points to the fact that Russia prioritized deliberately transporting people from abroad instead of utilizing the domestic population. Furthermore, the top three nationalities, Iraqis, Syrians, and Afghans, are people from states with high levels of violence and instability. Overall, the vast majority of migrants arriving at the border are either from conflict-riddled zones or deeply authoritarian governments. There appears to be a deliberate effort to leverage people's vulnerability and hopelessness to instrumentalize them as a weapon against the EU. Importantly, after failing to cross the border, migrants often end up being left with nothing, having already paid a large sum to Russian human smugglers (Dyner 2023; Kibrik et al. 2025).

Table 2. Registered illegal migrants grouped by the country of origin

| Country    | 2025 | 2024 | 2023 | 2022 | 2021 | Total       |
|------------|------|------|------|------|------|-------------|
| Iraq       | 13   | 14   | 19   | 167  | 1557 | <b>1770</b> |
| Syria      | 1    | 367  | 86   | 79   | 272  | <b>805</b>  |
| Afganistan | 81   | 151  | 92   | 25   | 447  | <b>796</b>  |
| Somali     | 20   | 450  | 38   | 3    | 68   | <b>579</b>  |
| Ethiopia   | 53   | 471  | 14   | 2    | 4    | <b>544</b>  |
| Eritrea    | 22   | 453  | 9    |      |      | <b>484</b>  |

|              |            |             |            |            |             |             |
|--------------|------------|-------------|------------|------------|-------------|-------------|
| Belarus      | 24         | 19          | 79         | 46         | 82          | <b>250</b>  |
| Yemen        |            | 190         | 23         | 15         | 19          | <b>247</b>  |
| Sudan        | 11         | 187         | 11         | 22         | 2           | <b>233</b>  |
| Iran         | 5          | 57          | 35         | 41         | 55          | <b>193</b>  |
| Russia       | 5          | 4           | 23         | 24         | 100         | <b>156</b>  |
| Turkey       | 2          | 6           | 26         | 28         | 55          | <b>117</b>  |
| Tajikistan   | 1          | 1           | 3          | 7          | 51          | <b>63</b>   |
| India        | 3          | 21          | 25         | 4          | 8           | <b>61</b>   |
| Pakistan     | 29         | 18          | 6          | 3          |             | <b>56</b>   |
| Cameroon     | 1          | 27          | 3          | 16         | 8           | <b>55</b>   |
| DRC          |            | 5           | 2          | 24         | 19          | <b>50</b>   |
| Egypt        | 1          | 17          | 6          | 16         | 8           | <b>48</b>   |
| Cuba         | 4          | 10          |            | 6          | 28          | <b>48</b>   |
| Morocco      |            | 19          | 9          |            |             | <b>28</b>   |
| Palestine    |            | 1           | 3          | 3          | 21          | <b>28</b>   |
| Sri Lanka    | 1          | 3           | 3          | 16         | 4           | <b>27</b>   |
| Turkmenistan |            | 2           | 15         | 9          |             | <b>26</b>   |
| Algeria      | 3          | 16          | 6          |            |             | <b>25</b>   |
| Others       | 9          | 73          | 29         | 32         | 69          | <b>212</b>  |
| <b>Total</b> | <b>289</b> | <b>2582</b> | <b>565</b> | <b>588</b> | <b>2877</b> | <b>6901</b> |

Source: Polish Border Guard; author's elaboration.

In addition to having on-site local agents to facilitate recruitment, Russia also utilized sophisticated digital campaigns in its promotion of the EU “gateway”. The Kremlin makes ads for target communities, where the whole process is described as safe and guaranteed. What’s more, influential members of the African and Middle Eastern societies often end up employed by Russian agencies, recruiting people on a horizontal peer-to-peer level. Hearing a promise of a better life from a trusted source makes people more susceptible to falling for the disinformation, resulting in high recruitment numbers. Often, however, Russia deliberately

lies about what's waiting on the other side. There are numerous instances where migrants are lured by a promise of a job or education inside Russia, arriving without any understanding of what is happening and why they are being taken to the border (Muraszkiewicz and Piotrowicz 2023). Once inside, they often face harsh treatment from officials, with the judiciary specifically issuing deportation orders to force people into an impossible position where the only option is to keep storming the fences (Kościółek and Binczycka-Gacek 2025).

## 7.0 Empirical analysis: Media

The collected sample of articles from Sputnik Polska and Pravda Network reveals a coordinated media effort that accompanied escalating border tensions. In total, 109 articles were analysed and coded based on the prevalent narratives and frames. Overall, the content covered a range of topics focusing both on domestic Polish developments as well as wider regional and European trends. The analysis reveals that the three most dominant narratives present are: systematic brutality and the humanitarian crisis at the border, Poland being the ineffective and corrupt shield of the EU, and Poland acting as the Western puppet and buffer zone. These are then further approached from various, often contrasting angles, highlighting the fluidity of Russian strategy. Table 3 presents the distribution of frames across the three dominant narratives. The following analysis will engage and elaborate on each one separately.

Table 3. Russian narrative and framing matrix

| Narrative                                                      | <i>Frame 1</i>                       | <i>Frame 2</i>                                            | <i>Frame 3</i>                          | <i>Frame 4</i>         |
|----------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------|------------------------|
| Systematic brutality and the humanitarian crisis at the border | Poland violates international law    | Migrants are suffering                                    | Migrants are violent                    | Sanctions are to blame |
| The ineffective and corrupt shield                             | Questionable spending and corruption | Migration as a "hybrid weapon" Poland can't fight against | The ecological crimes                   |                        |
| The Western puppet and buffer zone                             | Poland is treated as a subordinate   | The EU does not want to help                              | The EU forces Poland to accept migrants |                        |

Source: author's elaboration.

## *7.1 Narrative 1: Systematic brutality and the humanitarian crisis at the border*

### *7.1.1 Frame 1: Poland violates international law*

Systematic brutality and the humanitarian crisis at the border represent the most popular narrative of the Russian disinformation network. Nearly half of the analysed articles use it as a foundation, by far surpassing other manipulative stories. The surrounding discourse in Russian media, however, differs significantly, with some frames being direct opposites. First, the dominant frame is centered on the idea that Poland, with its actions, violates international law. It discusses the migrants arriving at the border as an issue of a legal nature, evaluating Poland's actions based on international conventions and European policies. The 1951 Refugee Convention is specifically mentioned as a binding document that Warsaw supposedly breaches. The agreement elaborates on norms and procedures around the right to asylum, like the principle of non-refoulement or the right to an individualized asylum assessment. Non-refoulement refers to the prohibition of migrant expulsion to territories where their lives or freedom would be threatened. The right to asylum, at the same time, grants individuals the possibility of having their asylum claim evaluated. These articles argue that these are the principles that Poland violates by refusing to process every migrant arriving at its borders and pushing them back into Belarus. Additionally, Russia utilises the criticism voiced against Poland by civil society groups, directly quoting organizations such as Amnesty International to highlight Poland's "inhumane" behavior. In one article, the reference was made to Article 6 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which protects the inherent right to life that Warsaw, according to the authors, was not upholding. Specifically, the Polish strategy of legalized pushbacks is emphasised as a representation of criminal state behavior. This frame defines the problem not in terms of what causes the migration flows in the first place, but in the way the Polish government chooses to deal with it.

As a consequence, the issue itself is flipped on its head, making Poland the one responsible for deteriorating border security. This interpretation shifts the attention away from Russia and Belarus, which are, in fact, engineering the arrivals. The legal argument allows Russia to only make the victim bear the blame, but also evaluates the Polish government as morally inferior. It frames Warsaw's decisions as lacking any regard for international norms, made by power hungry Politicians that are incapable of following the agreements they themselves signed on to. Migrants, on the other hand, are portrayed as people who are genuinely looking for a better life, arriving at the borders through their own means with legitimate asylum claims. According to this story, Poland is an evil actor that denies people their basic human rights. Migrants, at the same time, are innocent victims, while Russia is nothing more than a neutral observer. Meanwhile, Moscow's role and abuses happening on the Belarusian side of the border are generally either outright denied or barely mentioned. To solve the issue, the prescribed treatment focuses entirely on Warsaw's domestic and international policies. Articles advise Poles to reconsider their treatment of Belarus and Russia, and to ensure that

every asylum claim is being processed properly. Importantly, the legal nuances, such as the “first safe country” principle and the instrumentalized nature of migration flows, appear to be completely overlooked to make the argument more compelling and one-sided.

### *7.1.2 Frame 2: Migrants are suffering*

Complementing the legal framing is an emotionally charged rhetoric exacerbating migrants’ suffering. Whatever gaps are left in the process of demonising the Polish government are then filled through applying a humanitarian angle. At the core of the problem, according to this frame, lies not the question of security or legality, but rather the disregard for humanity. The issue becomes not tied to attempted breaches of the border or lack of asylum processing, but to what is done and not being done by Polish officials in their treatment of individuals. First and foremost, articles with this framing focus on injuries and fatalities that migrants incurred after encountering border guards. They often direct attention to especially shocking stories, such as a pregnant mother who lost her child as a result of a hit in the stomach or a man of African descent who froze to death. While some cases have been verified by independent journalists, many instances of supposed violence from the Polish side appear to be entirely fabricated. Videos that are meant to serve as proof often originate from the Belarusian border, with no third-party access to verify the claims. What’s more, aside from highlighting the brutalities of Poles, articles often stress that migrants are denied food, shelter, and basic human necessities, which could possibly lead to a humanitarian disaster. In one instance, a story described a diabetic Iraqi man whose plea for medication was deliberately ignored. On top of this, Belarusian officials are given a platform to discredit their neighbors. Quotes from politicians attacking Polish authorities on the basis of ethics and morality appear directly in the published pieces.

Whether such discourse is truthful or not, the intended effect is to portray Poland as responsible for any physical or mental damage suffered by those at the border. Practically no attention is given to the fact that Russia brings migrants in the first place, and has direct access to deliver them any necessary supplies. Importantly, however, a minority of articles do put a certain level of blame on Belarussian side, acknowledging that they issue deportation orders and deny access back into Minsk. The reason for such a small share of honesty might be to increase the media source’s credibility. That being said, Belarusian border guards also receive pleasant coverage, with positive reports acknowledging a “decent” treatment on their territory and migrants having access to medical care. As a consequence, similarly to the legal framing, Poland and its security units are being treated as scapegoats, a morally corrupted force that does not have basic human decency. Migrants, meanwhile, are displayed as facing severe injustice, treated as objects instead of human beings. One report mentioned a Polish soldier throwing a person over the fence as a “bag of garbage.” Such language aims to infuriate the readers and justify a pro-Russian stance, turning the population against their own security forces. To help resolve the issue, articles suggest that Poland needs to drastically

reverse its course. Primarily by ordering its guards to stand down and allowing migrants into the country with all the necessary supplies.

### *7.1.3 Frame 3: Migrants are violent*

With a contrasting angle, the third major framing Russia utilizes is focused on migrant violence. This frame directly shifts from grounding the problem in Polish conduct to pinpointing foreigners' behaviour at the border. The problem is defined as an influx of inherently violent individuals who are damaging property and hurting border guard service members. Such a position serves as a striking distinction from emphasising migrants' suffering or the Polish breach of the laws. It instead treats migrants themselves as the largest source of problems, dehumanizing them in the eyes of the readers. In some accounts, articles describe confrontations happening between the two sides, where migrants would use tree branches and stones in attempts to clear the path forward. Additionally, some stories are more graphic, detailing physical injuries of Polish soldiers, including in one instance a stab wound from a knife. Others describe property damage, specifically highlighting arson and fence cutting as methods of breaching border defence lines. Importantly, the above-mentioned developments are verifiable and have also been reported by credible international outlets. AP News reported on the same story involving a stab wound in May 2024, citing reliable information from Polish officials. Russia thus does not appear to be manufacturing stories emphasising violent conduct but exaggerates their effect. Moscow's media reports on them despite a contrasting strategy of highlighting migrants' humanity and Polish misconduct. This points to the fluidity of the Russian approach, where stories of virtuous, suffering people and violent, barbaric criminals storming the border coexist in the same information ecosystem. The goal is to radicalize society from both sides simultaneously, targeting human rights defenders and protective Polish nationalists.

This framing makes Polish border units a side of the good, defending the country against mounting violence. There are even pieces that highlight the effectiveness of the border guards who stand up against numerous attacks and prevent breaches. Specifically, by 2024, more stories were published detailing the brave conduct of service members who manage either to deter or arrest large groups of people. Additionally, in such articles, the increases in the number of servicemembers are not displayed negatively (contrary to conventional propaganda) but mostly neutral. Migrants here take on a morally degraded side that is incapable of civilized behaviour and consistently resorts to force to achieve its goals. This justifies a proportionately violent response by Poland. Importantly, however, there is no mention of mostly Russian and Belarusian smugglers and secret service members who have proven to be the primary guides for migrants in question. There is a deliberate attempt to avoid any discussion on the lead-up to the violent incidents, making it seem like migrants just appeared at the border out of nowhere. As a consequence, such discourse aims to radicalize Polish society without deliberately acknowledging the role of Russia or Belarus, and hopes this will lead Warsaw politicians to make irrational decisions under societal pressure.

Notably, the framing does not prescribe a specific solution to the problem, and instead wants to instill a sense of perpetual fear and uncertainty.

#### *7.1.4 Frame 4: Sanctions are to blame*

The last framing of the narrative of systematic brutality and the humanitarian crisis at the border refers not necessarily to conduct but instead focuses on the underlying causes. It treats the deteriorating situation not as the result of weaponized migration, but as a supposedly unjustified response by the EU after Belarusian repression of democratic elections and protests. Imposed sanctions are described as a central problem driving the mounting difficulties Poland faces. According to such a position, those who bear the largest blame are Polish politicians and other EU governmental agents who agreed on such a response. Articles cite Lukashenko directly, emphasising his view that with economic hardship, Belarus supposedly became incapable of stopping the influx of refugees. The arrival of people at the border is thus in its entirety the problem of the European Union, which Minsk and Moscow have nothing to do with. This framing aims to instill a belief that the European response was unjustified, or to say the least, short-sighted, and the deteriorating crisis is simply a consequence of a failed policy. As a result, this creates an illusion that if sanctions were lifted, the irregular flow of people would immediately stop. The calculus was that it would put additional pressure on Polish and other EU leaders to reverse or stall their chosen course.

Importantly, however, this framing is the least represented in the gathered sample, and appears only in a few articles for August 2021. Because it was abandoned so quickly, its categorization as a genuine, sustained coercion strategy falls short. If the primary goal were to force the EU into lifting sanctions, this narrative would have been maintained and amplified throughout other peaks of the crisis. Additionally, this point would have been supported by diplomatic communication and put forward as a key difference maker. This proved not to be the case. Instead, the sanctions were used as a smokescreen, an initial justification that allowed Moscow to better communicate its operationalization of migration flows. What's more, it was meant to serve as a distraction, shifting the discussion from security into the chaotic political realm. Nonetheless, as the crisis dragged on, the utility of framing the subject as a question of sanction relief became less and less attainable. Consequently, the framing was abruptly dropped in favor of more aggressive disinformation tactics that focused on attacking Poland's humanitarian record directly or emphasising the violent behavior of migrants.

#### *7.2 Narrative 2: The ineffective and corrupt shield*

##### *7.2.1 Frame 1: Questionable spending and corruption*

The second narrative, shaped by Russian discourse, is of an economic nature. Instead of highlighting human suffering or breaches of the law, it treats the issue from a cost-benefit

analysis perspective. Poland, in this story, represents a corrupt country that wastes funds on ineffective border measures while elites in Warsaw continue to steal from the ordinary people. Its most dominant frame engages specifically in the question of governmental spending on the new fence construction. Articles consistently highlight the estimated cost of the project without meaningfully engaging with its purpose and effects. In one instance, the number supposedly wasted by the Polish government on “useless” border initiatives was put at 400 million EUR. Measures that, as the authors argue, fail to produce any tangible results. The primary problem definition here is not that the border is being breached, but rather that the Polish government lacks credibility and disgraces itself even further with its chosen response policies. It, as a result, flips the script to blame Warsaw for the deteriorating situation. The story is then further connected to any set of economic problems the country is facing to make it more relatable for the reader. Articles emphasize that it is taxpayers' money that is being used, which could otherwise have been spent or invested in other public needs. Inside Poland, just as in any other country, even domestic border issues might appear distant compared to immediate financial concerns. Framing the Polish government's response as not in the economic interest of the average citizen thus aims to provoke a negative reaction, potentially leading to political destabilization.

Overall, inflaming the contest between the people and the elites and creating a sense that the government fails to deliver for its citizens is exactly the objective this frame seeks to achieve. In doing so, it tries to leverage economic grievances to turn Poles against direct countermeasures. Importantly, it makes a moral distinction between those enacting the policies and the people who suffer as a result. Politicians are described as individuals engaged in corruption schemes that profit at the expense of regular citizens. In one instance, it treats it as a form of “disease”, stating that once a new government takes charge, they continue with the same failed set of measures. Specifically, this was a remark made after Donald Tusk became Prime Minister and refused to shift away from border defence initiatives. Poles and their business are portrayed as the main victims that lose out due to both wasteful spending and sanctions against Belarussian market and products. Some figures, such as estimated revenue loss for the Polish economy, appear to be made up to exacerbate the stoppage of trade ties. One article claimed that Belarusians would bring an additional 124 million EUR, a figure not supported by any credible report. This is done with hopes of civil society putting additional pressure on Warsaw to normalize its relations with Minsk and Moscow. Some small Polish businesses, whether voluntarily or with a paycheck, popularize such propaganda narratives by appearing on Russian media or protesting on the streets. However, this is done by a minuscule part of Polish society, possibly connected directly with the Kremlin's disinformation network, and should by no means be treated as a representation of popular opinion.

### *7.2.2 Frame 2: Migration as a "hybrid weapon" Poland can't fight against*



In addition to making an economic argument against extra border protection, the second frame presents a combination of pushing against the idea of a hybrid nature of a threat, while, in the meantime, downplaying Poland's capacity to respond to any challenge of such magnitude. First and foremost, it treats Polish concerns as paranoid and falsified. Articles that quote Western political leaders criticizing Belarus and Russia do so to immediately counter their position. One piece treats "hybrid war" as a myth created to distract from other foreign policy concerns, tying it to wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The author further argues that in this instance, it supposedly aims to mask Poland's own involvement in generating waves of refugees in the first place through their involvement in NATO campaigns. On top of this, "hybrid war" rhetoric is treated as a method of control, a sort of deception to lure Poles into obedience. It is argued that by viewing the border crisis from this angle, the Polish government supposedly wants to justify additional control over the population and media. This was a point raised by a Belarusian parliamentarian, who described an imposed state of emergency as a way to suppress journalism and make covert border provocations. Furthermore, the ongoing course of action is treated as disastrous, a result of geopolitical manipulation that does not serve Polish interests. Authors make a point that the EU pushes Poland into a confrontation it is unable to win, which will lead to economic degradation and consequences for years to come. Bringing it all together, the problem definition with this frame is of a failed strategic choice and calculations made by the current government.

Warsaw, together with other Eastern states, represents in this frame the antagonist that aims to leverage the border crisis for their own selfish political ambitions. Russia and Belarus are, meanwhile, misunderstood, turned into scapegoats without any meaningful proof. It is evident that this frame fully overlooks the reasons for the sudden appearance of people at the border and the continuity of this trend. Instead, the details of border events are fully disregarded, focusing entirely on the question of sustainability and appropriateness of Poland's course of action. Another crucial detail is that such discourse is often combined with the framing of suffering migrants, additionally making it seem like Poland's policies are out of place. This makes Warsaw's decisions not only strategically misguided but also morally wrong. In such a scenario, the solution to the crisis becomes recalibration of foreign policy, ideally to align with that of Moscow. In articles, diplomacy and the reopening of dialogue are often cited as necessary alternatives. Some even make connections to the Cold War, stating that the new Iron Curtain needs to be dismantled. As a consequence, the desired end goal is either to turn the Polish population and government against one another or to manifest a behavioral change through policy adjustment.

### *7.2.3 Frame 3: The ecological crimes*

The last frame supporting the narrative of Poland being an ineffective and corrupt shield of Europe taps into the environmental effects generated by large-scale construction projects. At its core, such discourse centers the argument around animal well-being and the ecosystem. The proposed reinforced border fences are described as death traps for the local habitat that

threatens numerous endangered species. It is argued that construction would cut the migration routes and cause environmental damage for both sides. What's more, Russian media claims that it would cause disruption of the hydrological regime, risking the whole region drying out. As a result, Poland is framed as a country not only strategically misguided but also disregarding its own surroundings. One article described an appeal made by Belarusian Minister of Natural Resources, Siergiej Maslyak, to UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization), asking for help in protecting the border areas. The politician stated that Poland wastes money on ineffective border fences that, in practice, have a large negative impact on the unique local fauna of Białowieża Forest. The aim of such discourse is to turn Belarus into an actor committed to upholding international norms while highlighting Poland as a villain.

As a result, this framing makes a direct emotional appeal. Instead of approaching the problem as a mounting security challenge, it treats it instead as an issue of environmental values. It turns animals and the local ecosystem into primary victims that are, for obvious reasons, not responsible for the escalating crisis. Poland then appears to be in a position of a cruel actor that ignores the well-being of the domestic biosphere. Additionally, viewed at such an angle, Warsaw can not be described as anything but hypocritical, especially taking into account all the environmental protection commitments it made by being part of the European Union. From the moral standpoint, taken at face value, this frame makes a clear distinction between Poland and Belarus, with the latter representing a force of good. In this framing, authors do not engage with the question of migration itself, instead leveraging European environmental standards to their advantage. To resolve the issue, articles propose a solution identical to many other frames: Poland should reverse its course and dismantle defences to protect the natural habitats. Additionally, the inclusion of UNESCO highlights an important part of the conversation. It is an attempt to utilize institutional mechanisms and Russia's superior position to put extra pressure on Polish policymakers and facilitate behavioral change. Given Moscow's veto rights, it is hardly surprising that international organizations are also operationalized for the Kremlin's strategic objectives. Lastly, discourse on the environment often ends up linked to the frame of questionable spending. Articles highlight that the damage that is being done is not only immoral but also utterly unnecessary, made for the purpose of completing projects that have no utility to begin with. It portrays Poland as shooting itself in the head by destroying the ecosystem for the purpose of at best "symbolic" wall construction.

### *7.3 Narrative 3: Poland as a Western puppet and buffer*

#### *7.3.1 Frame 1: Poland is treated as a subordinate*

The last narrative that Russia tries to construct through its discourse and digital propaganda is that Poland is a Western puppet and a buffer state. The primary goal is to generate a wedge factor for the transatlantic relations and European cohesion, antagonizing member states and their societies against one another. The first angle in particular attempts to manipulate the

public opinion into believing that Poland is treated as a subordinate and that the border crisis also represents a degradation of sovereignty. First and foremost, this argument makes an overarching historical claim that Poland has consistently sacrificed its own interests and people to appeal to the US and to be treated as an ally. In one instance, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq are presented as prime examples where Poles have died on behalf of Washington in vain. The allegiance, thus, according to the authors, constitutes nothing but an illusion, where problems of the Poles are being sidelined by more powerful geopolitical players. Such framing creates an idea that Poland is the one bearing the costs of maintaining its relations with the West, while in the meantime not receiving any tangible benefits. Secondly, a supposed loss of diplomatic autonomy is presented as yet another factor that proves the inward nature of a problem. Poland, it is argued, has withdrawn its own capacity to enter into negotiations and resolve the issue by subscribing to the foreign policy dictated by the European Union bureaucrats. The authors suggest that Warsaw no longer has phone numbers to Minsk and simply follows a script presented by its masters. This scales up a problem from a border breach to an institutional crisis. Under such framing, the core challenge becomes unrelated to the unfolding situation and is angled to make Poland doubt its decades-long commitments. The core antagonist becomes the collective West, which has, over the years, abused Polish loyalty and resources without providing much in return.

The moral distinction here becomes quite clear. Poland, or more specifically its people, fell victim to decades of manipulation and foreign interference and is, as a consequence, considered virtuous. The West, represented most prominently by the US, EU, and NATO, is the chief abuser, whose actions are treated as hypocritical and subversive. Additionally, Polish officials, who fail to represent national interests, are described as puppets, inseparable from their superiors. Poles and their government thus are treated as separate entities that have conflicting interests and objectives, with Warsaw officials undermining the future of their people by selling it out for scraps. This suggests a simple but effective treatment - change the government to save the country, cut ties with the West, and with it restore true sovereignty and autonomy. Additionally, authors suggest that the current politicians also reconsider their approach, and instead of acting as a subordinate of the European Union, engage with Belarus and Russia bilaterally. This, they argue, would bring back rationality to Polish foreign policy and allow them to build productive relations with their neighbors without having to suffer the consequences of increased migration flows.

### *7.3.2 Frame 2: The EU does not want to help*

The second part of this narrative makes reference to the EU's unwillingness to meaningfully engage and assist with the crisis. At the center is the idea that not only is Poland being manipulated by Brussels, but it also does not receive help from their supposed allies. The EU is treated as an entity that abuses Poland's resources, refusing to bear the proportional share of the costs. The articles specifically highlight the EU's refusal to contribute towards border wall construction in 2021. The European bureaucrats themselves openly stated that the

organization was not made for such initiatives, viewing them as contradictory to established norms. The funds the EU was willing to allocate as the crisis escalated are described as symbolic, not enough to make any real difference. One article highlights that the aid the EU offered did not even cover 10% of the costs in the case of Lithuania. This, as a consequence, is framed as an additional pressure on local taxpayers who carry the burden on their shoulders. Additionally, the EU is depicted as also lacking the tools necessary to execute a countermeasure strategy. Its border agency, Frontex, is described as unnecessary and unhelpful, stating it would only constrain Polish border guards. The only acknowledged value is the deportation mechanism and elaborate administrative processes surrounding it. Through this, the organizational utility as such is diminished as the EU's inability to adapt to mounting challenges is put to the center of attention. The framing attempts to burn the bridges between Poland and the EU, highlighting an inappropriate response and failure to live up to the expectations of the latter.

Importantly, in this framing, the Polish response is not directly criticized, and Polish politicians are not portrayed as lackeys of Brussels. Instead, they are treated as protectors who shield ungrateful Europe that refuses to pay for its own security. Morally, the EU is presented as the most corroded actor, entangled in its own complicated institutional mechanisms that fail to produce results. The Union's hypocrisy of talking about hybrid warfare while in the meantime stepping back from defending the borders only helped make the Russian talking points clearer and more relatable. Ursula von der Leyen, for instance, is quoted as rejecting the EU's involvement in installing fences, specifically the barbed wire, claiming a certain level of moral high ground. The situation did, in fact, result in a rift between affected member states and Brussels, where Poland, as well as Latvia and Lithuania, refused to conform to the EU's strategy that would undermine their own national interests. Russian propaganda helped to exacerbate the internal crisis, but fell short of achieving the goal of complete internal rupture. It is imperative to point out that after the EU changed its course and became more resolute and aggressive in protecting regional security, Russian disinformation kept meaningfully engaging with the subject. The articles for 2024 have been, for instance, criticising the new Migration Pact, claiming it would be a disastrous agreement for Warsaw.

### *7.3.3 Frame 3: Other EU countries force Poland to accept migrants*

The last frame, similar to the one described above, is aimed directly at damaging internal relations between Poland and other member states, as well as overall EU cohesion. It combines a focus on bilateral relations with an attack on evolving institutional dynamics. There are two key stories that are being told. First, other EU countries are framed as the ones forcing Poland to house migrants on its territory, dissatisfied with Warsaw's burden-sharing. Specifically, Germany and France, with a reputation for being popular migrant destinations, are portrayed as seeking to address their domestic problems. Pro-Western Polish politicians are treated as foreign agents who want to undermine state sovereignty by subscribing to such

French and German migration plans. Some articles speculate that Germany might even want to construct a barbed wire fence on the Polish border to ensure that those crossing from Belarus do not go further. Second, the new Migration Pact is treated as a mechanism of manipulation, disastrous for Polish sovereignty and future. Since articles for May 2024 were published in the wake of EU negotiations, they specifically lean in on this angle. A key problem, according to the authors, is a resettlement mechanism that would result in Poland being forced to accept a lot more asylum seekers. It treats it as an obligation with no way out, an institutional trap Poland is being made to follow. Flexibility of the mechanism, however, is completely disregarded. Articles fail to mention that countries can, for instance, make financial contributions or assist with human resources instead of relocating migrants to their territory. Additionally, no attention is given to reinforced legal instruments that strengthen Polish border security, such as rapid screening and quick asylum rejection.

Nonetheless, the negative framing of the Migration Pact remains dominant in Polish discourse. The Polish government ended up standing against it, not least because of societal and media pressure. The Russian framing aimed to deepen the rift, treating the proposed legislative reform as a central problem that would lead to an influx of asylum seekers into Poland. According to such a story, the EU itself and countries like Germany and France are working against Polish interests and want to simply utilize Poles to solve their domestic challenges. Furthermore, Warsaw is then grouped together with Hungary, Slovakia, and Czechia as countries that suffer the most and should represent a bloc that fights against Brussels bureaucrats. It just so happened that in two of those countries, openly pro-Russian governments have been consistently sabotaging European security (although Hungary's 2026 election changes the landscape). The goal of Moscow thus becomes quite clear. Through disagreements on migration policy, the Kremlin wants to help establish a strong anti-EU bloc inside the union itself, as a consequence undermining its functionality in every other aspect. The end result of this strategy remains to be seen, as debate on migration laws stays high on the European agenda. The Migration Pact is scheduled to take effect in June 2026, and it would be a critical moment that tests European unity and cohesion, as Poland has not yet withdrawn its concerns.

## **8.0 Hybrid interference as the Russian strategy**

Tying the identified narratives and frames back to Wigell's (2019) hybrid interference theory, several patterns of disinformation used to generate a wedge factor emerge. They can be separated into two main categories: regional and domestic. Regionally, there are three identifiable conflicts that Russia seeks to cultivate and exploit. First is the clash between normative, progressive Europe and supposedly backwards, unlawful Polish government. It is a wedge factor driven by conflict between practical policies necessary to repel weaponised migration and the EU's commitments to strictly upholding international law. Poland here is portrayed as an outlier, an actor disregarding normative processes for its own interests. Additionally, the scale of human suffering and instances of violence are singled out and

blown out of proportion to further display Poland as backwards and barbaric. It is, at its core, an argument based on morality, where one side is treated as a villain corroding the institution from within. It aims to increase the hypocrisy costs of effectively stopping the migration flows and, with it, break the relations between Eastern European countries and the rest of the organization. To exacerbate the tensions, appeals are made towards institutions such as UNESCO, trying to widen the rift between Poland and the EU on a normative basis.

The second crucial regional factor is the question of sanctions and broad economic well-being. At the center is an idea that the EU was the actor pushing for restrictions on Belarussian market, while Poland was forced to accept it and yet is the one suffering the consequences. This attempts to worsen the relations simultaneously between Polish civil society, the Polish government, and other European officials. First and foremost, this narrative speaks to the common citizens, who, like in many other parts of the world, often face financial challenges driven by rising prices. Hearing that the government is missing out on trade opportunities and is only spending more on what feels like a distant issue has the potential to make an impact on public perception of the issue. What's more, some Poles are openly demanding the normalization of relations with Minsk. Whether such people are employed by Russia is of little importance, since they create an image Kremlin seeks to exploit. If the problem is viewed exclusively from economic terms and as hurting Polish businesses, then the actions of the Polish government do not seem entirely rational, and even more so the decisions of the EU. As a consequence, this creates a critical wedge factor that can be leveraged by Eurosceptic parties and social groups, resulting in more disagreement in the institutional setting.

The third regional conflict cultivated through Russian disinformation is based on the idea that Poland is being manipulated by external powers, a puppet in the hands of Brussels and the broader West. It emphasises concepts such as sovereignty and autonomy that the current Polish government has supposedly traded off. It treats Polish cooperation with Brussels and the establishment of a united European strategy as a sign of weakness. As such, any idea of Warsaw working through the institutional mechanisms is considered disastrous for the future, a path that can only lead towards national degradation. This idea wants to specifically target Polish nationalists and people with a strong sense of pride. It ties a concept of Polish nationhood and its future to cooperation with the EU. If Poland does cooperate, it supposedly gives up on the idea of the country itself. The vocal and unwavering opposition to the Migration Pact possibly best highlights this line of thinking. The only remaining option then is for Warsaw to distance itself from Brussels, as this is treated as the primary way of upholding national interests. This wedge factor has largely been successful, with anti-EU rhetoric being a common occurrence in the Polish political debate.

Domestically, there are two further ways in which Russian disinformation attempts to antagonize different groups within Polish society against one another. First is an emotional framing of violent migrants attacking citizens and destroying property while the government

fails to mount an appropriate response. It dehumanizes those attempting to cross the border, while in the meantime stating that border defence initiatives are failing despite being costly. It attempts to separate Polish society into those in favour of a harsher response and those demanding full compliance with international law and norms. On one hand, you end up with radicalized groups that call for disproportionate measures. On the other hand, civil society and NGOs that criticize the government and insist on a more measured approach. Politicians also end up torn between these two camps, having to navigate a sensitive issue while upholding the overarching party identity. The goal of this wedge factor is to divide Poles on what protecting national security with regard to the migration crisis actually means. The idea Moscow follows is that a country conflicted in its own decision-making is eventually a vulnerable target. Cultivating such realities in Poland is done with the hope that this would open an opportunity for further interference campaigns.

Treating the Polish government as corrupt and engaged in questionable spending is the second domestic angle Russia utilizes in its wedge strategy. It engages primarily with spending details on new border initiatives. By describing them as overpriced and ineffective, Moscow attempts to discredit the sitting government in the eyes of the average citizen. It treats Poles as victims of their superiors, trying to cultivate a populist framing of people being abused by the elites. The media campaigns would highlight taxation as the primary method of paying for failing defences, making it seem like the government wastes the hard work people are putting in. On top of this, the corruption angle is supposed to highlight the moral degradation of Warsaw officials, who are not only incompetent in their job but also criminal. Overall, this helps promote the populist explanation for the challenges the country is facing, contributing to political polarization. This, as a consequence, has the potential to weaken the state's ability to effectively respond, as any decision receives increasing public scrutiny. In conclusion, the above-described wedge factors effectively satisfy Wigell's (2019) theory, and more specifically, its disinformation component. As such, this research ascertains that Russian media activity in relation to the migration crisis at the EU's Eastern border constitutes a hybrid interference strategy.

## **9.0 Subversive weaponization of migration**

Bringing the research back towards Greenhill's (2010) foundational work on weaponized migration, it is worth identifying in what ways it fails to explain Russian behaviour in this case. First, Russian activity is not aimed at displacing Polish citizens or immediately acquiring Polish land. There is no evidence or data to support this, and no unnatural domestic population shifts are happening inside the country. As such, a dispossessive variant of weaponized migration, which would imply a strategy of ethnic cleansing, does not satisfy underlying realities. Second, migrants crossing the border are mostly foreign nationals. Russians and Belarusians comprise only a small 5,9% of those who were apprehended and processed by the border guards. Meanwhile, others applying for asylum are holding temporary visiting visas and have not been residing in either Russia or Belarus. This makes

exportive explanation inapplicable, since Moscow does not export its own migration problem to Poland, nor does it expel known domestic dissidents through such means. Third, as of now, Russia and the EU are not engaged in active military conflict, which makes the militarized category irrelevant from the outset. For engineered migration flows to generate an effect from such an angle, there needs to be a utility for the ongoing strategic military operations, which is impossible in times of peace.

The last of Greenhill's elements, coercive weaponized migration, has applicability only to a certain limited extent. One of Russia's framings was indeed centered on the idea that increased, unnatural migration flows are a direct result of the new sanction regime. Official Minsk's position also supported this claim, with Lukashenko openly describing his behavior as a countermeasure to European actions. This indirectly implied that lifting sanctions would help resolve the issue. If such a narrative were true, weaponized migration in this case would constitute a blackmail strategy and, as a consequence, satisfy the requirements for a coercive categorization. This, however, was only an implied notion and was never communicated through official diplomatic channels. Neither Poland nor the EU has at any point received an ultimatum that would elaborate on Russia's position and propose possible solutions. Instead, the campaign has been mostly executed in silence, with no open dialogue between both sides. In the absence of clear demands, blackmail becomes an insufficient explanation.

Additionally, the coercive framing of the issue has been popular only in the initial months. After the early phase, the discourse around sanctions has largely disappeared from the media articles. As the campaign dragged on, it became more apparent that engineered migration flows constitute an elaborate hybrid strategy and not a rapidly launched operation of forcing the EU to change its course. The Polish and EU officials have also never been under the impression that lifting sanctions was a legitimate possibility of stopping the crisis. Especially since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 for once destroyed any myths that Moscow seeks to normalize relations with the West. This makes Greenhill's coercive weaponization of migration an imperfect explanation for the developments at the Eastern border.

For this reason, this research proposes the addition of a fifth category of subversive weaponization of migration, defined as a wedge strategy which, through engineered migration flows, aims to destabilize and fracture the target society, country, or political institution. When applied, the primary focus of the sending state becomes fracturing of the opponent to weaken its capacity to respond. It is a strategy of a typical "divide and conquer" nature that, through division, creates conditions for further political gains. Crucially, it does not require an element of coercion, since the primary goal is destabilization itself, not necessarily a specific behavioral change or financial gain. On top of this, it can be utilized in both peace and wartime, as it does not have any specific preconditions, such as ongoing armed conflict. It relies primarily on the perception of the target society, and perception can be influenced in any given moment. This strategy is designed to achieve reflexive control, to incline an opponent to voluntarily make certain decisions towards their own degradation. It is



most effective against liberal democracies, as they bear the highest hypocrisy costs and could end up conflicted between appropriate policy response and normative commitment. That is the reason why subversive weaponization can be considered a trap, creating conditions where any decision becomes costly and reputationally damaging. Importantly, it can be applied against both nation-states and highly integrated regional organizations such as the EU. Furthermore, it is a highly cost-effective approach, as the primary financial investment required is creating transportation channels for people to arrive at the border. Migrants themselves might be compelled to travel by the promise of a better life, resulting in an extremely efficient method of political destabilisation. For authoritarian states specifically, disregarding migrants' well-being, living conditions, and legal consequences cuts the potential costs even further.

The conditions for the success of subversive weaponization are twofold. First, the sender state must have the capacity to generate a migration flow on a sizable scale in perpetuity. The number of migrants arriving at the border needs to be unnatural and high enough to draw the attention of both the political elite and regular citizens. Then, it is essential that this trend does not stop after the initial period and drags on without any clear end insight for the issue to generate desired political effects. If, for instance, the border becomes once again stable after a month, such a time frame may prove insufficient to make a tangible impact on political discourse. Second, the generated effects must be associated with a form of societal polarization, governmental or institutional gridlock. This could be characterized, for instance, by an increasing antagonism between political parties, a decrease in policy effectiveness, and heated debates between the government and representatives of civil society. In essence, the problem of migration needs to become an unsolvable crisis that cripples the target country or institution. The concept of subversive weaponization of migration, as a result, solves the existing gap in the literature and ensures that the theory of weaponized migration accounts for the contemporary hybrid nature of the campaigns.

## **10.0 Concluding discussion**

This research shows that disinformation has been, and continues to be, an integral part of a weaponized migration campaign directed by Russia against the European Union. In itself, it is a strategy of hybrid interference with the goal of driving a wedge and fracturing the organization from within. The initial border data gathering process revealed several peaks of activity, with October 2021 and May 2024 being the months with the largest number of attempted illegal border crossings. Articles published in Russian state-controlled media (Sputnik and Pravda Network) during that time further exposed prevalent narratives and frames that Moscow tried to use to influence how the crisis was perceived. Three primary narratives could be determined. First, Russian disinformation took an angle of systematic brutality and the humanitarian crisis at the border. It leaned on questions of legality and emotional framing, leveraging normative commitments and human suffering to generate appeal. Furthermore, it treated the Polish response as both overly harsh and, at the same time,

misleading, discrediting the sitting government's ability to solve the mounting problems. Second, Poland was portrayed as the ineffective and corrupt shield of Europe that is not up to the fight. The Polish government was turned into a scapegoat, made to look selfish and treacherous. Implemented policies were treated as the opposite of what the “real” Polish interests were supposed to look like. Third, Warsaw officials were described as Western puppets who turned the country into a buffer state. Meanwhile, the EU appeared as a manipulative institution, seeking to abuse Poles without providing much in return. Poland was treated as lacking sovereignty and autonomy in both its domestic and foreign policy, which was supposedly exactly what led to a deteriorating security situation. These three narratives were then supported by frames of various kinds that allowed for expanding potential public reach and radicalizing the society from multiple sides simultaneously. Some frames, like portraying migrants as suffering victims while in the meantime highlighting their violent nature, speak precisely of the fluidity of the Russian approach. Migrants were both the abusers and the abused, depending on the article in question. It highlights that Moscow's disinformation often ended up contradicting itself, since the goal was not to shape the truth but rather to polarize the local population. Launching stories that spoke to both extremes was done precisely to achieve this objective.

As a consequence, the research was able to identify that Russian disinformation operations constitute what Wigell (2019) describes as hybrid interference. Particularly because the identified narratives and frames are predominantly of a polarizing nature, serving as wedge factors both for the domestic Polish audience and the overall EU dynamic. Additionally, the research conceptualized a new term of subversive weaponisation of migration, building on Greenhill's (2010) theoretical foundation. It is defined as a wedge strategy that, through engineered migration flows, aims to destabilize and fracture the target society, country, or political institution. The new term allows for a more nuanced understanding of contemporary use of such an approach, increasing the theory's applicability and future utility. Additionally, through the wedge factor, it bridges the weaponization of migration theory to hybrid interference theory, providing an analytical framework for how both can be utilized together for academic research. In this case, the Russian foreign policy of weaponized migration through its disinformation component constitutes a broader strategy of hybrid interference.

While this strategy undoubtedly poses a direct challenge to the functionality of the EU and increases potential future risks, this research acknowledges a limitation of the chosen methodology in examining the effects of Russian campaigns. It is thus imperative to further develop this topic and accurately assess how and where exactly disinformation, in combination with engineered migration flows, generates desired impact. One avenue that immediately comes to mind is the relationship between anti-migration parties, their position on the EU, and Russia. It could be the case that, aside from generating migration flows and trying to shape public perception through media, Russia is also engaged in cultivating political movements that further bring the discussion to the forefront of national debates. Tracking such groups, their policy proposals, and achievements would allow not only to

conceptualise and theorise Russian strategy, but also move closer towards quantifying the tangible success of reflexive control in facilitating the voluntary degradation of Western institutional unity.

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