



UNIVERSITÀ DI PISA

**EUROPEAN UNION-BELARUS BORDER CRISIS IN 2021-2022**

**ORIGINS, EVOLUTION, AND IMPLICATIONS**

STUDENT

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The objective of this research paper is to understand the migration crisis that occurred at the borders between Belarus and certain countries of European Union such as Poland and Lithuania, but also Latvia. Through the analysis of events will be clarified the origins, the evolution, and some implications of this migration crisis. The main theme of the research paper is the phenomenon of weaponization of migrants and how the migration crisis could be by States used as leverage and method of “persuasion” towards other States.

## **Introduction**

Since July 2021, thousands of migrants have attempted to cross the Belarusian border into European Union’s neighbours’ countries such as Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia. In November the situation was particularly tense on the Polish-Belarusian border, especially at the Kuznica-Bruzgi checkpoint, where thousands of migrants were amassing.

Because of the accumulation of migrants which tried to cross the border, the Polish police forces started to repel the mass movement of migrants from border crossing with the use of water cannons and tear gas. Clashes broke out between Polish police forces and migrants. The situation became complicated when also the Belarussian security forces forced migrants to cross back when they were returning, so as to create a grey zone along the Belarusian-Polish border. Temporary camps were established on Belarusian side, but they did not have suitable water, food, medical care, and shelter from the cold. The Kuznica-Bruzgi checkpoint remain the most amassed point of the whole border between Belarus and European Union.

The United Nations High Commissioner, the UNHCR, and the International Organization for Migration, the IOM, reported the highest presence of children and woman among migrants. How it was documented by Frontex, the most of migrants which were illegal crossing on the European Union’s eastern land were especially from conflict affected States as Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan. In October 2021, a month before the peak of the crisis, was registered a number of migrants around 3,870 from Iraq, 590 from Afghanistan and 265 from Syria.

Obviously, the question is how these migrants arrived in Belarus, if the country does not border with Iraq, Syria, and Afghanistan.

## **Origins**

The crisis started when Belarusian authorities began to promote tours in Belarus for people coming from Middle East’s countries. In organizing the travels, the authorities in Minsk were helped by several tourist agencies and airline companies as Belavia, the Belarusian airline company, Turkish Airline, Flydubai and Syrian Cham Wings Airlines. Different air routes were established from Damascus, Baghdad, Dubai and Beirut to Minsk, although the most important departure airport was Istanbul, which became a real international hub of migration. In fact, in addition to the air routes, the migrants arrived at Istanbul via ground routes directly from Syria and Iraq.

Migrants received a 30-day tourists visa, and once they arrived at Minsk’s airport, they were escorted by Belarusian security forces to the border with Poland. Because of misinformation, migrants believed that once arrived in Belarus, they could easily enter European Union crossing the Polish, Lithuanian and Latvian frontiers.

In response to the amassment of migrants and because of numerous attempts to cross the border illegally, Polish and Lithuanian authorities deployed army soldiers to assist the frontier guards and opted for the “pushback” practice of migrants on the border. Was estimated that in November 2021, the peak of the crisis, around 8,000 illegal migrants were trying to cross the Polish-Belarusian and the Lithuanian-Belarusian borders. According to United Nation’s Refugee Agency, the exact number of migrants in Belarus was “unknown”, but it estimated a ranging between 5,000 and 20,000 of migrants.

## **Evolution**

Such action had immediate diplomatic response. The European’s leaders have called this crisis as a “hybrid attack” on the European Union. The High Representative for the Foreign Affairs of the EU, Joseph Borell, described Belarus’s action as illegal and inhuman, while the Polish Prime Minister Morawiecki declared that Poland was “under attack” by Belarus and called NATO to take “concrete steps” to resolve the situation. In December 2021 the European Union and the United States imposed sanctions on Belarusians individuals and entities responsible for the migrant crisis.

The European members of the United Nation Security Council have accused Belarus of seeking to destabilize neighbouring countries and the EU’s external border and divert attention away from its own increasing human rights violations.

At the same time, the Russian President Vladimir Putin criticized Poland and European countries for the unwillingness to accept migrants and accused the European Union in failing to uphold humanitarian ideals, which are characteristic of the Union’s external action. Putin, also, highlighted Poland’s use of violent force against the migrants.

Simultaneously, at the Turkish request, the Belarusian airline Belavia decided that citizens from Iraq and Syria will no longer be permitted to fly from Istanbul to Minsk. At the same time Emirate airline Flydubai has banned Afghan, Syrian and Iraqi citizens from boarding flights to Minsk. Private Syrian carrier Cham Wings Airline has also stopped flights to Minsk, because of inability to “differentiate between travellers and migrants”.

An important role had played by the humanitarian organisations such as the International Organization for Migration and the High Commissioner for Refugees of the United Nations, which both requested that Poland and Belarus respected the human rights and the international legal obligations such as the prohibition of the collective expulsion of the refugees. It important to consider that Belarus, Poland, and Lithuania are states part of the Geneva Convention of 1951 relating the Status of Refugees and its Protocol of 1967.

Human rights groups criticized Poland and Lithuania which legalize the “pushback” practice of migrants at the border and refused applications for asylum without examination of different cases. Also, International Organization for Migrants accused Poland in preventing journalists and non-governmental organizations from going to the border with Belarus in order to examine the situation on the ground and to bring aid to who needed it. At the same time, the High Commissioner for Refugees of the United Nations emphasized that the migrants should never be used by States to achieve political aims or as leverage in negotiations, as has been done by Belarusian authorities.

According to several analysts the potential options available were the application for asylum in Belarus, for those who needed international protection, and the promotion of the assessments of some refugees, including the family reunification in the European Union. Another possibility available was the creation of the humanitarian corridor for people to return safely to their countries of origin.

### **Implications**

The events started to change after the phone call between the President of Belarus Lukashenko and the German Chancellor Angela Merkel in mid-November. Belarusian authorities started to repatriate the migrants from its territory through the Belarusian airline companies, Belavia. Also, European Union has provided support and financial assistance to Iraq, which undertook its first repatriation flight in November 2021.

While some have been repatriated, many, especially Iraqi Kurds, continued their efforts to seek to entry in the European Union. It remains unclear what will happen to those migrants who refused repatriation and currently being denied to entry to European Union. Most of them continue to seek to cross illegally the Belarusian-Polish border.

Several European leaders, especially Polish and Lithuanians, have cautioned Merkel, but also criticized her, from “legitimising” Lukashenko’s regime by holding direct talks. It is curious how in a phone call with Merkel, Putin reportedly told to her to deal directly with Belarusian authorities to resolve the crisis. There is no evidence of a direct role of Russia in organizing the migration crisis.

During the disputed presidential election in 2020, many Western countries, especially from European Union and United States, have refused to accept the legitimacy of Lukashenko. The elections were considered by many electoral observers neither free nor fair. Despite the start of protest movements and of the political crisis, the principal political opponents fled as Svetlana Tikhanovskaya or was arrested as Marina Kolesnikova.

Belarusian leadership was seeking for a recognition from European countries. For Minsk, the fact of dialogue in order to resolve the crisis represented a perception of legitimacy after the contested election. Another aim was to demonstrate the failure of the international isolation imposed by Western countries in response to Belarusian’s forced diversion of an international flight in May 2021, in order to detain Belarusian dissident, Roman Protasevich.

So, according to many analysts, Lukashenko have perceived, rightly or wrongly, that such engagement would enhance the perceptions of his legitimacy and authority, after a period of domestic political crisis and international isolation.

The European Union accused Belarus of using migrants as instrument of coercion. As many scholars underlined it was the phenomenon of weaponization of migrants, and how migration’s crisis is used by States as a method of “persuasion”.

### **Conclusion**

The events on the border between Belarus and several countries of the European Union, especially Poland, are one of the recent examples of the phenomenon of weaponization of migrants. Migrations movement became a weapon, used by States to seek a concession from the targeted country and achieve some political and economic objectives, but also for reasons of revenge.

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