

People as a Weapons System: Moscow and Minsk's Continued Attempts to Weaponize Migration

Description

[Weaponized migration](#), the orchestration or threatened orchestration of a sudden influx of refugees by a hostile government into another country for coercive purposes, continues to make appearances as the latest preferred instrument in the modern autocrat's toolkit. Using what was once a favorite strategy of leaders such as Cuba's [Fidel Castro](#), Russian and Belarusian leaders have been accused in recent years of employing this irregular approach as a way to distract Western governments from other malign behavior by instigating political turmoil, forcing spending, and driving the reallocation of military forces to augment border security in Nordic and eastern European states.

While [not a new concept](#), attempts to weaponize migration capitalize on vulnerable populations and remain especially odious given the misery they cause (or exacerbate) for at-risk and potentially desperate migrants. [Kelly Greenhill](#) expertly outlined the logic behind the coercive employment of purposefully-created migration crises over a decade ago, detailing how coercion-engineered migrations are deliberately organized to induce concessions from a target state. To counter this particularly cruel approach, the West must remain both pragmatic and proactive in considering ways to respond to Moscow and Minsk's attempts to weaponize migration.

Hybrid Operations on the Finnish Border

[Finland](#) is only the latest country to call out Russia's hidden hand in fomenting migration crises, closing border crossings with Russia for [the second time](#) in early December 2023 after more than two hundred asylum seekers entered the country from Russia. The Finnish Prime Minister, Petteri Orpo, described the situation as "exceptional" and accused Russia of trying to undermine Finnish national security with a "hybrid operation." Officials in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO) [newest ally](#) have stated that Russian officials were likely [heavily involved in the transport operation](#) that brought migrants from places such as Kenya, Syria, and Yemen to the Russo-Finnish border [this winter](#), providing necessary transportation, equipment, and assistance at the border. [Specifically](#), Russia has been accused of paving the way for migrants along its border with Finland by abandoning visa checks in the border zone and providing bicycles, which allow migrants to skirt laws that criminalize approaching Russian border posts on foot.

Lukashenko Targets Poland and the Baltics

Russia is not the only country weaponizing migrants, as evidenced by Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko's behavior since late 2021. By December of that year, at least [8,000 migrants](#) had crossed the Belarusian border into migration centers in Poland, Latvia, and Lithuania. The pressure exerted by Lukashenko, likely acting in [retaliation](#) against European Union (EU) sanctions imposed to punish the regime for its treatment of opponents, has been perhaps most acutely felt in Poland. There, [4,000 Polish troops](#) have been dispatched to the border with Belarus, a move this past fall that came in addition to the [115-mile long steel wall](#) completed during the summer of 2022, also in response to border crossings. [Reports](#) in 2023 of cross-border incidents involving helicopters, as well as [claims](#) that mercenaries from the [private military corporation Wagner](#) were training with Belarusian forces within miles of the Polish border, have only added to the tensions.

Costs and Benefits

While morally repugnant, weaponized migration is nevertheless seen as an effective approach by the governments who employ it because it necessitates a response from the targeted state: the political leadership *must* respond in some fashion given the tactical manipulation of human suffering and impacts on public perception. Furthermore, such required responses can have significant implications on the target state's limited monetary and nonmonetary resources. For example, the short-term and near-term financial costs of addressing organized migrant influxes have been significant for the Baltic states: Lithuania alone sought [120 million euros](#) (\$130 million) in damages from Belarus in early 2023 to replenish money spent on border infrastructure, including a new barbed-wire fence. Further south, the Poland-Belarus border wall reportedly cost Warsaw [353 million euros](#) (\$407 million in 2023 dollars) in addition to the costs incurred from moving military forces to the border. The Polish border patrol has also seen [vehicles damaged and officers attacked](#) by groups of people throwing stones from the Belarusian side of the border. Beyond the millions spent on increased security measures, there are also political costs for incumbent parties whose decisions are closely scrutinized by their constituents given the highly politicized nature of migration-related policies, as demonstrated by the Social Democratic Party's [ousting from power](#) in Finland last year in favor of nationalist parties calling for stricter asylum policies and border control. There is also potential for such tactics to inflame a country's already polarized political and social dynamics, as evidenced by the rhetoric surrounding migration in campaigns leading up to the Polish parliamentary [elections](#) in October 2023.

Using migrants as weapons is thus a low-cost way for national leaders whose regard for human life is famously absent *to indirectly impose* costs on other governments. For Russian President Vladimir Putin in particular, these are not acts of desperation but simply additional ways to pose dilemmas on the United States and its allies. Given Moscow's history with the [Tatar people in Crimea](#), having

forcibly deported thousands of ethnic Tatars from the region during the Cold War, the West can only be so surprised by current headlines from [Helsinki](#) regarding overwhelming migrant surges. Any non-attributable—or simply deniable—actions that stress the border security of NATO allies cause unexpected troop deployments or require budgetary changes that create the type of political turmoil that only stands to benefit the strongmen of Moscow and Minsk. For Putin and Lukashenko, weaponized migration is strategic distraction on the cheap.

Addressing the Threat

Beyond individual, national decisions regarding border walls, fences, and immigration laws, there are a handful of imperatives for the United States—Nordic and eastern European allies to consider as a collective response to these modern examples of weaponized migration. The first should not be contentious: all states impacted by this tactic—from Finland to Poland—should name and shame—Russia and Belarus so as to discourage this practice from becoming an accepted norm and potentially deter its further use. Leaders like Prime Minister Orpo should continue making public statements identifying Moscow's weaponization of migrants as unacceptable hybrid operations, and other Western decision-makers should follow suit, casting light on such gray zone tactics when discussing the security threats posed by Russia more broadly and thus diminishing their subversive power. Secondly, Baltic and Nordic states, as well as Poland, could also shape mil-to-mil engagements with other, unaffected NATO allies to increase multinational training with border guards, potentially [sharing best practices](#) regarding border security. At a minimum, NATO writ large should incorporate scenarios similar to those currently experienced by border countries into future wargames as a way to feature Russian hybrid operations in more conventionally-minded events.

While the plight of migrants and their treatment by border guards on both sides has been [criticized by international organizations](#), pragmatically and proactively stalling the modern employment of weaponized migration is more than a pressing human rights issue. It is a critical security threat, one that drives states to increase spending and reallocate resources while maintaining the initial identity of a human rights challenge. Countries facing migration-related threats are slowly beginning to appreciate that fact. [Finland](#), for example, has viewed everything to do with Russia through the prism of security—since February 2022. Nevertheless, the view from NATO's newest ally regarding the danger posed by this tactic and its reemergence in [twenty-first century strategic competition](#) may contrast with that from members who enjoy strategic depth vis-à-vis Russia and Belarus. The United States, thanks to the defensive benefits of two bordering oceans, does not have its primary competitors on its doorstep like the Baltic and Nordic states do. No country, however, is totally immune to the dangers posed by weaponized migration. By capitalizing on human suffering, Putin and Lukashenko's weaponized migration approaches are first and foremost security challenges and

must be treated as such. Western allies would thus do well to recognize the dangers posed by these tactics.

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Main image: A sign marking the end of the border for Lithuania and the start for Poland after U.S. Army paratroopers assigned to the Company D, 2nd Battalion, 503rd Infantry Regiment, 173rd Airborne Brigade crossed through, Oct. 24, 2015, as part of Operation Bayonet Thrust. Bayonet Thrust is a demonstration of NATO's ability to move forces freely across allied borders and maintain freedom of movement across the region. (Staff Sgt. Opal Vaughn via U.S. Army)

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