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## Migration Crisis on the Eastern Border of Poland, 2015–2022/24, as Part of a Multi-level Influence Operation of the Russian Federation

**Abstrakt:** Celem artykułu jest próba oceny, na ile kryzys migracyjny na granicy polsko-białoruskiej jest głównie operacją wymyśloną i realizowaną przez reżim Aleksandra Łukaszenki w odwecie za stanowisko Polski i UE wobec sfałszowanych wyborów prezydenckich w 2020 r., a na ile elementem dużej operacji destabilizacyjnej realizowanej wspólnie przez Rosję i Białoruś.

**Słowa kluczowe:** granica polsko-białoruska, kryzys migracyjny 2021, operacja „Śluza”, wojna rosyjsko-ukraińska, relacje polsko-białoruskie.

**Abstract:** The aim of this article is an attempt to assess to what extent the migration crisis on the Polish-Belarusian border is mainly an operation devised and run by the Lukashenko's regime in retaliation for the position of Poland and the EU on the falsified 2020 presidential elections, and to what extent this is a part of the significant destabilisation operation run jointly by Russia and Belarus.

**Keywords:** Polish-Belarusian border, 2021 migration crisis, Operation 'Lock', Russian-Ukrainian war, Polish-Belarusian relations.

### Introduction

The border crisis provoked by Alexander Lukashenko's regime after the 2020 presidential elections, which he falsified, continues today. It has led to an unprecedented rise in tension between Belarus and Poland, Lithuania and Latvia, as well as to the construction of barriers on the European

Union's eastern border that have never existed there in such a form. Even the famous Soviet *sistema*, or the border between the USSR and the socialist bloc countries,<sup>1</sup> specially reinforced, deep, equipped with alarm systems and sensors, was never fitted with a several-metre-long prefabricated fence topped with a concertina.

Formally, the origins of the border crisis can be traced back to 2015, and some analysts even set the whole operation back to 2011, to the moment of the first severe crisis between the EU (Poland) and the administration of President Alexander Lukashenko. In the meantime, the operation's primary objectives have changed, the support procedures for border trespassers have changed, and the very group of people trying to cross illegally the fortifications built by Poland and the Baltic States has also changed. Therefore, it is worth trying to determine how the objectives of Belarus and the Russian Federation have evolved, and to answer the question of whether the migrant surge is the objective in itself or just a tool of influence operation, and if so, where it is potentially going to.

## Objectives and Research Problems

The purpose of this study is to systematise the stages of the border crisis and to evaluate it once again, this time regarding those less obvious, and probably key, aspects, the launch of migration pressure by Russia and Belarus is all about. The current experience of Finland, now a NATO member state – as regards also 2015 – indicates that Russia, and with it Belarus, had a variety of procedures prepared, the potential usefulness of which was assessed precisely at the moment of the biggest, in European history, 2015 and 2016 migration crisis.

The basic research assumption is the thesis that the 2021 border crisis, running uninterruptedly till the present, was implemented by Russian services as early as 2015, mainly towards Finland, and in its final phase (the surge at the Polish and Lithuanian borders) served primarily to prepare for war in Ukraine.

Therefore, the following research problems/questions were formulated:

- Can we speak of a planning-and-decision-making process which dates back to the great crisis of 2015, when some of the migrants chose alternative routes?
- When planning with Belarus for the 2021 crisis, to what extent did the Russian Federation benefit from the 2015 experience and the subsequent crisis caused by Turkey?

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<sup>1</sup> A. Szymura, 'Sistema czyli zapora w Puszczy Białowieskiej', *bialowieza.info.pl*, 29 June 2022, <https://bialowieza.info.pl/sistema-czyli-zapora-w-puszczy-bialowieskiej/> (accessed: 20 April 2024).

- Was the so-called Operation ‘Lock’, or rather its planning dimension, really an element preceding the 2021 border crisis?

The present paper uses analytical research, applying deduction and conceptual modelling, as well as a case study.

## Migration Crisis 2015

The year 2015 went down in history because of images of hundreds of thousands of migrants from the Middle East and North Africa moving from the south to the north of Europe. Among them were refugees from territories of the so-called Islamic State and numerous economic migrants from the MENA area, Africa and East Asia seeking a better life in the ‘mythical’ Western Europe. The above-mentioned migration wave was the result of two events that shook the Middle East and North Africa.

The first one was the so-called Arab Spring, a great wave of social protests caused by the rapid deterioration of living conditions and unfulfilled promises by the local authorities to improve them. Initiated in December 2010 in Tunisia, it spread in 2011 to most countries of the region, resulting in the more or less bloody overthrow of the existing government (Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, Yemen) and civil war in Libya and Syria. An indirect effect of the bloody overthrow of Libyan dictator Muammar Gaddafi was the disintegration of the state and thus the ‘clearing’ of one of the key migration corridors across the Mediterranean Sea to Europe. Before Gaddafi’s fall, which happened with the *de facto* support of NATO, which replaced in this role the ‘general muster’ of UN countries, including France (Operation Harmattan), the US (Operation Odyssey Dawn) and the UK (Operation Ellamy),<sup>2</sup> the Italian government had a special agreement with Muammar Gaddafi<sup>3</sup> to stop migrants trying to enter Europe through Libya, that was something Gaddafi constantly emphasised (also during the intervention) when he was describing Libya as a valve against the flooding of Europe by African newcomers.

The second major crisis that triggered an avalanche of people fleeing the Middle East was the emergence of the so-called Islamic State in the lands belonging to Syria and Iraq. ISIS, taking advantage of the weakness of the civil war-stricken Syrian state, proclaimed a pseudo-state structure based on strict observance of Sharia law and announced to the world that it was proceeding to rebuild a caliphate. The ruthlessness of the jihadist forces,

<sup>2</sup> M. Lakomy, ‘Międzynarodowe kontrowersje wokół interwencji NATO w Libii’, in: *Śląsk – Polska – Europa – świat: pamięci Profesora Jana Przewłockiego*, eds K. Miroszewski and M. Stolarczyk (Katowice, 2013), pp. 275–93.

<sup>3</sup> M. Dahl, A. Dziudzik, *Państwa Unii Europejskiej wobec kryzysu migracyjnego z 2015 roku*, p. 18, [http://cejsh.icm.edu.pl/cejsh/element/bwmeta1.element.desklight-844f1f0a-6fe4-46ea-a47d-08f7b0c05b7c/c/UE.pl\\_3\\_2017.3.pdf](http://cejsh.icm.edu.pl/cejsh/element/bwmeta1.element.desklight-844f1f0a-6fe4-46ea-a47d-08f7b0c05b7c/c/UE.pl_3_2017.3.pdf) (accessed: 25 April 2024).

who, along with the proclamation of the state, proceeded to eradicate all religious groups deemed undesirable, led to the strengthening of a humanitarian disaster encompassing most of Syria, resulting in millions of Syrians forced to flee their country or to become internal migrants.<sup>4</sup> This very group constituted one of the largest diasporas on Europe's roads in 2015. During the migration crisis, there were 368,355 asylum applications registered in the European Union from Syrians or from people claiming to be citizens of this country, hoping that this will make it easier for them to obtain refugee status.<sup>5</sup>

In 2015, the UN estimated that there were approximately 60 million forcibly displaced people. Five years later, it was already 80 million. At the same time, at the height of the first migration crisis in 2015, the number of all registered illegal crossings of the European Union border was estimated at 1,822,337.<sup>6</sup>

When analysing the dangers of uncontrolled mass movements of population, ESPON brought attention to the fact, as early as December 2015, that Europe remains under intense pressure, while refugees and migrants were heading mainly to countries with the most favourable economic conditions and places with the most attractive and inclusive integration policies. The crisis caused by Russia and Belarus in 2021, although on a much smaller scale than in 2015, confirms these.<sup>7</sup>

At the same time, the report included a map developed on the basis of Frontex data showing all confirmed migration routes of this period. The main one was the Central Mediterranean route to Italy, running from Libya and Tunisia. The second largest was the Eastern Mediterranean route, followed by the Western Balkans, Western Mediterranean, Western African, and Eastern Mediterranean routes. The next two routes ran generally through Russia, Ukraine, and optionally through Belarus, with crossing of the Eastern borders of the EU mainly in Slovakia, the Baltic States, Finland and Norway. These were the routes that Afghans, Syrians, Pakistanis, Georgians and Moldovans tried to work their way through. These were the Black Sea route and the Eastern borders route. Regardless of them, migration from Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, and the Caucasus, mainly from Chechnya and Armenia, took

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<sup>4</sup> N. Ostrand, 'The Syrian Refugee Crisis: A Comparison of Responses by Germany, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and the United States', *Journal on Migration and Human Security*, vol. 3, no. 3 (2015), pp. 255–79, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/233150241500300301> (accessed: 25 April 2024).

<sup>5</sup> P. Kolbusz, *Kryzys migracyjny 2015 roku w Europie i sytuacja uchodźców w czasie pandemii – czy kryzys skończył się na dobre i jaki wpływ na migrantów ma epidemia wirusa COVID-19?*, [http://www.repozytorium.uni.wroc.pl/Content/134047/PDF/02\\_Kolbusz\\_Kryzys\\_migracyjny.pdf](http://www.repozytorium.uni.wroc.pl/Content/134047/PDF/02_Kolbusz_Kryzys_migracyjny.pdf) (accessed: 25 April 2024).

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> 'Territorial and Urban Aspects of Migration and Refugee Inflow', *ESPON Policy Brief*, [https://www.ccre.org/img/uploads/piecesjointe/filename/ESPON\\_Policy\\_brief\\_migration\\_FINAL\\_041215.pdf](https://www.ccre.org/img/uploads/piecesjointe/filename/ESPON_Policy_brief_migration_FINAL_041215.pdf) (accessed: 25 April 2024).

place throughout Poland, especially through the Brest-Terespol crossing. A large number of migrants from Chechnya were being returned to Belarus, which was already being used for propaganda by the Belarusian side.<sup>8</sup>

The 'Policy Report in the field of migration and asylum 2013' pointed out the gradual development of the 'Belarusian' route, on which during detentions people were recorded who had entered Russia legally or illegally by land, and then travelled by road and rail routes. Railroads were used primarily by Russian citizens of Chechen nationality. Despite Russia's restrictive migration policy, Russia–Belarus–Poland trafficking channels were operating.<sup>9</sup> In 2014, attempts to build alternative migration routes via Poland were reported.<sup>10</sup>

Thus, if one were to look for a moment when the Russian Federation and Belarus could assess for the future the possibility of using migrants as a tool of pressure on the countries along the eastern border of the EU, they could, by all means, gain the necessary experience after 2011 and especially 2015. For the Russian Federation, the key operations were towards Norway and Finland, which were basically completely unknown in European public opinion and focused on hundreds of thousands of people migrating through the Balkans towards Germany. The Russian Federation most likely organised attempts to destabilise Finland and Norway in retaliation for the sanctions imposed by the EU and the US after the illegal annexation of Crimea.<sup>11</sup>

As part of the eastern route, migrants tried to reach Norway and Finland directly from the Russian Federation, via road crossings or the Balkan routes, and farther on through the Czech Republic, Poland and the Baltics by rented transport. In the case of Finland, small crossings (Raja-Jooseppi and Salla) on the Kola Peninsula were used, which were reached by bicycles abandoned after crossing the border. This practice was reported in December 2015, at the time of Norway's closure of crossings beyond the Arctic Circle, where refugees arrived in a similar way. In the case of Finland, in 2015, about 600 people were involved. They were mostly Afghans, Nepalese, Iraqis, Iranians and Syrians.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> 'Terespol: uchodźcom zawracanym z polskiej granicy grozi niebezpieczeństwo', *Amnesty International*, 10 Aug. 2018, <https://www.amnesty.org.pl/terespol-uchodzcom-zawracanym-z-polskiej-granicy-grozi-niebezpieczenstwo/> (accessed: 1 May 2024).

<sup>9</sup> Krajowy Punkt Kontaktowy Europejskiej Sieci Migracyjnej w Polsce, *Raport polityczny w dziedzinie migracji i azylu 2013*, <https://www.gov.pl/web/europejska-siec-migracyjna/roczne-raporty-polityczne> (accessed: 1 May 2024).

<sup>10</sup> Krajowy Punkt Kontaktowy Europejskiej Sieci Migracyjnej w Polsce, *Raport roczny 2014. Raport na temat realizacji polityki Polski w zakresie migracji i azylu w 2014 roku*, <https://www.gov.pl/web/europejska-siec-migracyjna/roczne-raporty-polityczne> (accessed: 1 May 2024).

<sup>11</sup> R. Gönczi, 'Disinformation as a Tool of Hybrid Warfare at the Polish-Belarusian Border', *Warsaw Institute*, 28 Sept. 2023, <https://warsawinstitute.org/disinformation-as-a-tool-of-hybrid-warfare-at-the-polish-belarusian-border/> (accessed: 3 May 2024).

<sup>12</sup> T. Nielsen, 'Finland Forbids Asylum Biking', *The Barents Observer*, 27 Dec. 2015, <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/borders/2015/12/finland-forbids-asylum-biking> (accessed: 1 May 2024).

Norway encountered the first wave of migration arranged by the Russian Federation before the events in Finland. These were more or less numerous groups on all kinds of bicycles abandoned as soon as they crossed the border. All this because Russia did not allow migrants to cross the border on foot. Those waiting to cross were gathered in the town of Nikel, where they could buy bicycles, and were transferred to the area of the Kirkenes border crossing. In total, at least 5,500 people from October to December 2015 took the route beyond the Arctic Circle.<sup>13</sup> In January 2016, Norway launched measures to block the 'Russian' route.<sup>14</sup> Finland took similar measures, as in 2016 hundreds of migrants, with the tacit approval of the Russian authorities, made re-attempts to break through to the west. A concerned government of Finland estimated that at this rate their number would be up to 10 times as many as in 2015. Significantly, thousands were detained and sent back to Russia when it turned out that the 'refugees' were legally living in Russia or had come to Russia legally in order to enter the EU.<sup>15</sup> At the end of 2023, following the earlier decision of Finland and Sweden to join NATO structures, the Russian Federation, as a retaliation, launched migration routes on the Finnish–Russian border using the experience of 2015 and 2016.<sup>16</sup> Did it also use them to build operations towards Poland and the Baltics in 2021? Looking at the methods of operation, it can be assumed that the Russian services very profoundly analysed the experience of the 2015 and 2016 crises for the possibility of the internal destabilisation of a chosen country.

Another piece of this intricate jigsaw was the attempts to contain the migrant crisis by making deals with the countries through which migrants were arriving. One such deal was made in 2016 with Turkey, which, in exchange for financial support of €3 billion and a promise to speed up its integration with the EU, agreed to block a migration route for Syrian nationals which it had previously started itself.<sup>17</sup> It was the same as the case with the Mediterranean route, where Italy again struck a deal with one of the

<sup>13</sup> 'Refugees Are Biking Into Norway From a Tiny, Remote Russian Arctic Border', *ABC News*, 28 Dec. 2015, <https://abcnews.go.com/International/refugees-biking-norway-tiny-remote-russian-arctic-border/story?id=35978710> (accessed: 1 May 2024). See also N. Holland, 'Seeking Asylum on Children's Bicycles', *BBC News*, 23 Oct. 2015, <https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-34602208> (accessed: 1 May 2024).

<sup>14</sup> 'Migrant Crisis: Norway Begins Deportations to Russia', *BBC News*, 19 Jan. 2016, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-35355727> (accessed: 1 May 2024).

<sup>15</sup> R. Standish, 'For Finland and Norway, the Refugee Crisis Heats Up Along the Russian Arctic', *Foreign Policy*, 26 Jan. 2016, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/01/26/for-finland-and-norway-the-refugee-crisis-heats-up-along-the-russian-arctic/> (accessed: 1 May 2024).

<sup>16</sup> J. Graca, W. Rodkiewicz, 'Rosyjska presja migracyjna na granicę z Finlandią', *Ośrodek Studiów Wschodnich*, 17 Nov. 2023, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/pl/publikacje/analizy/2023-11-17/rosyjska-presja-migracyjna-na-granice-z-finlandia> (accessed: 30 May 2024).

<sup>17</sup> Rada Europejska, *Oświadczenie UE–Turcja (18 marca 2016)*, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/pl/press/press-releases/2016/03/18/eu-turkey-statement/> (accessed: 29 May 2024).

parties of the dual-power regime in Libya.<sup>18</sup> This also did not go unnoticed by the Kremlin. The Turkish ‘lesson’ demonstrated the European Union’s weakness in the decision-making. At the same time, subsequent attempts to build a common migration policy resulted in the increasing importance of populist parties and facilitated Russia’s internal destabilisation of the EU.<sup>19</sup>

## Migration Crisis 2021–2024

The organised surge on the eastern borders of Lithuania, Latvia and then Poland, which has begun in 2021, surprised the authorities of all countries, on the one hand by its scale, and on the other – by the fact that the Belarusian border was prepared, with the support of all Belarusian services, for the most effective penetration in the western direction.<sup>20</sup>

The Lithuanian Ministry of Internal Affairs reported that by August 2021, the number of confirmed illegal migrants who had trespassed the Belarusian-Lithuanian border had reached 4,115, which was a 55-fold increase compared to 2020 (74 people) and a 110-fold increase compared to 2019 (37 people). In one day of June 2021 alone, the number of people detained at an attempt to illegally cross the border exceeded the combined number of migrants from 2019 and 2020. Among them were citizens of 23 countries with an overwhelming majority of Iraqis. These people were accommodated at the Alien Registration Centre, where they attempted to apply for asylum.<sup>21</sup> These procedures quickly proved to be a trap for the Lithuanian authorities, as they led to an avalanche of border crossings with the help of Belarusian services, as reaching Lithuania meant de facto appearing on the EU territory and preparing to cross, via Poland, to Germany or Scandinavian countries. As a result of the coordinated actions of the Belarusian side, which facilitated the illegal pressure in every way, the Lithuanian authorities were forced to declare a state of emergency on 9 November in the border strip with Belarus and also in detention centres, to tighten controls in the zones where state of emergency was introduced, and to request assistance from Frontex, EASO

<sup>18</sup> Kolbusz, *Kryzys migracyjny 2015 roku*, p. 35.

<sup>19</sup> A. Nestoras, ‘How the Kremlin is Manipulating the Refugee Crisis Russian Disinformation as a Threat to European Security’, *Institute of European Democrats, Research Paper* (Jan. 2019), [https://www.iedonline.eu/download/2019/IED-Research-Paper-Russia-as-a-security-provider\\_January2019.pdf](https://www.iedonline.eu/download/2019/IED-Research-Paper-Russia-as-a-security-provider_January2019.pdf) (accessed: 26 May 2024).

<sup>20</sup> A. Kuczyńska-Zonik, ‘Litwa i Łotwa pod presją migracyjną ze strony Białorusi’, *Instytut Europy Środkowej*, 22 Nov. 2022, <https://ies.lublin.pl/komentarze/litwa-i-lotwa-pod-presja-migracyjna-ze-strony-bialorusi/> (accessed: 1 May 2024).

<sup>21</sup> ‘Information on Irregular Migration’, *Ministry of the Interior of the Republic Lithuania*, 12 Aug. 2021, <https://vrm.lrv.lt/en/information-on-irregular-migration/> (accessed: 1 May 2024).

and Europol. Additionally, border crossings were formally allowed only at designated checkpoints.<sup>22</sup>

All these problems were attentively watched by the Polish side, which was not subject to as intense pressure as Lithuania at the time. The first aggregate data was also published by Frontex. According to their estimates, referred to by the BBC, more than 5,000 people, the vast majority of them from Iraq, crossed the eastern borders of the EU with the support of Belarusian and Russian services. These people reached Belarus by air and then, organised, were shipped by Belarusian authorities to the border. According to EU officials, this was a Belarusian attempt to pressure the EU over the EU sanctions imposed on this country in June.<sup>23</sup>

These actions were preceded by a series of decisions by authorities in Minsk aimed at facilitating operations of delivering the migrants. On 1 February 2021, Alexander Lukashenko approved the 2021 State Border Protection Plan due to migration challenges. In the following months, Minsk relaxed the code of administrative offences (e.g., penalties for an illegal stay in the border zone were abolished) and lastly suspended the readmission agreement with the EU.<sup>24</sup>

When Lithuania, flooded by migrants, decided to block the border by building fortifications and fences, and sent forcibly back more than 7,000 people from its centres, Belarus swiftly rerouted migrants to the Polish border, leading to the first border crisis. From September 2021 until June 2022, the number of thwarted illegal attempts to cross the border in our direction reached more than 40,000, of which the autumn of 2021 (September–November) accounted for nearly 33,000.<sup>25</sup> The scale of the attempts to enter the Polish territory was designed to trigger an internal crisis in the shortest possible time, as in the case of Lithuania. Minsk and Moscow wanted to base the entire operation on an attempt to force EU countries to comply with international law requiring a country on whose territory a person seeking protection arrives, to allow access to the asylum procedure.

<sup>22</sup> J. Hyndle-Hussein, 'Lithuania's reactions to the escalating migration crisis', *OSW*, 10 Nov. 2021, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2021-11-10/lithuanias-reactions-to-escalating-migration-crisis> (accessed: 1 May 2024).

<sup>23</sup> 'Belarus Border Crisis: How Are Migrants Getting There?', *BBC News*, 26 Nov. 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/59233244> (accessed: 1 May 2024).

<sup>24</sup> A. Dynier, 'Kryzys graniczny jako przykład działań hybrydowych', *PISM Strategic File*, no. 2 (2 Feb. 2022), [https://www.pism.pl/publikacje/kryzys-graniczny-jako-przyklad-dzialan-hybrydowych#\\_ftn2](https://www.pism.pl/publikacje/kryzys-graniczny-jako-przyklad-dzialan-hybrydowych#_ftn2) (accessed: 3 May 2024).

<sup>25</sup> *Informacja o sytuacji na granicy polsko-białoruskiej w związku z kryzysem migracyjnym, Załącznik nr 3 do Strategii Rozwoju Województwa Podlaskiego*, [https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&source=web&rct=j&opi=89978449&url=https://strategia.wrotapodlasia.pl/resource/2025/Za%25C5%2582%25C4%2585cznik%25203.%2520do%2520Raportu.pdf/attachment.1&ved=2ahUKEwjF5cOF0\\_KHAXU2FRAIHVEpDBsQFnoECCMQAQ&usg=AOvVaw3y-UeYcngSpO7ltAm0crL](https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&source=web&rct=j&opi=89978449&url=https://strategia.wrotapodlasia.pl/resource/2025/Za%25C5%2582%25C4%2585cznik%25203.%2520do%2520Raportu.pdf/attachment.1&ved=2ahUKEwjF5cOF0_KHAXU2FRAIHVEpDBsQFnoECCMQAQ&usg=AOvVaw3y-UeYcngSpO7ltAm0crL) (accessed: 3 May 2024).



Anna Dyner thinks that ‘the beginning of the activities at the Polish border can be partly linked to the evacuation from the Tokyo Olympics of the runner Kryscina Cimanouska, who received a Polish humanitarian visa’.<sup>26</sup> We must add to this the Zapad exercise, which, as we now know, served to deploy the military contingents essential for striking Ukraine from Belarus. In fact, the entire border crisis on Poland’s direction was directly correlated with preparations for the Russian Federation’s aggression against Ukraine. The Russian services had realised that an attack on Ukraine would trigger an avalanche of war refugees. If, during its course, it had succeeded in provoking Poland’s violent, categorical response blocking the mass surge on the border with Ukraine, on one hand, it would have led to yet another deep crisis in Polish-Ukrainian relations and on the other, would have complicated the internal situation of Ukraine itself. In addition, it would affect the situation in the EU as a whole. At the same time, the psychological operations towards Poland, which have been run ceaselessly since the autumn of 2021, could be intensified.

The execution of this project was based on social media accounts that just a few months earlier had been sending out anti-vax content prepared by Russia. Almost overnight, they changed their design and began to propagate widely anti-Ukrainian disinformation prepared specifically for the moment of the attack.<sup>27</sup> From the very beginning, Russia tried to synchronise it up with the operation on the Polish-Belarusian border and create the impression of one common threat to Poland’s security – dangerous migrants and anti-Polish Ukrainians. What’s important, there was also an attempt to use the narrative of a threat from dark-skinned people using the fact that thousands of foreign students, mainly from African countries and India, were ordered to evacuate to Poland.<sup>28</sup>

To the surprise of Russian and Belarusian services, the Polish public reacted differently to the massive influx of war refugees from Ukraine than to migrants crossing the border illegally. The Kremlin’s aggressive narrative was counter-effective. As a result, the whole elaborate project of using propaganda on the Ukrainian direction failed completely, which resulted in the operation turning very quickly into an economic project (profits from trafficking) and into maintaining Russian and Belarusian disinformation directed westward, both to Poland and Germany, the target country of those smuggled across the Polish border.

<sup>26</sup> Dyner, ‘Kryzys graniczny’.

<sup>27</sup> M. Zadroga, *Disinformation Landscape in Poland*, Dec. 2023, [https://www.disinfo.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/20231203\\_PL\\_DisinfoFS.pdf](https://www.disinfo.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/20231203_PL_DisinfoFS.pdf) (accessed: 5 May 2024); see also ‘Uderzenie dezinformacyjne’, [www.gov.pl](http://www.gov.pl), 17 Dec. 2021, <https://www.gov.pl/web/sluzby-specjalne/uderzenie-dezinformacyjne> (accessed: 5 May 2024); R. Gönczi, ‘Disinformation as a Tool of Hybrid Warfare’.

<sup>28</sup> K. Kojzar, ‘Kłamstwa o uchodźcach zalewają Przemysł. Policja prostuje fake newsy’, *okopress.pl*, 2 March 2022, <https://oko.press/dezinformacja-zalewa-przemysl-policja-to-przekazy-ktore-maja-wystraszy-c-mieszkancow-i-uchodzcow> (accessed: 5 May 2024).

## Operation 'Lock'

The fact that the procedures used by Belarus in 2021 were developed much earlier was told in an interview for *Gazeta Wyborcza* by Tadeusz Giczán, a Belarusian opposition activist and journalist for the Nexta editorial board. The interview was conducted because he published on social media a piece of information about the Belarusian border destabilisation project codenamed 'Lock'.<sup>29</sup> Accounts and reports by BYPOL, an organisation that gathers former employees of the Belarusian services (investigating officers, policemen) who fled to Poland, included information about the deliberate import of migrants from Iraq to Belarus as early as 2011 in order to demonstrate the EU's problems in the area of the impermeability of borders. These activities were to be stopped with the receipt of funds from the EU to improve the impermeability of Belarusian borders.

In 2015, there was not much traffic in the Belarusian direction. Attempts to cross the borders via Belarus and Ukraine towards Poland and the Baltic States were symbolic. As I mentioned earlier, the main surge was directed at the time to the Scandinavian countries. In the case of Poland, such attempts were made by citizens of the Russian Federation of Chechen nationality, or Vietnam. In 2015, the Border Guard recorded 3,365 illegal crossings of the EU external border, of which Ukrainians accounted for 3,713 cases (53.1 per cent of all crossings and attempted crossings), Russians – 613 cases (8.7 per cent), Belarusians – 236 cases (3.3 per cent).<sup>30</sup>

Consequently, there is no reliable data on whether the actual Operation 'Lock', allegedly developed by the Belarusian authorities in 2011, was actually used by them in 2021. The concept of this operation, however, coincides with the actions of Turkey, which destabilised Greece in early 2020 when it allowed the illegal migration of Syrian citizens living in refugee camps.<sup>31</sup> It cannot be ruled out that the Russian Federation and Belarus benefited from Turkey's ideas by creatively transforming Operation 'Lock' for the needs of the upcoming special operation in Ukraine, although officially it was supposed to be President Alexander Lukashenko's revenge for the involvement of Poland and Lithuania in supporting the opposition protesting against the falsification

<sup>29</sup> W. Bielaszyn, 'Tadeusz Giczán, autor tekstu o operacji "Śluz": Uchodźców nie można zostawić w potrzasku', *wyborcza.pl*, 28 Aug. 2021, <https://wyborcza.pl/7,75399,27502347,tadeusz-giczán-autor-tekstu-o-operacji-sluz-uchodzcow-nie.html> (accessed: 3 May 2024).

<sup>30</sup> 'Ile nielegalnych przekroczeń polskiej granicy odnotowano w 2019 roku?', *Demagog*, 23 Aug. 2021, <https://demagog.org.pl/wypowiedzi/ile-nielegalnych-przekroczen-polskiej-granicy-odnotowano-w-2019-roku/> (accessed: 3 May 2024).

<sup>31</sup> I.E. Kotoulas, W. Pusztai, 'The 2020 Migration Crisis on the Greek-Turkish Border', *Civitas Gentium*, vol. 8, no. 1 (2020), pp. 173–85, [https://www.academia.edu/43752163/Ioannis\\_E\\_Kotoulas\\_and\\_Wolfgang\\_Pusztai\\_The\\_2020\\_Migration\\_Crisis\\_on\\_the\\_Greek\\_Turkish\\_Border](https://www.academia.edu/43752163/Ioannis_E_Kotoulas_and_Wolfgang_Pusztai_The_2020_Migration_Crisis_on_the_Greek_Turkish_Border) (accessed: 3 May 2024).

of the 2020 elections and for the EU sanctions imposed on the regime.<sup>32</sup> Nevertheless, it cannot be ruled out that the Russian Federation and Belarus may have developed the concept of destabilising the border states of the EU and NATO entirely independently of those plans, given the moods in the EU over the ongoing migrant crisis via the Mediterranean and Balkan routes.

The artificially-created migration pressure of 2023–24 already has different objectives than the one used against Poland in 2021, and it has a longer perspective in terms of the outcome desired by the Russian authorities. As Jacek Rauba reports in 'InfoSecurity', 'the intention is primarily to create psychological pressure (Operation PSYOPS) on the security of European countries and their societies. This is based on the recognition that it is possible to create a vision of mass trafficking of illegal immigrants from the Far North to the Mediterranean and the Balkans, potentially at the same time'.<sup>33</sup>

In his view, the 2021 operation was a key element of Russian operations below the threshold of war designed to put states at NATO's eastern flank to the test. Additionally, the distraction of what 'was to give Russia greater leeway in its aggression against Ukraine, limiting the chances of providing effective military assistance from Europe, involved in a created and tasked migration crisis'.<sup>34</sup>

## Conclusion

By analysing the policies of Russia and Belarus, it is clear that the first 'experiences' were gained by the Russian Federation as early as 2015 on the so-called northern route (Finland and Norway). The launch of the 2021 crisis, in turn, was preceded by the pandemic and Ankara's operation to transfer Syrian refugees to the sea border with Greece. Russia's objective in 2021/22 was to destabilise Poland and, indirectly, EU countries. The first actions towards Lithuania and Latvia were most likely a general test of the operation. The crisis on the Polish-Belarusian border was perfectly prepared and synchronised with psychological and disinformation activities which were to

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<sup>32</sup> C. Pawlak, 'Operacja "Śluza"', *Polska Zbrojna*, 8 Aug. 2022, <https://polska-zbrojna.pl/Mobile/ArticleShow/37826> (accessed: 3 May 2024), see also 'Białoruska "Operacja Śluza". Starannie przygotowany plan służb', *InfoSecurity24*, 25 Aug. 2021, <https://infosecurity24.pl/bezpieczenstwo-wewnetrzne/bialoruska-operacja-sluza-starannie-przygotowany-plan-sluzb> (accessed: 3 May 2024); 'Russian and Belarusian Disinformation and Propaganda in the Context of the Polish-Belarusian Border Crisis', *PISM Bulletin*, no. 212 (9 Dec. 2021), <https://www.pism.pl/publications/russian-and-belarusian-disinformation-and-propaganda-in-the-context-of-the-polish-belarusian-border-crisis> (accessed: 5 May 2024).

<sup>33</sup> J. Raubo, 'Presja migracyjna to część rosyjskiego "arsenału". Co zrobi Zachód?', *InfoSecurity24*, 5 Dec. 2023, <https://infosecurity24.pl/za-granica/presja-migracyjna-to-czesc-rosyjskiego-arsenalu-co-zrobi-zachod> (accessed: 5 May 2024).

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

lead to destabilising our country internally and weakening trust in the military and uniformed services. This was to facilitate Russia's military and destabilisation operations in Ukraine and to 'close' the border with Poland. Among other things, the actions used here included deception, which the Bolsheviks already had well mastered, e.g. in the first stage of building their empire.<sup>35</sup>

Fortunately, the Russian services assessed the attitude of the Polish society as badly as that of the Ukrainian public. As a result, the operation was transformed due to other priorities. Minsk pursued it from the beginning as 'punishment' for Polish and Lithuanian involvement in supporting the Belarusian opposition. When activities in Ukraine did not develop in line with Russian objectives, the border crisis again became an element of destabilisation of NATO's eastern border and a tool to reinforce propaganda and disinformation efforts. To Russia's surprise, Poland responded to the unfolding crisis in a swift and decisive manner, reduced the scale of penetration of the border regions and, at least partially, immunised the society against Russian psyop operations in this direction. The Kremlin made its last attempt at destabilisation by re-launching the former northern route to destabilise the security of Finland, which had unexpectedly joined the ranks of NATO. Whether and what the further objectives of this operation will be, we will see in the future. Undoubtedly, Russia will do everything to take advantage of the desperation of people desiring to enter Western Europe.

*Translated by Agnieszka Pospiszil*

## Summary

The article analyses the 2015–24 migration crisis on the Polish-Belarusian border as part of a multi-level influence operation of the Russian Federation-Belarus. The author points out that this crisis, although officially presented as an initiative of Alexander Lukashenko's regime, had a deeper basis, being part of Russia's strategy to destabilise Eastern Europe and weaken the unity of the European Union and NATO. The 2015 migrant crisis, fuelled by conflicts in the Middle East, provided Russia with important experience for subsequent operations, including the 2021 border crisis. The surge of migrants on the EU's eastern border, organised by Belarusian services with the support of Moscow, was to destabilise Poland, Lithuania and Latvia, while testing NATO's ability to respond to the hybrid threats. The author also analyses Operation 'Lock', a 2011 Belarusian project which was to use migration as a tool of political pressure. The operation was modified and adapted to the new geopolitical situation, including in response to Poland's involvement in helping the Belarusian opposition after the falsified 2020 presidential elections. The article highlights the fact that the 2021 migration crisis was integrated with Russia's preparations for the invasion of Ukraine, with disinformation activities and psychological operations aimed at polarising societies and undermining trust in state institutions. Despite these attempts, Poland has responded effectively to the crisis, limiting the impact of the operations on internal security. In conclusion, Russia will

<sup>35</sup> M. Świerczek, *Jak Sowietci przetrwali dzięki oszustwu. Sowiecka decepcja strategiczna* (Warszawa, 2021).

continue to use migration as a tool of destabilisation in an attempt to achieve its geopolitical objectives through escalating pressure on the EU and NATO borders.

### **Kryzys migracyjny na wschodniej granicy Polski 2015–2022/2024 jako element wielopoziomowej operacji wpływu Federacji Rosyjskiej**

Artykuł analizuje kryzys migracyjny na granicy polsko-białoruskiej w latach 2015–2024 jako element wielopoziomowej operacji wpływu Federacji Rosyjskiej i Białorusi. Autor wskazuje, że kryzys ten, choć oficjalnie prezentowany jako inicjatywa reżimu Aleksandra Łukaszenki, miał głębsze podstawy, stanowiąc część strategii Rosji mającej na celu destabilizację Europy Wschodniej i osłabienie jedności Unii Europejskiej oraz NATO. Kryzys migracyjny z 2015 r., napędzany konfliktami na Bliskim Wschodzie, dostarczył Rosji istotnych doświadczeń, które wykorzystano przy kolejnych operacjach, w tym podczas kryzysu granicznego w 2021 r. Napór migrantów na wschodnią granicę UE, zorganizowany przez służby białoruskie przy wsparciu Moskwy, miał zdestabilizować Polskę, Litwę i Łotwę, testując jednocześnie zdolność NATO do reagowania na hybrydowe zagrożenia. Autor analizuje również operację „Śluza”, białoruski projekt z 2011 r., który zakładał wykorzystanie migracji jako narzędzia nacisku politycznego. Operacja ta została zmodyfikowana i dostosowana do nowej sytuacji geopolitycznej, m.in. w odpowiedzi na zaangażowanie Polski w pomoc białoruskiej opozycji po sfałszowanych wyborach prezydenckich w 2020 r. W artykule podkreślono, że kryzys migracyjny z 2021 r. był zintegrowany z przygotowaniami Rosji do inwazji na Ukrainę, a działania dezinformacyjne oraz operacje psychologiczne miały na celu polaryzację społeczeństw i podważenie zaufania do instytucji państwowych. Pomimo tych prób Polska skutecznie zareagowała na kryzys, ograniczając wpływ operacji na bezpieczeństwo wewnętrzne. Konkludując, Rosja będzie nadal wykorzystywać migrację jako narzędzie destabilizacji, próbując realizować swoje geopolityczne cele poprzez eskalację presji na granicach UE i NATO.

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