

Weaponization of Migration: A Powerful Instrument in the Hybrid Warfare Toolbox

João Pedro Souza Gohla¹

Abstract:

The weaponization of migration has emerged as a key tactic in hybrid warfare, allowing states to exert political pressure and destabilize rivals. Europe's vulnerability to migration crises has been exploited by various actors, including Libya, Turkey, Belarus, and Russia. Muammar Gaddafi used migration threats to negotiate political concessions, while Turkey leveraged refugee flows for financial and diplomatic gains. In 2021, Belarus orchestrated a border crisis to retaliate against EU sanctions, exposing European divisions. Russia, through its influence in conflict zones, has indirectly fueled migration pressures on Europe. These cases highlight the broader challenge of balancing security, humanitarian commitments, and EU solidarity. This analysis explores the legal and political implications of migration as a weapon, assesses Europe's current strategies, and outlines potential policy responses to mitigate future threats. As geopolitical instability persists, Europe must adopt a resilient, coordinated approach to prevent migration crises from undermining its stability.

Keywords: Hybrid warfare; migration weaponization; EU security

Migration as a Weapon in Hybrid Warfare

Hybrid warfare involves unconventional and asymmetrical tactics to achieve political and military goals. It blurs the line between military and non-military methods, creating complex challenges for opponents. One tactic in this strategy is to use migration as a weapon by deliberately manipulating migration flows to pressure rival nations. By weaponizing migration, states can strain resources, destabilize governments, and exploit societal divisions (Greenhill, 2010, p. 57). Europe's proximity to unstable regions, along with its humanitarian commitments and political diversity, makes it particularly vulnerable to such strategies. Internal divisions, such as differing migration policies and the rise of populist movements, are amplified under migration pressure, making Europe an attractive target (Collett, 2016).

Gaddafi's Threat

Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi openly used migration as leverage against Europe. In 2010, he warned, "*Tomorrow Europe might no longer be European, and even black, as there are millions who want to come*" (BBC, 2010). Gaddafi argued that Libya was a crucial buffer against migration

¹ João Pedro Souza Gohla is an M.A. student in Law and Security, specializing in International Law, Geopolitics, and Security Studies. His research primarily focuses on global security challenges, including terrorism, organized crime and state fragility. João Pedro holds a B.A. in Political Science, where his undergraduate thesis explored political stability through a comparative case study of Rwanda and Burundi.

from sub-Saharan Africa, demanding financial and political concessions in return for maintaining this role. Following Gaddafi's fall in 2011, Libya disintegrated into turmoil, leading to a surge in migration that overwhelmed European border systems. Smuggling networks thrived, and the Mediterranean Sea became a dangerous route for thousands seeking safety. The influx of migrants fueled debates over migration policy and amplified divisions within the EU, with some members advocating for stricter controls and others emphasizing humanitarian responsibilities (Geddes & Scholten, 2016, p. 93). This led to the EU investing billions in initiatives like Operation Sophia and Frontex to strengthen external borders, while simultaneously increasing their dependence on North African countries. To manage and curtail migration, Europe relied on agreements with Libya and others, leaving itself open to political blackmail (Carrera et al., 2017, p. 132).

Erdogan's Leverage

In 2016, the EU and Turkey reached an agreement to manage the Syrian refugee crisis. Turkey agreed to prevent migrants from crossing into Europe in exchange for €6 billion in aid, visa liberalization for Turkish citizens, and renewed EU accession talks. While the deal initially reduced migrant flows, it also gave Turkey significant leverage over Europe (Terry, 2021). President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has used migration as a bargaining tool to secure financial aid and political concessions. With about 4 million refugees, mostly Syrians, Turkey holds considerable influence over Europe's migration landscape. In 2020, Erdogan declared that Turkey would no longer "carry this burden alone" and briefly opened its borders, prompting thousands to head for Greece (Atlantic Council, 2020). Turkey's strategic goals include financial and political benefits, which frequently coincide with calls for additional funds or backing for its military operations in Syria. Furthermore, Turkey tests EU unity as migratory crises widen schisms among EU states. Frontline countries, like as Greece, want greater solidarity, while others refuse to bear the weight (Park, 2015). The outcomes highlighted EU divisions, with the 2020 crisis revealing Europe's lack of a unified migration policy. Some states, like Hungary and Poland, resisted taking in migrants (Roehse & Varma, 2024). This dependence on Turkey leaves the EU vulnerable to future coercion. Lastly, humanitarian concerns were raised due to reports of harsh treatment and pushbacks at the Greece-Turkey border, highlighting the tension between security and humanitarian commitments (Amnesty International, 2019, p. 13).

Lukashenko's Tactics

In 2021, Belarus, led by President Alexander Lukashenko, engineered a migration crisis at the EU's borders. Migrants from the Middle East were enticed to Belarus with false promises of easy entry into Europe. They were then directed to the borders of Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia, creating both a political and humanitarian crisis. Belarus's actions were a deliberate attempt to destabilize EU countries and exploit their vulnerabilities in managing migration. This move was also a response to EU sanctions imposed due to Belarus's human rights

abuses (AFP, 2021, pp. 1–5). As a result, Poland and Lithuania implemented stricter border controls and emergency laws that limited asylum claims. Relations between the EU and Belarus worsened, with the EU imposing additional sanctions on Belarus and accusing Russia of supporting the crisis (Forti, 2023). Socially and politically, anti-migrant sentiment increased in Europe, bolstering populist movements and challenging the EU's commitment to humanitarian principles.

Weaponization of Migration: Russia's Role and Strategy

Russia has demonstrated its ability to use migration crises to weaken Europe's unity and shift focus away from larger geopolitical issues. By destabilizing regions like Syria or parts of Africa, Russia indirectly increases migration flows to Europe, deepening political divisions. In the future, Russia might exploit conflicts in Africa, the Middle East, or Central Asia to fuel migration flows. It could also leverage climate change and economic crises to heighten displacement, straining Europe's resources. Emboldened by current developments in Ukraine and a shift in U.S. priorities, Russia might feel empowered to take even more drastic measures. As Europe must secure its borders while upholding its commitments under the 1951 Refugee Convention, striking a balance between border control and humanitarian duties is essential. Migration crises often lead to political divisions, strengthening populist movements and creating rifts among EU members, which makes solidarity difficult to achieve (Collett, 2016). Additionally, relying on agreements with third-party states like Turkey and Libya exposes Europe to political blackmail, as seen in past crises.

Prevention and Mitigation

To effectively manage migration challenges, Europe must adopt a multi-faceted approach. Proactive border management is essential, involving investments in Frontex, advanced surveillance systems, and early warning mechanisms to counter manipulation (Carrera et al., 2017, p. 135). Strengthening resilience through better intelligence-sharing among EU and NATO countries can help identify and respond to state-sponsored migration crises. Promoting EU solidarity by developing fair systems for sharing migration responsibilities and countering disinformation is crucial to maintaining unity (Wohlfeld et al., 2024). Addressing root causes through long-term efforts to stabilize conflict-prone regions will reduce forced migration (Geddes & Scholten, 2016, p. 95). Additionally, diplomatic and economic measures, such as sanctions against states weaponizing migration combined with strong diplomacy, can be an avenue for deterring future attempts. Many of these strategies are part of the European Pact on Migration and Asylum, which aims to establish a new set of rules for managing migration and creating a common asylum system at the EU level. These rules are designed to deliver results while staying true to European values. They build on and amend previous reform proposals, offering a comprehensive approach that strengthens and integrates key EU policies on migration, asylum, border management, and integration. With firm but fair rules, they aim to manage and normalize migration for the long term, providing

EU countries with the flexibility to address specific challenges and necessary safeguards to protect people in need (European Commission 2024).

Europe's Preparedness

Europe needs to stay vigilant and adjust as Russia's increasingly self-assured hybrid threats change. It should get ready for a number of new challenges since the weaponization of migration will remain a serious concern given the widening rifts in the transatlantic alliance, Russia's destabilising actions, and problems like climate change and economic crises. For Europe to successfully tackle this challenge, a unified, forward-looking approach that strikes a balance between security, humanitarian principles, and solidarity is essential (Collett, 2016). Given the uncertainty surrounding the transatlantic backing it historically depended on, Europe should strive to accomplish this on its own as a sovereign political entity.

References

AFP. (2021). *Migration crisis on the Belarus-Poland border*. https://www.acaps.org/fileadmin/Data_Product/Main_media/20211202_acaps_briefing_note_belarus_poland_migration_crisis_on_the_border_0.pdf

Amnesty International. (2019). *Pushed to the edge: Violence and abuse at Europe's borders*.

Atlantic Council. (2020, March 18). *EU-Turkey relations and the migration conundrum: Where does the EU-Turkey statement stand after three years?* Atlantic Council. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/commentary/event-recap/eu-turkey-relations-and-the-migration-conundrum-where-does-the-eu-turkey-statement-stand-after-three-years/>

BBC. (2010, August 31). *Gaddafi wants EU cash to stop African migrants*. BBC News. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-11139345>

Carrera, S., Blockmans, S., Gros, D., & Guild, E. (2017). *The European border and coast guard: Addressing migration and asylum challenges*. Centre for European Policy Studies. <https://www.ceps.eu/ceps-publications/european-border-and-coast-guard/>

Collett, E. (2016). *The paradox of the EU-Turkey refugee deal*. Migration Policy Institute Europe. <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/research/paradox-eu-turkey-refugee-deal>

European Commission. (2024). *Pact on migration and asylum*. Home Affairs. https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies/migration-and-asylum/pact-migration-and-asylum_en

Forti, M. (2023). Belarus-sponsored migration movements and the response by Lithuania, Latvia, and Poland: A critical appraisal. *European Papers*, 8(1), 249-268. <https://doi.org/10.15166/2499-8249/648>



APL Blog

SOUZA GOHLA, João Pedro. *The Weaponization of Migration: A Powerful Instrument in the Hybrid Warfare Toolbox* [em linha]. APL Blog, Março 2025, NOVA Asylum Policy Lab, Faculdade de Ciências Sociais e Humanas, Universidade Nova de Lisboa, DOI:

Geddes, A., & Scholten, P. (2016). *The politics of migration and immigration in Europe*. SAGE Publications. <https://uk.sagepub.com/en-gb/eur/the-politics-of-migration-and-immigration-in-europe/book234419>

Greenhill, K. M. (2010). *Weapons of mass migration: Forced displacement, coercion, and foreign policy*. Cornell University Press. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7591/j.ctt7v70q>

Park, J. (2015, September 23). *Europe's migration crisis*. Council on Foreign Relations. <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/europe-s-migration-crisis>

Roehse, S., & Varma, T. (2024, October 24). *Understanding Europe's turn on migration*. Brookings. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/understanding-europe-s-turn-on-migration/>

Terry, K. (2021, April 8). *The EU-Turkey deal, five years on: A frayed and controversial but enduring blueprint*. Migration Policy Institute. <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/eu-turkey-deal-five-years-on>

United Nations General Assembly & United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. *Convention and protocol relating to the status of refugees*.

Wohlfeld, M., Nickels, B. P., & Jensen, B. (2024, July 12). *NATO and instrumentalized migration*. Center for Strategic and International Studies. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/nato-and-instrumentalized-migration>

