

## CHAPTER 7

# Weaponizing Migration in Illiberal Autocracies

## The 2015–2016 Russian Arctic Route and the Belarus–EU Border Crisis since 2021

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### Abstract

Thousands of asylum seekers have sought to cross the border to Europe from Russia to Norway and Finland during 2015–2016 and through Belarus since 2021. This migration at the EU's external borders encapsulates the geopolitical and weaponizing potential of global migration for authoritarian illiberal states. In this chapter, we argue that both the migration from Russia during the

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2015–2016 ‘migration crisis’ and the asylum seekers stranded at the Belarus–Polish border since 2021 reveal interesting perspectives on the EU’s and its member states’ responses to both migration and its instrumentalization, as well as on liberalism and illiberalism in global migration. Both the illiberal Russian and Belarusian states and the responses of Finland and Poland as EU member states feature key characteristics of illiberalism and demonstrate the contradictory character and the effectiveness of these attempts at coercive engineered migration.

**Keywords:** weaponizing migration, Russia, Belarus, EU, illiberal autocracies, border crisis, Arctic Route

## Introduction

Thousands of asylum seekers have sought to cross the border to Europe from Russia to Norway and Finland during 2015–2016 and through Belarus since 2021. This migration at the EU’s external border encapsulates the geopolitical and weaponizing potential of global migration for authoritarian illiberal states. Curiously, it also makes explicit the illiberal migration and border policies of the EU and its member states, indicating the multifaceted nature of migration and border management and complex relations between liberalism and illiberalism. By scrutinizing the ways that migration from Russia (2015–2016) and Belarus (since 2021) have taken place and how the two illiberal authoritarian states have instrumentalized migration as part of their foreign policy, we uncover interesting features of migration in foreign policymaking, as well as of the characteristics of liberalism and illiberalism. With a temporary ‘opening’ of the border for asylum seekers in northern Russia, Russia arguably tested Finland’s and the EU’s capacity to act during the 2015–2016 ‘migration crisis’. Five years later, Lukashenka’s government in Belarus went further by organizing transportation of third-country nationals to Belarus, forcefully pushing asylum seekers to the borders of Poland, Latvia, and Lithuania, and by force denying them the possibility

to return once their entry to the EU's territory was denied (e.g. Wilczek 2021).

Besides ordering its border guard to 'open' the state territorial border, a high-capacity state can also mobilize consulates, national airlines, travel agencies, and other state and non-state actors for the implementation of what Greenhill (2010, 2016) calls coercive engineered migration (abbreviated to CEM). In illiberal political contexts, long traditions of informal practices and corruption enable the mobilization of non-state actors and networks in the migration process, and the poor state of migrants' rights enables their treatment as pawns in a political game. In this chapter, we argue that both the migration from Russia during the 2015–2016 'migration crisis' and the asylum seekers stranded at the Belarus–Polish border since 2021 reveal interesting perspectives on the EU's and its member states' responses to both migration and its instrumentalization, as well as on liberalism and illiberalism in global migration. Both the illiberal Russian and Belarusian states and the responses of Finland and Poland as EU member states feature key characteristics of illiberalism and demonstrate the contradictory character and effectiveness of the CEM attempts.

The chapter follows the book's overall definition of illiberalism as the rejection of the superiority of the Western liberal-democratic model. State authorities in both Russia and Belarus have systematically emphasized their sovereignty, cultural cohesion, and uniqueness, demonstrating only selective commitment to international norms, democratic political institutions, and liberal policymaking. Illiberal societies are aggravated by unofficial networks, informality, corruption, and weak institutional trust. Russia and Belarus have long traditions of such practices, and their public opposition to Western liberal-democratic values has become a central element of state-making and nation-building. In these states, liberal elements have been present in pockets, against the dominant backdrop of illiberalism promoted by the Lukashenka and Putin regimes. The European Union, in contrast, has traditionally been considered a bastion of liberalism. However, illiberal tendencies have been strengthening in Europe in recent

years, especially in the field of migration policy (Natter 2021). The societal contradictions triggered by the 2015–2016 ‘refugee crisis’ in Europe and the EU’s and its member states’ attempts to prevent illegal border crossings illustrate the sensitive and political character of migration, and the formation of a strongly criticized ‘Fortress Europe’. These responses demonstrate the political vulnerability of European societies on occasions of the weaponization of migration and underline the arbitrary nature of the supposedly liberal character of the EU.

Russian and Belarusian rulers do not hide their anti-Western and illiberal attitudes. The chapter agrees with those who argue that Western discourses and practices during the 2015–2016 and 2021 ‘migration crises’ indicate the prevalence of tacit illiberalism in the sphere of migration governance by restricting migrants’ socioeconomic and political rights (Natter 2021). Although the European Union was founded on liberal values such as human dignity, democracy, freedom, and human rights, it has kept its borders closed for third-country migrants and even many asylum seekers. Within this broader context of liberalism and illiberalism, we ask: what do these ‘migration episodes’ of 2015–2016 and 2021 onwards tell us about the nexus of migration and illiberalism in the contexts of the authoritarian Russia and Belarus, and of the supposedly liberal EU and its member states? Does migration challenge or strengthen illiberalism?

To answer the above questions, the chapter draws on secondary sources and a qualitative analysis of primary sources consisting of state-affiliated and independent media reports and official statements by state authorities. The study uses material published in Finland, Russia, Belarus, Poland, and the European Union, making a many-sited platform for the analysis. In the case of Russia, the study is based primarily on material and findings drawing attention to the ‘narrow conception of security’ in the Finnish discourses of the Arctic Route migration, and informal practices and the weak rule of law in Russia as a background to this migration. The case of Belarus demonstrates Lukashenka’s illiberal authoritarian regime and how it utilized migration to put pressure

on the EU. This was a textbook example of CEM, but Europe's response provides an insight into the hypocritical character of the liberal EU and the rare success in resisting the coercive attempt (Greenhill 2016). While Finland's public discussion on the Arctic Route focused solely on geopolitics, hybrid influence, and political solution with Russia, Poland's response went further. It sent armed soldiers to the border, built a barbed-wire border fence, and announced a state of emergency in its border municipalities. In both cases, migration was presented as a hybrid attack against Europe. Thus, Poland marginalized migration-related activism and demobilized the 'pro-migrant/refugee community' (Greenhill 2016, 31–32). In these contexts of the 'liberal' European Union, the responses were clearly illiberal—if not necessarily undemocratic (Natter 2021, 113).

### **Illiberalism, Authoritarian States, and the Weaponization of Migration**

The nexus between illiberalism, authoritarian governance, and the instrumentalization—or even weaponization—of migration is easily observable. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia and Belarus have developed into authoritarian states that question and challenge the hegemony of Western liberalism. Russia's current state ideology, emphasizing conservative values and anti-Western sentiments, has developed gradually since the late 1990s. The division between Western-oriented (*zapadniki*) and more conservative Eurasian ideologies, declaring Russia as a separate civilization in between Europe and Asia, has a long history in Russian political thought. Since the early 1990s, when the Russian state was looking for a new national idea, or a national ideology, the varied aspects of the past and possible paths of nationhood have been discussed. The Russian state has come to emphasize not only its separate civilization between the East and the West and its traditional values and conservatism but, increasingly, its role in a global movement against Western liberalism. In Belarus, the brief period of democratization in the early 1990s ended

when Lukashenka ascended to power and moved to consolidate his authoritarian rule, a process which was completed by the early 2000s (Wilson 2011). Anti-Westernism was one of the ideological underpinnings of Lukashenka's rule from early on and has only intensified in the aftermath of the mass protests that erupted in 2020 (Kazharski and Makarychev 2021).

Marlene Laruelle (2016) identifies different periods in the gradual elaboration of conservatism and anti-Western ideology in Russia's state posture. During the first years of 'patriotic centrism', when the state was still calling for stabilization and global revival, neither liberalism nor communism provided sufficient ground for a state ideology. The slow recovery of Russia's confidence in the 2000s, combined with the centralization of power, led to a gradual institutionalization of conservatism as a state posture. During Putin's second (2004–2008) and Medvedev's (2008–2012) presidential terms, the state utilized the Yeltsin-era economic and political chaos, colour revolutions in Georgia (2003) and Ukraine (2004), mass protests against the government in 2011–2012, and the prosecution of Pussy Riot as resources for anti-liberal and anti-Western politics. The 'conservative turn' in Russian politics has also signalled an increased reliance on the country's conservative electorate at the expense of urban liberal votes (Smyth and Soboleva 2014). Protesters tried to bring liberal voices to the centralized political atmosphere which has contributed to the rapid closing of the political space in Russia. With a clear fear of liberal political activism, the Russian government turned increasingly to patriotism, traditional values, and spirituality as primary values of Russianness. Since then, such interpretations have been supported by repressive legislation and pressure on civil society (Sharafutdinova 2014; Laine and Silvan 2021).

In Belarus, anti-Westernism was rooted in Lukashenka's battle against the nationalist and democratic opposition. Relations with Western states and institutions had deteriorated as early as 1996, when Lukashenka's usurpation of power was condemned in the West following the 1995 and 1996 referenda (Hill 2005). Although Belarus' relations with the West have since then witnessed several

‘thaws,’ Lukashenka’s anti-Western policies and authoritarian practices have persisted until the present day. In the aftermath of the contested presidential election of 2020, which President Lukashenka blamed on the West, Lukashenka’s anti-Westernism has gained new extremes. In September of that year, he claimed that the protests against him had been organized by the United States and ‘its satellites—Poland, Lithuania, the Czech Republic, and unfortunately, Ukraine,’ trying to organize a so-called ‘colour revolution’ with the goal of ‘violating our sovereignty and even our territorial integrity’ (Lukashenka, quoted in RFE/RL 2020). Russia’s support for Lukashenka’s government has increased in both rhetoric and practice since the summer of 2020, which stresses Belarus’ support for and proximity to Russia (Shraibman 2022).

Russia and Belarus have become personalist authoritarian states with power centralized in the hands of the presidents and their administrations. Such authoritarian regimes often turn to international law as a means of shielding themselves from criticism and actively promoting their illiberal projects, extending legal norms that exist alongside and compete with democratic principles (Ginsburg 2020). With a secondary interest in the rule of law and rule-based international order, such states may use any matters, including migration, as a means of ‘soft power’ in international relations. Kelly Greenhill (2010, 2016) even talks about the deliberate weaponization of migration, defined as the instrumentalization and intentional political use of migration as a foreign policy bargaining chip. For her, this CEM is a ‘weapon of a weak’: a tool for a relatively weak and most likely illiberal challenger that both overcomes the powerful target’s reluctance to negotiate and levels the playing field to achieve political, economic, or military goals (Greenhill 2016, 27–28). With migration as a political tool, states can threaten, intimidate, and blackmail other states with no direct involvement of military forces. They may cause tensions and contradictions and create crises with territorial or foreign policy aims. Even though Greenhill identifies over 50 different cases where migrants have been utilized as ‘weapons,’ she does admit that the ‘migration weapon’ does not always work. Yet, as

the ‘refugee crises’ of 2015–2016 and 2021 onwards on the borders of Russia and Belarus demonstrate, many European governments define geopolitics and migration as the primary issues of security and national defence. These were issues that were also to challenge the future of the entire European Union. The ‘illegal’ border crossings and the ‘uncontrolled’ migration created or facilitated by the EU’s neighbours challenged the sovereignty of states on one hand, and the EU’s and its member states’ integrity on the other. This made CEM at least a useful tool for generating crises and political confusion, even if this was not necessarily fully successful.

Greenhill’s explicit portrayal of migration as a ‘bomb’, a ‘weapon’, and a ‘weapon of mass destruction’ has faced strong criticism. Marder (2018) argues that such militaristic metaphors do not serve the intended purpose but dangerously weaponize (sic) migration and undermine the possible solutions to ‘the problem’. Such militarized concepts also leave little room for a more complex understanding of migration and refugees’ humanity and, as two of the authors of this chapter argue elsewhere (Virkkunen and Piipponen 2021a, 2021b), migrants’ own actorness. Keeping these limitations in mind, we argue that such metaphors may still clarify the important ways in which illiberal authoritarian states frame migration as an instrument of international politics. For our scrutiny, what are especially interesting are the ways that the Russian and Belarusian cases relate to the usefulness of CEM despite differences in responses to it and in possibilities for measuring the complete success or failure of the cases (see Greenhill 2016, 30–31).

For this, Greenhill’s (2016, 4, 2010, 132) concept of ‘hypocrisy costs’ is particularly insightful. She suggests that the hypocrisy costs of weaponization are ‘symbolic political costs that can be imposed when there exists a real or perceived disparity between a professed commitment to liberal values and norms and demonstrated actions that contravene such a commitment’. In the context of the European Union, Russia and Belarus have repeatedly addressed the *de facto* disparity between the EU’s overt commitment to the pronounced common values of human dignity,



freedom, democracy, equality, rule of law, and human rights and the actual realization of those values in the EU's practices, and at its external borders in particular. Such claims correspond to broader critiques pointing to the de facto human rights violations of the EU, its member states, and its institutions (e.g. Frontex) in the Mediterranean Sea.

Fakhry, Parkes, and Rácz (2022) argue that migration can be instrumentalized as a 'cheap' strategy of international politics and as a tool of geopolitics, nation-building, counter-diplomacy, and hybrid warfare. Within this framework, the instrumentalization of migration is a part of broader hybrid action that, according to the European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats (2022), 'is characterized by ambiguity as hybrid actors blur the usual borders of international politics and operate in the interfaces between external and internal, legal and illegal, and peace and war'. That ambiguity combines conventional but also alternative forms of politics such as disinformation campaigns, intervention in political debates or elections, interruptions of or attacks against critical infrastructure, cyberoperations, criminal activities, and even the use of the military. What makes migration instrumentalization different from 'classical' hybrid tools is its explicit nature. This instrumentalization becomes significant only if it is open and the public clearly links it with the perpetrator's capacity to stop it (Fakhry, Parkes and Rácz 2022, 10). This was exactly what happened in February 2016 when Russia decided to end the use of the Arctic Route to Finland, after governmental and presidential negotiations between Finnish and Russian authorities. What is curious is that the strategy of 'crisis generation' (Greenhill 2016, 28) was employed by an actor that is supposedly stronger than its target.

### **The Arctic Route from Russia to Finland**

In the first case study of this chapter, we analyse the so-called Arctic Route from Russia to Finland in late 2015 and early 2016. This migratory route through Russia's Arctic areas to the EU

emerged during the so-called ‘migration crises of Europe’. The route appeared when asylum seekers were, for the first time, able to enter Finland and Norway, and ultimately the EU and its Schengen area, through the suddenly ‘opened’ border crossing points in the Russian north. First the route ran through Moscow to the city of Murmansk in northern Russia and, further, to the Russian–Norwegian border and the Storskog border station in Norway. When the Norwegian authorities reached an agreement with Russia in November 2015 to not allow people without visas to cross the border to Norway (Moe and Rowe 2016), the asylum seekers turned towards Finland. Despite decades-old state agreements and existing practices of border management, Russian border officers allowed asylum seekers to exit Russia and enter the Finnish border stations of Raja-Jooseppi and Salla. Practically none of them had a valid Schengen visa.

During 2015–2016, Finland received about 38,000 asylum seekers. The majority entered Finland through the EU’s internal borders, mainly through the Western Haparanda–Tornio border crossing point between Sweden and Finland. Less than 5 per cent of them (1,756 individuals) entered Finland through the Arctic Route and Russia (Virkkunen and Piipponen 2021a, 248). The use of the EU’s external border in the north to enter the Schengen area was a new phenomenon but, as with the western border, it was part of the migratory movements to Europe from the Middle East, Asia, and Africa (Nerg and Järvenkylä 2019). Despite this broader context and the small number of asylum seekers arriving in Finland through the Arctic Route, the public and political discussion narrowly emphasized the route to be a threat caused by Russia. It was seen as a state-orchestrated test in which the Russian Federation was instrumentalizing migrants and asylum seekers to further its hybrid influence.

The ongoing broader migratory contexts were missing from the discussions, e.g., those of Russian and European migration processes and policies, Russia as a migrant-receiving country in international migration, migrants’ and asylum seekers’ actorness in the migration process, corruption and weak rule of law, and

the influences of informal networks of helpers, facilitators, and smugglers. The complex migratory phenomenon was analysed, handled, and solved narrowly as a geopolitical and border security issue. Next, we connect the instrumentalization discourse of the route to the aforementioned contextual and migratory characteristics. This helps in recognizing the potential space for instrumentalizing migration in Russia and on the route by making the migratory processes unpredictable and intentionally irregular.

In our study of the Arctic Route and CEM, we use media and other public reports. This material is also scrutinized with reference to our earlier empirical studies based on the application protocols of those who applied for asylum in Finland after entering the country. Two authors of this chapter have explained the protocol material in their earlier studies on the Arctic Route (Virkkunen, Piipponen, and Reponen 2019; Piipponen and Virkkunen 2020; Virkkunen and Piipponen 2021a, 2021b).

The Finnish public and political discussions portrayed the Arctic Route as an example of what Greenhill calls CEM by emphasizing that Russia used displaced persons as non-military instruments of state-level coercion and an element of international politics. However, instead of recognizing a clear and concrete objective for Russia's behaviour, the Finnish discussion evolved around Russia's hybrid influence, intimidation, and testing of EU's and Finland's response to the 'European migration crisis'. Questions related to border management were especially puzzling in the Finnish discussions: why did cooperation with the Russian Border Service suddenly fail, and why were migrants allowed to travel to and through the Russian border zone to Finland, and earlier to Norway, without valid Schengen visas (Nerg and Järvenkylä 2019; Skön 2017; Moe and Rowe 2016)? This question arose from decades-old regulations of the border and border crossings, as well as well-functioning cooperation between the Finnish Border Guard and the Russian Border Service. The two border services had since the Soviet times developed a pragmatic and trustful professional relationship, performed through regular interaction along the strictly guarded Finnish–Russian border (Laine 2015,

133; Niemenkari 2002, 12–13). Antti Honkamaa (2016) in the Finnish tabloid newspaper *Ilta-lehti* wrote:

Russian authorities are involved. Without the permission of the FSB, nothing happens at the Russian border. Local border guards and other authorities do what they are told to do, they do not make initiatives. According to the Finnish News Agency STT, asylum seekers are directed by the Kandalaksha city hall.

Even Minister of the Interior of Finland Petteri Orpo argued for the involvement of Russia: ‘Since 1944 and until 2016, Finland and Russia had a peaceful border. So, something exceptional happened. And this happened only at the two northernmost borders, and there was the Norway episode before. This could not be a coincidence’ (Nerg and Järvenkylä 2019, 134).

Also, the cessation of the migration route in February 2016 happened immediately after President Putin’s public address to the FSB, in which he spoke of the ‘necessity to strengthen the control of refugee flows to Russia and through Russia to Europe’ (Putin 2016). The Finnish Ministries of the Interior and Foreign Affairs, together with the Finnish Border Guard, had been negotiating with their Russian counterparts for months (Huhta 2016a; 2016b). Yet only negotiation at the highest political level—the meeting of the presidents—brought a solution: a temporary six-month restriction for the two northernmost border crossing stations between Finland and Russia. Starting in April, only the citizens of Finland, Russia, and Belarus could then approach and cross the border (Nerg and Järvenkylä 2019, 134).

Did the Russian state really plan the Arctic Route and make asylum seekers use it, or did it simply use the opportunities provided by the dynamic migratory movements in Europe and beyond? The Russian border guard ‘opened’ the border in late 2015, as many of the migrants in the protocol material expressed it, and ended up ‘closing’ it in February 2016, before the formal restriction came into effect. However, based on our earlier study of asylum application documents and different analyses of the route (Virkkunen, Piipponen, and Reponen 2019; Piipponen and

Virkkunen 2020; Virkkunen and Piipponen 2021a, 2021b), we argue that the Arctic Route was also a part of the broader global migration in which migrants, smugglers, and other helpers took advantage of the flight routes, relatively easy visa regulations, and travel agencies. In addition, rumours and hearsay about the route made it quickly a good option.

In contrast to how literature on CEM (Greenhill 2010, 2016) often lends support to migrants' passive role, the Arctic Route demonstrated that it is important not to downplay the actorness of the migrants and the role of the many other actors who made the route function. The repeated news and pictures of people and routes heading towards Europe through the Mediterranean and Russia, as well as images of Finland as a peaceful country of equality, human rights, education work, and welfare, lived a life of their own in different media and networks. All of this was enough to instruct and trick possible migrants to the north. Overall, migrants considered the Arctic Route safer and cheaper compared with the dangerous and, at that time, already very crowded Mediterranean and Balkan routes (see also Moe and Rowe 2016). The Russian state did not need to do much more than organize it so that migrants were exceptionally allowed to approach the border zone. Authorities did not systematically organize trips, transport migrants either to the north or to the border, or use violence or explicit coercion.

Even with this minor input, Russia managed to take full advantage of what Greenhill calls hypocrisy costs and argued that the route was actually the EU's own failure. The Russian prime minister at that time, Dmitry Medvedev, assessed the route from the perspective of the European human rights pact. According to him, Russia was not authorized to stop the migrants from traveling through Russia to the European Union and applying for asylum in 'the West': stopping their travel would have violated the regulations on human rights (Afhüppe and Brüggmann 2016; Huhta 2016b). At the same time, any scrutiny of how the migration policy of Russia had been implemented hardly lent support

to the view that the country had given such serious consideration to human rights.

In the context of Russia's 'informality environment' (Urinboyev 2016, 74) and the weak rule of law, non-elite labour migrants and refugees, whose life is characterized by their irregular status, need to discover strategies to cope with abusive authorities and business owners and to find solutions to their precarious everyday problems. Constantly changing laws and bureaucratic procedures and widespread corruption create a complex immigration legal regime that makes it difficult for migrants to follow the regulations. This pushes them even more into domains of irregularity and makes them vulnerable to cheating authorities, different kinds of racketeers, and random document checks by the police (Urinboyev 2021; Malakhov and Simon 2018; Nikiforova and Brednikova 2018; Reeves 2013). Such precarious conditions influenced migrants' decisions to join the transit migrants of the Arctic Route in 2015–2016 after living for years, even decades, in Russia.

The Arctic Route is a good example of instrumentalized migration. It also shows that narrowly framed securitization and weaponization narratives in Finland contributed to the hypocrisy costs based on the discrepancy between the declared liberal values on the one hand and the restrictive migration policy on the other hand. Such an approach silences the fact that irregular migration is a humanitarian matter combining different layers of security, actorness, and policymaking as well. The CEM was at least useful, even if rating its success is more challenging in this case than in the other cases that Greenhill (2016, 30–31) rates in her studies around the world. It is difficult to verify what was Russia's ultimate objective in relation to the Arctic Route in 2015–2016. Four years after the opening of the Arctic Route at the Finnish–Russian border, a similar migration phenomenon took place at the Belarus–Polish border in 2021, where Belarus took the instrumentalization of migration to a new level.

## **Belarus's Textbook Case of State-Generated Migration Crisis**

The migration crisis on Belarus' borders with EU member states Lithuania and Poland was a textbook example of CEM, with tens of thousands of asylum seekers trying to enter the European Union via Belarus in the summer and autumn of 2021. What triggered the crisis was Belarusian authorities' promotion of Belarus as a gateway to the European Union. Lukashenka's administration relaxed its visa policy and organized direct flights from Middle Eastern cities to Minsk. Information about the new 'safe and easy' route to Europe started immediately to circulate in social media networks popular within the migrant community. Once migrants arrived at Minsk airport, state authorities assisted them in reaching the EU border and even crossing it, while complicating migrants' return from the border zones to Belarusian cities and their countries of origin (Łubiński 2022). At first, Belarusian officials directed most migrants to the border with Lithuania. However, after the Lithuanian Ministry of Interior issued an order legalizing the pushback of all 'irregularly' migrating people to Belarus on 11 August, Poland became the primary target. Its response was to declare a state of emergency on the border zone, which blocked aid groups, media, and civil society groups from entering the area and criminalized any attempts to help people stranded in the forest. The pushback was enabled by the adoption of new national legislation violating EU and international laws which state that anyone seeking protection must be given access to the asylum process (Bielecka 2022). Although Latvia, too, neighbours with Belarus, its border did not become a site of confrontation, possibly given the early restrictive measures introduced by its government.

The situation deteriorated in the autumn of 2021, as a growing number of migrants found themselves trapped in the border zone, unprepared for the approaching winter and inaccessible to organizations delivering humanitarian aid. News reports about migrants, including children, were spreading around the world, and criticism of the illiberal migration policy of Lithuania

and Poland increased, forcing EU officials to address migrants' plight by both restricting the routes to Belarus and engaging with Lukashenka. Although some migrants still attempt to cross to Europe via Belarus, the route lost much of its popularity when EU officials succeeded in pressuring Türkiye to restrict individuals of certain nationalities from buying tickets for flights to Belarus (Roth and O'Carroll 2021). In addition, after phone calls with Germany's Chancellor Angela Merkel, Lukashenka granted the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and other international organizations access to provide humanitarian aid at the border and expand voluntary return opportunities to those stranded there (IOM 2021). However, given that Lukashenka's demands—the compelling objective of the lifting of sectoral sanctions, to be discussed below—were not met, we argue that the case is a rare instance of the *unsuccessful* application of CEM (Greenhill 2016, 30).

The publicly available source material, consisting of reports by media outlets, non-governmental organizations, and international organizations, statements by the officials of Belarus, Lithuania, Poland, and the European Union, and migrants' accounts, suggest that Belarusian authorities used migrants to generate leverage vis-à-vis its neighbours and the EU in the context of worsening sanctions. As Maxim Samorukov (2021) argued at the time, Lukashenka sought 'to use the only language he understands—force—to try to reopen dialogue with the EU'. Following Greenhill (2010, 2016), Lukashenka resorted to CEM because it yielded him 'relative strength vis-à-vis a more powerful target state' (Greenhill 2016, 28) quickly and at a relatively low cost (Greenhill 2016, 29). Although Lukashenka's Belarus had never been a reliable partner for the EU, the post-2014 rapprochement between Belarus and the EU resulted in increased collaboration across sectors (Preiherman 2020), including in border management. Indeed, October 2016 witnessed the launch of the EU–Belarus Mobility Partnership and a gradual increase in cross-border collaboration. In July 2020, Belarus–EU visa facilitation and readmission agreements entered into force, 'represent[ing] an important step in strengthening



the EU's engagement with the Belarusian people and civil society' (European Commission 2020). Although Belarus had been a bystander during Europe's 'migration crisis' of 2015–2016, Lukashenka's statements in 2021, analysed below, suggest that he had identified migration as an Achilles heel of the EU. What is more, using vulnerable people, first and foremost political prisoners, as pawns in negotiations with the EU has been Lukashenka's strategy for decades (Bosse 2012).

The post-2014 thaw in EU–Belarus relations ended in August 2020, when Lukashenka claimed victory in a rigged presidential election and ordered unprecedentedly violent repression of the peaceful mass-scale protests that the election instantly sparked. The EU's response was 'slow and timid' (Korosteleva and Petrova 2021, 130). Although EU officials were quick to condemn Lukashenka's actions, it was the officials of Baltic states and Poland that were the first to take measures against Belarus (Korosteleva and Petrova 2021). The lack of a unified response was puzzling given the EU's long-term commitment to the promotion of liberal values in its neighbourhood. Instead of introducing sanctions, EU representatives sought to negotiate with the Lukashenka government and convince him to engage in 'inclusive national dialogue' for weeks after the outbreak of mass violence on 9 August. EU sanctions were adopted late due to Cyprus' bargaining, and the first three packets targeted only Belarusian officials and business-people. Lukashenka himself was added to the sanctions list only in the second packet in mid-November 2020, when the protest movement had been crushed all but completely (Korosteleva and Petrova 2021; Leukavets 2022).

In June 2021, EU–Belarus relations worsened still further. On 23 May, Ryanair flight number 4978 en route from one EU country to another was forced to land in Minsk. Upon entering Belarusian airspace, the captain of the plane was informed about a possible bomb on board and escorted by Belarusian fighter jets to land at Minsk airport. After landing, Belarusian security officials detained the opposition journalist Raman Pratasevich and his companion Safiya Sapega, who were onboard (Leukavets 2022).

The operation caused outrage in the EU and accelerated negotiations over the fourth package of sanctions. For the first time, the EU introduced sanctions that targeted entire sectors of the economy: oil products and potash salts, Belarus's most important sources of income.

Based on the timeline of events and statements, it was the upcoming introduction of sectoral sanctions—called by the Belarusian leader an element of hybrid war waged by the West against Belarus—that triggered Lukashenka to enact the plan to deliver Europe a repeat of the 2015–2016 ‘migration crisis.’ While EU leaders were meeting in Lisbon to agree on the sanctions three days after the landing of the Ryanair flight, Lukashenka threatened: ‘We stopped drugs and migrants. Now you will eat them and catch them yourselves’ (quoted in Dettmer 2021). As demonstrated by Greenhill (2010), such threats have been used with varying degrees of success recurrently, also vis-à-vis the EU. As the threats alone were not enough to elicit concessions, Lukashenka moved to the next phase of CEM, going from words to action (Greenhill 2016, 28). In May, the Belarusian state-owned travel agency Tsentrkurort partnered with travel agencies in the Middle East to provide potential migrants with hunting tours in Belarus (Hebel and Reuter 2021). According to the investigative report of independent Belarusian news site Reform.by (2021), in August 2021 a package tour from Iraqi Kurdistan to Belarus cost US\$560–950, inclusive of flight tickets, a visa, insurance, hotel accommodation, and a few excursions. At the same time, the number of flights to Minsk increased. Belarus’ national carrier, Belavia, had just one weekly flight from Istanbul to Minsk in February–March 2021. By July it had two, while at the beginning of August, Iraqi Airways started flying directly to Minsk from Baghdad, Basra, Erbil, and Sulaymaniyah and FlyBaghdad from Baghdad (Euro-radio 2021). Tourist visas were issued on-site at Minsk airport. In November 2021, Oksana Tereshchenko (quoted in *Belorusy i rynok* 2021), responsible for the international economic activities of Minsk airport, said that the airport was preparing for new flight connections from cities in Algeria, Ethiopia, Iran, and Morocco.

Investigative reports suggest that Belarusian state officials were directly involved in bringing migrants to the border with Lithuania and Poland. According to the investigation of Lithuanian media outlet LTR (2021), arrivals at Minsk airport were taken first to hotels and, after a few days, to the border, being told that another car would be waiting for them on the other side. Some accounts point to the decisive role of Belarusian border guards, while others suggest that Belarus quickly became a hub for international smugglers, who charged thousands of dollars for assisting a migrant in reaching the European Union (LTR 2021; Reform.by 2021; Hebel and Reuter 2021). In November, Lukashenka admitted in a BBC interview that it was ‘absolutely possible’ that his forces had helped migrants cross into Poland (Rosenberg 2021). There is an interesting parallel between his comment ‘We’re Slavs. We have hearts’ (Rosenberg 2021) and Türkiye’s President Erdogan’s remarks about his ‘refugee-friendly’ policy towards Syrian refugees being rooted in the Islamic tradition, ‘generosity and brotherhood’ (Jennequin 2020, 2). While Lukashenka’s main objective was, arguably, to compel the EU to come to the negotiation table and to level the playing field (Greenhill 2016, 27–28), the utilization of CEM also brought some tangible economic benefits for the government. While some Belarusians did see the appearance of migrants as a business opportunity, Sauer (2021) suggests that others were irritated by them.

Latvian, Lithuanian, and Polish politicians and officials used the undeniable evidence of Lukashenka’s agency as a justification to frame the crisis as a ‘hybrid attack’ and thus of their decision to resort to illiberal migration practices on the border: erecting razor-wire fences, reinforcing their border guards to prevent migrants and asylum seekers from entering their territory, pushing back migrants, and refusing to ensure regular asylum process for those who had entered their territories (Margesson, Mix, and Welt 2021). The rhetoric and the policy that followed were accepted by both the majority of the countries’ domestic constituencies and EU officials, thus succeeding in what Greenhill (2016, 32) calls ‘issue redefinition’. In categorizing these migrants

as victims of Lukashenka's gamble (Natter 2021, 113), authorities across Europe succeeded in demobilizing and marginalizing the pro-migration camp, which in turn prevented the split in society sought by the Belarusian leader (Greenhill 2016, 32). The European Union, too, endorsed the rhetoric of the border crisis as a 'hybrid attack' promoted by the Eastern member states. For example, during her speech on 18 September 2021, Ursula von der Leyen (2021) referred to the border crisis as 'a hybrid attack to destabilize Europe'. Indeed, Poland proved to be well prepared to respond to a CEM with an illiberal arsenal. Pushbacks of migrants who managed to cross into the country and the construction of border fences paralleled the border management strategies of illiberal autocracies such as China (Greenhill 2016, 33).

We argue that the framing of the border crisis as a hybrid attack was a narrative tool that enabled European actors to minimize or outright nullify the hypocrisy costs that its illiberal response in the crisis generated, thus preventing societal polarization that would have pushed them to make concessions to Lukashenka. The Polish authorities did attempt to apply issue redefinition (Greenhill 2016, 32) and frame migrants as 'terrorists' for the domestic constituency in order to ensure that their voters would remain supportive and unified over the illiberal government policy. However, the attempt failed, as even its conservative and government-supportive Catholic Church criticized the border pushbacks. Yet the mobilization of the pro-migration/refugee camp remained marginal because of the dehumanizing hybrid attack narrative combined with the limited amount of information from the border zone, given legislation that restricted media and NGO access to the area. There was no public outcry over the government's utilization of CEM from the side of Belarusian society, arguably because it had been thoroughly repressed in the aftermath of the 2020 protest wave. For example, the Belarusian Red Cross, which supposedly provided some relief and assistance in the border zone, did not criticize the government given its status under the control of the Lukashenka administration.

The Belarusian migration crisis demonstrates that Lukashenka's highly repressive authoritarian state was fully capable of exploiting and manipulating the migration outflows created by others (Greenhill 2016, 25). For the EU, it proved to be near impossible both to compel Lukashenka to put an end to the CEM and to convince the migrants to stay at home. At the same time, outsourcing the issue by dealing with third parties—the migrant-sending countries—seemed to be an effective tool in cutting the route. Although some of the EU's Eastern member states criticized Angela Merkel for offering Lukashenka symbolic recognition by negotiating the resolution of the border crisis with him (Greenhill 2016, 29), the fact that the EU's sectoral sanctions not only stayed in place but were intensified signifies a failure in Lukashenka's application of CEM (on the coding of successes and failures, see Greenhill 2016, 20).

## Conclusions

This chapter discusses the nexus of migration and illiberalism from the perspective of Russia and Belarus, two authoritarian states in the EU's immediate neighbourhood. In the analysis, we apply Greenhill's (2010, 2016) notion of coercive engineered migration (CEM), which captures well the ways that migrants and displaced people can be used as non-military instruments of state-level coercion. According to Greenhill, liberal states are ideal targets for CEM due to their supposed adherence to liberal ideals, whereas illiberal states have little to lose when violating the norms of universal human rights by applying CEM. They are already 'viewed with suspicion and contempt by the most powerful members of the international community' (Greenhill, 2016, 29).

We argue that although the 2015–2016 Arctic Route migration from Russia to Finland and the ongoing migration episode at the Belarus–Polish border seem to differ significantly, they are in the end similar. As examples of CEM they make explicit the significance of instrumentalized migration, and the nexus of migration with liberalism and illiberalism. Both cases demonstrate the

potential that migration may have in autocratic and illiberal states for achieving their foreign-political objectives. Russia and Belarus shared a common target—the explicitly liberal European Union and, to some extent, the West in general.

The ‘hybrid attack’ rhetoric that Finland and Poland applied dehumanized migrants and asylum seekers who appeared at the border. Rather than building on their supposedly liberal values and ideology, both states took a securitization approach in which not only the actions of the illiberal states Russia and Belarus were countered but also international commitments regarding the rights to apply for asylum. Poland especially was criticized for its illiberal responses that limited domestic civil society organizations’ access to migrants for humanitarian aid and ability to exercise their democratic right to demonstrate and act against Poland’s illiberal—and illegal—border policy. These actions made the hypocrisy of the liberal West explicit, just as was intended by its illiberal authoritarian neighbours.

In 2015–2016, Finland allowed the entry of asylum seekers from Russia until the negotiated political deal with Russia to stop letting third-country nationals to the border. However, public and political pressure forced the government to restrict migration and negotiate a deal with Russia. Public discussion presented asylum seekers as illegal and as passive objects of Russia’s hybrid operation. In Lithuania and Poland, authorities went even further to apply systematic pushbacks. The narrow security and border protection narrative ignored the broader global migratory context—the humanitarian aspects of migration and migrants’ own actor-ness. EU member states and the EU itself made illiberal Faustian bargains that generated hypocrisy costs at both the international and national levels. European policymakers and citizens failed to act according to their allegedly liberal values.

Related to the above, it is clear that the success and failure of CEM is not as straightforward as the literature may suggest. Given the opaque characteristics of authoritarian politics, it is not possible to know for certain the ultimate objectives of authoritarian regimes, or the role of security organizations or hidden,

yet very common, international crime and corruption. Whereas Russia seemed to succeed in creating some societal contradictions in Finland during 2015–2016 by opening the border and, as a result, contributing to the ongoing ‘migration crisis’, Belarus seemed to fail in both destabilizing Poland and bargaining with the EU regarding sanctions. The securitizing approach to migration worked against the Belarusian autocrat: it gave the EU and its member states clear evidence of the hybrid attack that allowed them to justify their own illiberal methods of migration control and border management. Overall, Russia and Belarus succeeded in triggering illiberal sentiments in European societies.

The usefulness of CEM is also demonstrated in the fact that Russia again opened its border for asylum seekers to enter Finland in November 2023, and in how CEM continues at the Belarus–Polish border. And now, Finland is on the way to even more illiberal responses. The Finnish–Russian land border is temporarily closed, there is no possibility to apply for asylum at the border, and once opened and new legislation is approved, pushbacks will become legal and are expected to be used also in Finland. Framing asylum seekers as a threat and the securitization of migration strengthen illiberalism in the seemingly liberal Europe, rather than challenging it.

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