

HYBRID ACTORS AND THE INSTRUMENTALISATION OF MIGRATION

A Selection of Possible Targets

*Strategic Analysis | Hybrid Threats & European Security
The Praevisio Institute For Geopolitical Affairs
Johannes Gummert*

The concept of hybrid warfare is widespread today, whether in media reports, academia or the actual use of hybrid attacks. The European Union (EU) in particular has been confronted with hybrid attacks and threats in its geopolitical space for some time. These include, in particular, various types of sabotage, airspace violations, nuclear threats and disinformation. However, in recent years, Belarus and Russia in particular have increasingly used so-called instrumentalised migration (IM), which is also a hybrid means of influence, against the EU, leading to a series of migration crises, mainly at the eastern EU external borders of Poland, Estonia, Lithuania and Latvia. The aims of sabotage and disinformation are sufficiently clear. However, what hybrid actors hope to achieve by exploiting migration is not necessarily obvious and often not immediately apparent. This section therefore provides a brief overview of some of the objectives that hybrid actors pursue with this hybrid attack vector. Since Russia in particular has used IM in recent years, this hybrid actor serves as an accompanying example here.

Overburdening of Asylum Systems

From the EU's perspective, the consequences of the Syrian civil war manifested themselves in particular in the form of an unprecedented refugee crisis triggered by the large number of refugees arriving in Europe to escape the war. The asylum management systems of EU countries were not prepared for such a crisis. Southern Europe was particularly affected. However, during the crisis, when migration flows were mainly across the Mediterranean, up to 5,000 Syrian, Afghan and Iraqi refugees suddenly crossed the Arctic Circle border from Russia to Norway to apply for asylum there (Pavlakis, 2021). These irregular border crossings were initiated by the Russian authorities. This was an attempt to spread the consequences of the refugee crisis to less affected European countries. Moscow wanted to use the war situation and the flow of refugees to Europe to overwhelm the Finnish and Norwegian authorities by opening the otherwise strictly controlled Russian border crossings (Elonheimo, 2021). The EU's inability to cope with the refugee crisis should be exploited and exacerbated in order to weaken it in the long term. Russia has therefore attempted to deliberately exacerbate the crisis in European migration management (Dyner, 2024). In 2021, Russia and Belarus engineered an artificial migration crisis on the eastern external border of the EU. Among other things, Belarusian authorities eased visa regulations for people from the Middle East and

arranged for domestic travel agencies to offer transport as part of a new migration route (Bryjka, 2021). Foreign airlines, smuggling networks and Russian and Belarusian authorities were also integrated into this artificial migration route, with the latter forcing irregular border crossings despite border fortifications and actively assisting the migrants in the process. Here, too, the aim was to deliberately confront EU countries with migration crises, the resolution of which ultimately lay in the hands of the EU.

A fundamental goal that hybrid actors seek to achieve with IM is therefore to overload the asylum systems of the target countries and confront them with crisis situations, thereby forcing political and economic destabilisation. The intention in the narrower sense is to use instrumentalised waves of migration to force destination countries to expend resources and take measures that they would not otherwise need for border protection. The sudden influx of thousands of immigrants is intended to paralyse operations, but also to necessitate the deployment of additional personnel to deal with the crisis (Bryjka, 2021). The destination countries are thus forced to devote more resources to border security and crisis management. This concerns additional border personnel, administrative officials, and the expansion of physical border security in the form of fences, barricades, border posts, and border surveillance. Particularly socially and politically important domains are to be targeted and overwhelmed. Orchestrated influxes are intended to test and challenge the capabilities of key service providers, especially border, police, military, judicial, health and security personnel (Bryjka, 2021).

Obtaining Critical Information

By instrumentalising migration, Russia created migration crises that, in typical hybrid warfare fashion, remained below the threshold of major military escalation. Nevertheless, these were political crises that had to be overcome. The manner in which they were overcome plays a decisive role for the hybrid actor, as it can gain information from this that can in turn be used for further actions. It has already been suggested that Belarusian President Lukashenko wanted to use the 2021 migration crisis to test EU border security for future operations involving instrumentalised waves of migration (Fakhry, 2022). Information about how to deal with sudden waves of migration can help hybrid actors to adapt and improve the operational procedures of this attack vector. However, such a test can also be used for the operational planning of conventional actions. When a migration crisis escalates due to violent riots at the border and destruction of border infrastructure, a hybrid actor can force the opponent to deploy its military to maintain border security and national security. In the course of this, important information about the course of the military operation can be gathered. In the past, there have been repeated violent clashes between border guards and irregular migrants at Poland's external EU border. During the migration crisis of 2021, the Polish government therefore decided to send soldiers to the border to support border guards (Bryjka, 2024). Similarly, the Lithuanian and Latvian governments deployed military and police forces to their border areas with Belarus (Bryjka, 2024).

In this regard, it has been claimed that the crisis that was initiated may have been an attempt by Russia to test which military units could be deployed operationally in eastern Poland, how quickly and by what routes equipment and soldiers could be transferred, how logistical support could be organised, and how large the forces could be in terms of troop numbers and weapons (Dyner, 2024a). Information such as this could be incorporated into the planning of future hybrid actions or attacks using military means. In this sense, the information gained from the

IM's hybrid operations could be used by the hybrid actor to familiarise its own armed forces with the operational behaviour of the opposing forces in order to gain advantages in a possible conventional operation. The IM would act as a kind of trigger, forcing the target country to disclose military information and accept the enemy's intelligence gathering. Of course, this would not necessarily involve intelligence information. However, Russia was able to use this tactic to force EU countries to concentrate police and military forces in border regions, while closely observing their procedures, response times and *modus operandi* (Bryjka, 2024). This information can be extremely useful for hybrid actors.

Social Division

Migration is an issue that provokes conflicting opinions within a society and between its social and political groups. Rising numbers of refugees in Western Europe are particularly associated with a polarisation of anti-immigration attitudes (van der Brug, 2021). Populations can be understood by hybrid actors as elements that have destabilising effects on their states. Since populations are an important part of political discourse, especially in democratic states, they can become targets for hybrid operations in the form of IM. IM is a suitable means to this end, as it allows hybrid actors to exploit the political explosiveness of migration and use the origin of migrants to fuel potential conflict among the population. This is precisely why hybrid actors select migrants from specific ethnic, religious or demographic groups — such as young men — who can have a polarising effect on the target country (Fakhry, 2022). With the orchestrated immigration of migrants from culturally foreign countries, a hybrid actor can destabilise the target countries' populations by stirring up domestic political conflicts over immigration. Political and social tensions in the EU arise primarily from the influx of people from non-European and non-Christian cultures. For this reason, Russia exploited people from Africa and the Middle East in particular. In this way, it focused in particular on creating tensions between the local populations and the migrants who had arrived, leading to the rise of right-wing extremist and populist governments with a pro-Russian agenda (McBride, 2023).

The aim of the hybrid actor may therefore be to politically divide societies and the party landscape of the target countries through the forced immigration of foreigners, thereby weakening governments in terms of domestic policy. In the most extreme case, a hybrid actor would use IM to attempt to force a change of government without resorting to conventional means. A particularly large wave of migration is not necessarily required for this. The effectiveness of IM depends less on size and more on the policies of the destination country and the attitudes of its population, with the origin and religious and cultural identity of migrants being a key criterion (Greenhill, 2024). Ultimately, every migration crisis divides the society of the destination country into opponents and supporters of immigration (Greenhill, 2024). If the target countries react too harshly or too gently to the irregular border crossings initiated by the hybrid actor, an immigration crisis can escalate in terms of domestic politics and society. A general rejection of migrants would be tantamount to inciting immigration advocates, while accepting all migrants would be tantamount to inciting immigration opponents, which would fuel any existing socio-political disputes. The Russian IM has also been repeatedly linked to the goal of creating domestic political tensions and uncertainty in EU countries in order to gain a certain degree of political control over the societies of European states. Secret service documents from the Kremlin suggest that Russia believes it can gain control over elections in Europe by controlling migration routes, either by curbing the influx or flooding countries with migrants (Greenhill, 2024).

Infiltration

When using IM, control and decision-making power lie solely with the hybrid actor. This problem was also recognised in the migration crises orchestrated by Russia. One of Russia's key advantages is that Russian officials were able to decide not only how many people would cross the border into the EU, but also who would do so and when (Praks, 2024). This applies to any hybrid actor who uses IM. After all, EU states have often suspected that infiltrated migrants were assigned tasks by the Russian secret service, or that at least attempts were made to recruit them for such purposes. Fears like these were based on the knowledge that Russian secret services have a decades-long tradition of training extremists, separatists and proxy militias in the Soviet Union, which could be fuelled by migration crises (Kuzio, 2021). There is therefore at least the possibility that a hybrid actor may intend to use migration flows as human cover with the aim of moving selected individuals or small groups to the target countries. Irregular migration flows are therefore considered an ideal cover for smuggling in agents, spies, saboteurs, agitators, partisans, activists and terrorists (Schmid, 2024). The European border protection agency Frontex also concludes that, in addition to terrorists, especially during times of increasing tension between Western and Eastern Europe, saboteurs, agitators and intelligence agents could also be among migrants who have entered the country illegally (Frontex, 2024). The goal of a hybrid actor could therefore be to smuggle individuals into the target countries who would then carry out one-off attacks from within the enemy state. It would also be conceivable to use IM in the target countries to establish networks or terrorist cells that would later carry out various actions, including sabotage, contract killings, attacks on critical infrastructure or political activism. With regard to the EU, it is therefore also argued that, due to Russian IM, there is a risk of social conditions arising in Europe that could be exploited by external actors (Schmid, 2024).

Summary

In addition to the typical goal of a hybrid actor who systematically exploits migration to overload the asylum system of the destination country in order to plunge it into a migration crisis and thus destabilise it, there are other goals that may not be obvious at first glance. If a hybrid actor forces the target country to deploy its military in order to maintain national security, national sovereignty and border security, military information may be disclosed that the actor intends to use for future activities. Similarly, a target country must expect a hybrid actor to aim to divide its society in order to provoke destabilisation from within. In doing so, the actor primarily exploits the party landscape and the fears and political views of the population. However, since this only works if there is a multi-party system, a free press and freedom of expression, i.e. if the target country is democratic, it must be assumed that this application of IM can only be used against democracies. Finally, a hybrid actor may intend to infiltrate individuals, including activists and terrorists, who are supposed to cause damage to the target country from within. In conclusion, it must also be made clear that a hybrid actor may well pursue several or even all of these lines of action when using instrumentalised migration against one or more target countries.

Literature

- van der Brug, Wouter & Hartveld, Eelco (2021): The Conditional Effects of the Refugee Crisis on Immigration Attitudes and Nationalism, *EUP — European Union Politics*, 22 (2), pp. 227–247. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/epub/10.1177/1465116520988905>
- Bryjka, Filip & Legucka, Agnieszka (2021): Russian and Belarusian Disinformation and Propaganda in the Context of the Polish-Belarusian Border Crisis, *Bulletin*, Polski Instytut Spraw Międzynarodowych / The Polish Institute of International Affairs (PISM), 212 (1908). <https://www.pism.pl/publications/russian-and-belarusian-disinformation-and-propaganda-in-the-context-of-the-polish-belarusian-border-crisis>
- Bryjka, Filip (2024): EU and NATO States Investing in Protection of Borders with Russia and Belarus, *Bulletin*, Polski Instytut Spraw Międzynarodowych / The Polish Institute of International Affairs (PISM), 154 (2462). <https://pism.pl/publications/eu-and-nato-states-investing-in-protection-of-borders-with-russia-and-belarus>
- Dyner, Anna Maria (2024): NATO Countries Respond to Russia’s Instrumentalisation of Migration, *Bulletin*, Polski Instytut Spraw Międzynarodowych / The Polish Institute of International Affairs (PISM), 11 (2319). <https://pism.pl/publications/nato-countries-respond-to-russias-instrumentalisation-of-migration>
- Dyner, Anna Maria (2024a): The Border Crisis as an Example of Hybrid Warfare. *Strategic File*, Polski Instytut Spraw Międzynarodowych / The Polish Institute of International Affairs (PISM), 2 (110). <https://www.pism.pl/publications/the-border-crisis-as-an-example-of-hybrid-warfare>
- Elonheimo, Tuukka (2021): Comprehensive Security Approach in Response to Russian Hybrid Warfare, *Strategic Studies Quarterly* (SSQ), 15 (3), pp. 113–137. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/48618299>
- Fakhry, Alia, Parkes, Roderick & Rácz, András (2022): Migration Instrumentalization: A Taxonomy for an Efficient Response, *Hybrid CoE Working Paper 14*, The European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats. <https://www.hybridcoe.fi/publications/hybrid-coe-working-paper-14-migration-instrumentalization-a-taxonomy-for-an-efficient-response/>
- Frontex (2024): *Annual Risk Analysis 2024/2025*. European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex), Warsaw, Poland. <https://www.frontex.europa.eu/media-centre/news/news-release/frontex-releases-annual-risk-analysis-for-2024-2025-navigating-complex-challenges-t0044z>
- Greenhill, Kelly M. (2024): Krieg mit anderen Mitteln — Migration als Instrument der Politik, *APuZ — Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte*, Bundeszentrale für Politische Bildung (bpb), 01.11.2024. <https://www.bpb.de/shop/zeitschriften/apuz/flucht-und-migration-2024/555939/krieg-mit-anderen-mitteln/>
- Kuzio, Taras (2021): Weaponisation of Refugees in Putin’s Long-Standing Hybrid War Against the West, *Research Brief*, Henry Jackson Society (HJS), Russia & Eurasia Studies Center. <https://henryjacksonsociety.org/publications/putins-weaponisation-of-refugees/>
- McBride, Julian (2023): Eastern Europe’s Frozen North: Do Not Overlook Russian Hybrid Warfare. *Modern War Institute at West Point*. <https://mwi.westpoint.edu/weaponized-migration-in-eastern-europes-frozen-north-do-not-overlook-russian-hybrid-warfare/>
- Pavlakis, George (2021): Manufactured Migrant Crisis: A Classic Case of Hybrid Warfare?, *Modern War Institute at West Point*. <https://mwi.westpoint.edu/lukashenkos-manufactured-migrant-crisis-a-classic-case-of-hybrid-warfare/>
- Praks, Henrik (2024): Russia’s Hybrid Threat Tactics against the Baltic Sea Region: From Disinformation to Sabotage, *Hybrid CoE Working Paper 32*, The European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats, Finland. <https://www.hybridcoe.fi/publications/hybrid-coe-working-paper-32-russias-hybrid-threat-tactics-against-the-baltic-sea-region-from-disinformation-to-sabotage/>
- Schmid, Johann (2024): Streitkräfte und Gesellschaft im hybriden Krieg zwischen Russland und der Ukraine, in: Hartmann, Uwe; Janke, Reinhold & von Rosen, Claus (Hrsg.): *Jahrbuch Innere Führung 2023/24: Der Krieg in der Ukraine — Folgerungen für die Sicherheits- und Militärpolitik Deutschlands sowie für die Bundeswehr*, Berlin: Carola Hartmann Miles-Verlag, pp. 47–62.