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Belarus's Coercive Engineered Migration Case of 2021–2022: Categorisation of State Media Narratives

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Abstract

This study deploys a narrative analysis of stories on the topic of the so-called migration crisis on the EU-Belarus border published on the website of the key Belarusian publishing house Belarus Segodnya between the 1st of June 2021 and the 31st of March 2022. The key eleven narratives were deconstructed through a close engagement with and interpretation of over 1,500 topical publications. The ongoing humanitarian crisis at the EU-Belarus border which peaked in late 2021 followed from the Belarusian regime's attempt to attain foreign policy goals, foremost the suspension of EU sanctions. The study applies the concept of coercive engineered migration proposed by Kelly Greenhill and finds that the content of most identified narratives fits Greenhill's predictions that coercing actors focus on manipulating the ability and willingness of targeted states to accept groups of migrants and that challengers tend to impose hypocrisy costs on targets to increase coercive power. The analysis suggests that some of the major state media narratives fit into two groups of coercing strategies proposed by Greenhill while others can be accommodated in the category related to hypocrisy costs. These "blame shifting" narratives cast full responsibility for the origin and persistence of the migrant crisis on the targeted actors. An additional "triggering catastrophe" category is proposed which includes narratives which project cataclysms for the targeted actors and high cost of not hosting migrants for them.

Keywords: Migration diplomacy, engineered migration, narratives, content analysis, "migration crisis"

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Introduction

Belarus is a highly centralised state with a questionable amount of sovereignty due to overwhelming control that Russia exerts over it in political, economic, and information spheres. Russia's control over the country's domestic and external policies arguably broadened after the 2020 fraudulent reelection of Alexander Lukashenko for a sixth term in office. "The Russian invasion [of Ukraine] has overshadowed the entire region, especially Belarus (157th [in the 2023 World Press Freedom Index]), which is now under Russia's control", the 2023 report of the Reporters Without Borders says (RSF 2023a). In response to election fraud and large-scale repressions against peaceful protesters in Belarus, in October 2020 the EU imposed restrictive measures against dozens of Belarusian individuals and progressively expanded them to additional individuals and companies linked to Lukashenko.

On the 23rd of May 2021 the Belarusian regime forced a civilian plane on the route from Athens to Vilnius to land in Minsk under the pretext of a bomb threat on board, in order to arrest opposition blogger Raman Pratasevich and civil activist Sofia Sapega. The next day after the incident, the European Council called on the Council of the EU to adopt further economic sanctions and to ban the overflight of EU airspace by Belarusian airlines (European Council 2021: 2–3). Consequently, Belarusian ruler Alexander Lukashenko publicly threatened to loosen border cooperation as a response to looming EU sanctions saying, "We stopped drugs and migrants. Now you will eat them and catch them yourselves" (Al Jazeera 2021). Following the European Council conclusions, in June 2021 the Council of the EU banned Belarusian airlines from flying over the EU's airspace and sanctioned sensitive sectors of the Belarusian economy, including petroleum and potash industries.

In the weeks and months that followed the diplomatic spat between the EU and Belarus, neighbouring Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland faced record high numbers of irregular border crossing attempts from the Belarusian territory. The majority of migrants that attempted to cross the border with the EU were Iraqi Kurds, while significant numbers originated from Syria, Yemen, Afghanistan, and other countries. "Belarus' abrupt decision to cease cooperating on border management and its aggressive instrumentalisation of migration in a hybrid campaign were the most significant developments at the external land borders in 2021", the 2022 report of the European Border and Coast Guard Agency said (Frontex 2022: 15). According to the same report, 7,528 detections of irregular border-crossings on the green borders were reported on the EU-Belarus border in 2021 which meant the Belarusian border was "joining the ranks of the most used land routes" (Ibid.).

The official Belarusian communication on the topic of this crisis on the EU-Belarus border remains understudied. It is expected that a limited number of major narratives can be distilled from a big number of topical publications. Thus, the paper seeks to explore the following research questions: What were the key narratives of the topical

publications in the Belarusian regime-controlled media? How specifically did they present the origin of the humanitarian crisis and manipulate the targeted EU countries and the EU as a whole? How can the relevant narratives be clustered based on their characteristics and types of arguments they convey? How do they relate to the predictions of the theoretical model of coercive engineered migration concerning the principal strategies of coercing states? These research questions drive the content analysis of over 1,500 topical articles published on the website of the key state publishing house "Belarus Segodnya" ("Belarus Today") and subsequent attempts of the categorisation of the key narratives.

The article proceeds as follows. The first section briefly presents a theory of coercive engineered migration and most significant academic publications which reviewed the so-called migration crisis on the EU-Belarus border through its lenses or analysed its media coverage. Next, the methodology behind the selection of articles and narrative analysis is explained. The article then proceeds with the categorisation of the major narratives and their overview. In conclusion, it discusses how applicable the analysis outcomes are to the theoretical model of coercive engineered migration in its part concerning the strategies of coercing states.

The EU-Belarus humanitarian crisis case and the concept of coercive engineered migration

Research on the interplay of migration and international relations (IR) has been a relatively new scholarly approach. As James F. Hollifield and Tom K. Wong put it, "How to explain the relative absence of the study of migration from one of the most important subfields in political science (IR) is indeed a mystery" (Hollifield, Wong 2014: 246–47). They hypothesise that the explanation lies largely in the historical context: during the Cold War IR theorists tended to attribute international migration to the category of "low politics" as opposed to "high politics" which concerned national security and issues of war and peace. The latter was of primary interest for international relations scholars and unless migration clearly affected inter-state relations and the balance of power, they preferred not focusing on migration-related issues. Throughout the 1980s foreign policy research largely overlooked this topic. Michael Teitelbaum was among few academics of that period who urged policymakers to pay greater attention to the attempts of adversary countries to use migration with malevolent foreign policy goals: "American foreign policy would be well served by the preparation of contingency plans aimed at deterring such actions, or at reversing them once they are in train" (Teitelbaum 1983: 222).

According to Christopher Mitchell, countries had found that "migration may acquire marked importance in their bilateral dealings" and therefore migration "loses its traditional image as a sector of 'low politics', and may alter or advance other

priorities in international competition" (Mitchell 1989: 682). Mitchell referred to the US-Haiti relations in the 1970s and Vietnam's mass departures of sea-borne refugees to neighbouring countries among such cases. Noting positive developments with classification and taxonomy of the cases when migration was used as foreign policy tool, Mitchell pointed at little scholarly progress with the development of theoretic framework binding the spheres of domestic politics, foreign policy, and international relations (Mitchell 1989: 691).

A notable attempt to create a broader theoretical model that Mitchell was seeking was undertaken by Kelly Greenhill in her prominent book *Weapons of Mass Migration: Forced Displacement, Coercion, and Foreign Policy* (2010). Greenhill proposes a theory of coercive engineered migration (CEM) which is defined as "cross-border population movements that are deliberately created or manipulated in order to induce political, military and/or economic concessions from a target state or states" (Greenhill 2010: 13). Greenhill argues that while conventional wisdom assumes that CEM cases are a rare phenomenon, in reality their frequency at about 1 case per year appears to be markedly more prevalent than both intrastate wars (0.68 cases/year) and extended intermediate deterrence crises (0.58/year) (2010: 18).

Notably, Greenhill discussed the exploitation of migration by the Belarusian regime long before the current humanitarian crisis on the EU-Belarus border began. Greenhill's 2008 article explicitly mentioned Alexander Lukashenko among actors who were able to exploit the fears associated with massive cross-border population movements (Greenhill 2008: 18). In fact, out of 64 CEM cases, which Greenhill identified between 1951 and 2006 in her 2010 study, two concerned the Belarusian regime's threats to loosen border control with the neighbouring European countries in 2002 and 2004. Greenhill's study established that, when exercised, "coercive engineered migration has succeeded at least in part almost three-quarters of the time, most often against relatively powerful, advanced liberal democracies" (Greenhill 2010: 60). The discussion of the reasons for this high coercion's success rate brings Greenhill to conclude that coercers manage to skillfully exploit commitment to protect human rights and electoral accountability of liberal democracies (Greenhill 2010: 63).

Greenhill discusses a variety of mechanisms that coercers typically employ when trying to manipulate the decision making of targets' leadership through engineered migration flows, including erosion of public support, creating popular unrest, and debilitating a country as a whole (Greenhill 2010: 38). Greenhill suggests two non-mutually exclusive strategies that coercing states apply to reach their objectives. The so-called "capacity swamping" strategy focuses on manipulating the ability of targeted states to accept, accommodate, or assimilate a given group of migrants or refugees. It contests the targeted countries' physical capacity to accommodate the migrants. The "political agitation" strategy focuses on manipulating the willingness of targets to do so. Facing a divided society with two mutually antagonistic and often highly

mobilised groups – the pro-refugee/migrant camp and anti-refugee/migrant camp – the targeted countries' leadership might be willing to concede to the coercers' demands (2010: 38–41). The study also underlines that the target's susceptibility to reputational costs, called hypocrisy costs by Greenhill, is an important factor that can enhance the success of a coercing actor. According to Greenhill, hypocrisy costs can drive politicians to pursue policies and concede to demands they previously attempted to avoid (2010: 57).

Discussing the Belarusian CEM case in a Foreign Affairs magazine, Greenhill disagrees with EU policymakers who find it innovative. Yet the case "showed the extent to which the tactic itself has come far more into the open" (Greenhill, 2021). Hence, Greenhill argues, given this kind of coercion has become more noticeable, it might make some observers mistakenly believe that it is new. According to Greenhill, the Belarusian CEM case also "showed how little Western governments, even now, understand the tactic and the ways it plays on the inherently contradictory and hypocritical politics surrounding migration in many advanced democracies" (Ibid.).

Janko Bekić (2022) provides a comparison of 2020 Greece-Turkey and 2021 Belarus-Poland CEM cases. In accordance with Greenhill's theoretical framework, Bekić suggests that Russia acted as an agent provocateur by using Belarus as a proxy to create the humanitarian crisis on the EU-Belarus borders (2022: 152) and that Russian foreign minister Sergey Lavrov's statement that the EU should provide financial benefits to Belarus for curbing transit migration "exposed the mastermind behind the operation" (2022: 160). Through the CEM case Lukashenko aimed to coerce the EU, foremost Poland and Lithuania, to relinquish their support to the pro-democracy movement in Belarus and to compel the EU to lift the post-2020 sanctions, the author argues. Bekić (2022) focused on the Belarus-Poland border in October-November 2021 without paying attention to the Belarus-Lithuania and Belarus-Latvia border sections. In turn, Ján Liďák and Radoslav Štefančík (2022) briefly outline how Libya, Turkey and Belarus used migration to promote their foreign policy goals in relation with the EU. The authors suggest that through the 2021 migration crisis Lukashenko sought to boost his legitimacy and have the EU sanctions suspended.

Neither of the above-mentioned publications examined the official Belarusian communication or state media to analyse the coercing actor's arguments. Anna Adamczyk (2022) analysed the media coverage of the migrant crisis on the Poland-Belarus border in the evening news broadcasts of Polish TV channels TVP and TVN in the second half of 2021. Aliaksei Kazharski (2023) examined visual representations of migrants in the Belarusian state media and discussed the humanitarian crisis at the EU-Belarus border using the concept of visual biopolitics. Kazharski compares visual depictions of migrants in the official state newspaper "Belarus Segodnya" with a "carefully staged authoritarian spectacle" (2023: 373) in which the Belarusian side is portrayed as a caring and humane actor whereas the EU member states are shown as merciless and hypocritical towards stranded migrants. Noticing that "Belarus Segodnya" put

forward normative demands to EU countries through, e.g., reporting on human rights activism and covering the pro-refugee protests in the EU, Kazharski suggested that the newspaper aimed to go beyond domestic readership.

Methodology

This work focuses on the systematic narrative coding of the textual content of articles concerning the migrant crisis on the EU-Belarus border published on the sb.by website. This Russian-language website, which belongs to the state-owned publishing house "Belarus Segodnya" ("Belarus Today"), posts content of the largest Belarusian state-owned printed newspaper with the identical title as well as of four other state newspapers ("Narodnaya Gazeta", "Respublika", "Selskaya Gazeta", and "Znamya Yunosti") which all were aligned in one media holding back in 2013. The Council of the EU called newspaper "Belarus Segodnya" – back then titled "Sovietskaya Belarus" ("Soviet Belarus") – Belarus's "main propaganda newspaper" (Council Decision, 2012). The publishing house and related media outlets are directly subordinated to the presidential administration – the major executive body which assists Alexander Lukashenko in controlling legislative, executive, and judicial branches of power in Belarus. *Belarus Segodnya* is one of the principal state media sources, along with the state news agency "Belta" and several state-owned TV channels.

In addition to the content of the five above-mentioned newspapers, the sb.by website occasionally reposts or summarises the content which is broadcast on state-owned TV channels and published in other pro-regime media outlets. It therefore provides news from a broad range of state-controlled sources, regardless of the fact that their editorial policies barely diverge because they are tightly controlled and governed by the executive. This is also noted in Kazharski (2023: 381) who names the newspaper "a regime propaganda hub that absorbs stories from other major media outlets of the regime". This peculiarity of the sb.by website facilitates a snapshot of the whole Belarusian state media landscape on various topics, including the humanitarian crisis on the EU-Belarus border.

Freedom of speech and media independence are severely limited in Belarus. The non-governmental organisation *The Committee to Protect Journalists* placed Belarus among the ten most censored countries in the world in 2019 (CPJ, 2019). Since then, the situation with the freedom of media in Belarus has worsened even further. "Belarus' media has never been more repressed by the authorities than since the controversial reelection of Alexander Lukashenko as head of state in August 2020", the 2023 report of the Reporters Without Borders says (RSF, 2023b). According to it, since 2020 the most popular news website, Tut.by, and most independent media have been labelled as "extremist" and de facto banned. The 2022 World Press Freedom Index published by Reporters Without Borders placed Belarus on 153rd rank

among one hundred eighty countries calling it "Europe's most dangerous country for journalists until Russia's invasion of Ukraine" (RSF, 2022).

In this study, data was sourced over a 10 month period between the 1st of June 2021 and the 31st of March 2022. In early June 2021, soon after Lukashenko's public threat of the 26th of May 2021 to create the so-called migration crisis, the sb.by website started regularly posting news and op-eds about growing migration flows on the EU-Belarus border. By the 22nd of March 2022 the Belarusian logistics centre in the Belarus-Poland borderland discontinued providing a temporary shelter for hundreds of migrants who intended to get into the EU. The closure of the major Belarusian state-supported facility for the migrants in March 2022 signaled the termination of the active phase of the crisis on the EU-Belarus border. As shown in Graph 1, by that time the intensity of coverage of the crisis on the sb.by website dropped significantly compared to the last quarter of 2021.

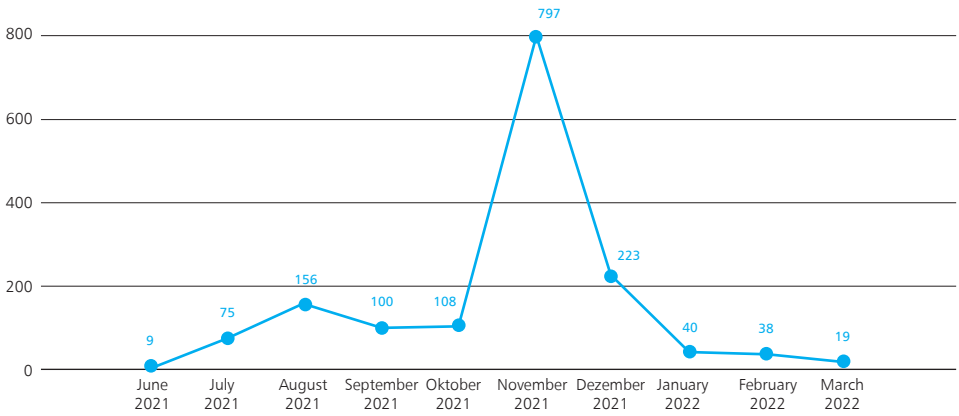
The sb.by website was searched using the search queries "foreigners", "migrants", and "refugees". The website's search system chronologically aggregates all published content with these words and their derivatives. This was followed with the inspection of 123 articles published under the thematic website's tag "Crisis in Lithuania", most of which concerned the humanitarian crisis on the Belarus-Lithuanian border and were published between the 21st of July and the 5th of October 2021, and of 1,187 articles published under the tag "Refugee crisis at the Polish border" dated from the 28th of August 2021 to the 3rd of March 2022. The publications under these tags which had been omitted from the initial search results, were added to the analysis. The combination of these two methods of article identification provided for the majority of all relevant articles on the sb.by website.

The articles which were not related to the humanitarian crisis on the EU-Belarus border or were purely informative and did not convey hidden messages beyond their overt meaning were discharged from further analysis. A total of 1,565 stories of various types, including news articles with judgements, opinion pieces of state propagandists, guest commentary, citations of Belarusian and foreign state officials, were included in the analysis. Publications which only consisted of photos and did not include any text were not included in the analysis. The high number of topical publications on the sb.by website suggests that Belarus's state administration placed considerable importance on the topic. In the month of November 2021 alone, 797 such publications were identified on the sb.by website. Several days in mid-November 2021 were particularly rich with migration-related content and saw between 50 and 80 topical publications.

The entire article constituted the unit of analysis. During the stage of exploratory research, a number of deductive narratives were defined, and relevant notes were taken to gain familiarity with the content. I later categorised these notes on a thematic basis by assigning names and patterns to them. Some preexisting narratives used for initial analysis were eventually modified and others emerged to accommodate the

Graph 1.

Number of analysed stories per month.



Source: Author's elaboration.

specific characteristics of the data. A qualitative narrative analysis was concluded through careful reading and re-reading of the data text in order to capture the meaning, including the contextual meaning, of the text. The publications were manually processed by the author in an Excel file which provided for their date and title, a website link, relevant pieces of text, and corresponding narrative(s). No specific language-processing software was used. The manual processing allowed for a more accurate attribution of narratives to publications given subtle linguistic characteristics which software is not always able to capture and correctly process. Through the coding process, the analysis of the stories was taken beyond its overt meaning. The frequency of the identified narratives is presented in Table 1. The total number of coded items under eleven major narratives (2,290) exceeds the number of analysed stories (1,565) because many were coded under more than one narrative.

As put in De Fina and Georgakopoulou (2012: 1), "More than numerous objects of inquiry, narrative resists straightforward and agreed-upon definitions and conceptualizations. Instead, its study tends to be a minefield of multiple and at times competing perspectives in a wide array of humanities and social science fields". The present study relies on the operationalisation of narrative in Miskimmon et al. (2013). Their study views strategic narratives as "representations of a sequence of events and identities, a communicative tool through which political actors – usually elites – attempt to give determined meaning to past, present, and future in order to achieve political objectives" (Miskimmon et al. 2013: 5). The point of strategic narratives, according to Miskimmon et at., is to influence the behaviour of domestic and international actors.

Rosselle et al. (2014: 71) call strategic narratives a "soft power in the 21st century" and view them as actors' power resources to get a better international standing

through the power of persuasion and contestation. Their study proposes three levels of strategic narratives. International system narratives provide understanding about "how the world is structured, who the players are, and how it works" (2014: 76). National narratives set out "what the story of the state or nation is, what values and goals it has" (Ibid.). Finally, issue narratives explain what the conflict or issue is, and particular policies which could resolve it. The interplay of narrative types can help explain how actors are narrating their counterparts and a given situation (2014: 79).

Table 1.

Frequency of the identified narratives

Narrative	Number of articles
Fascist and hypocritical EU countries humiliate migrants	918
The West has provoked the migrant crisis; accusations of Belarus are absurd	794
The migrant crisis is a pretext; the West is challenging Belarus	153
Poland and Lithuania are shaken by the migrant crisis	126
The only way to solve the crisis is to follow Minsk demands	93
Poland and the Baltic states exploit the migrant crisis to their benefit	81
EU countries' migration policies are facing stiff popular opposition	53
Poland and the Baltic states are provoking a military conflict	32
The EU is prompting Islamic extremism	17
The migrant crisis is putting Poland and the Baltic states in conflict with the EU	13
The EU is prompting mass deaths at the border	10

Source: Author's elaboration.

The key eleven narratives that were derived from the narrative analysis were organised into four categories of arguments, which can also be considered types of coercing strategies, and presented in Table 2. "Capacity swamping" and "political agitation" categories are named after coercing strategies proposed by Greenhill (2010). Narratives in the "capacity swamping" grouping contend that growing migration flows are severely destabilising the EU countries and that the EU cannot resolve the humanitarian crisis without making concessions to Minsk. The "political agitation" category consists of the narratives which argue that societies of the targeted countries strongly oppose state migration policies, and that the crisis is provoking a conflict between Poland and the Baltic states on the one hand, and other EU countries and Brussels, on the other.

The three major narratives which offer cataclysmic scenarios for the targeted actors in case of their resistance to hosting migrants and resolving the crisis on terms

beneficial to the Belarusian regime were grouped in the category titled "triggering catastrophe". They declare that otherwise the EU will face bloody retaliation from Islamic extremists, provoke hundreds if not thousands of deaths on the border, and instigate a large-scale military conflict. These narratives can also be seen as threatening ultimatums to the targeted countries and the EU as whole. One can argue that these narratives may alternatively be accommodated in the "political agitation" category as the form of arguments favouring acceptance of migrants and therefore contributing to more polarised societies and affecting targets' decision making. Finally, the group of blame shifting narratives attributes full responsibility for the origin and persistence of the crisis to the EU countries and therefore attempts to increase the cost of moral hypocrisy for them and to reinforce other coercive strategies.

Table 2.

Major narratives and their relation to coercing strategies used by the Belarusian regime

"Capacity swamping" – manipulating the ability of targets to accept migrants	**"Political agitation"** – manipulating the willingness of targets to accept migrants	**"Triggering catastrophe"** – cataclysmic scenarios in case of targets' resistance to accept migrants	**"Blame shifting"** – arguments increasing hypocrisy costs for the targeted actors
Poland and Lithuania are shaken by the migrant crisis	EU countries' migration policies are facing stiff popular opposition	Poland and the Baltic states are provoking a military conflict	Fascist and hypocritical EU countries humiliate migrants
The only way to solve the crisis is to follow Minsk demands	The migrant crisis is putting Poland and the Baltic states in conflict with the EU	The EU is prompting Islamic extremism	The West has provoked the migrant crisis; accusations of Belarus are absurd
		The EU is prompting mass deaths at the border	The migrant crisis is a pretext; the West is challenging Belarus
			Poland and the Baltic states exploit the migrant crisis to their benefit

Source: Author's elaboration

Empirical analysis

The empirical analysis is presented through the description of each of the major narratives, accompanied by exemplary quotes from analysed stories published on the sb.by website and translated into English by the author.

"Capacity swamping"

Title: *"Poland and Lithuania are shaken by the migrant crisis"*

Narrative: The governments of Poland and the Baltic states are inadequate and incapable of handling the humanitarian crisis, and are crumbling. The migrant crisis on the EU-Belarus border is driving political instability in the EU.

Interpretation: This narrative manipulates the ability of the targeted countries to accept migrants and, more broadly, to effectively deal with the humanitarian crisis. The analysed publications often exaggerate the destabilising effect of the so-called migration crisis on the socio-political situation in Poland and the Baltic states. E.g., one publication used the metaphor of Pandora's box referring to Lithuania's acceptance of migrants and speculated that Lithuania's ethnic and cultural composition will soon be profoundly changed due to the so-called inflow of migrants. A number of publications postulated that "Poland's fourth partition" is incoming as a result of the crisis in question. Relevant items under this narrative claimed that Poland and the Baltic states cannot carry out welcoming policies because otherwise they will be highly destabilised and their statehoods will become endangered. The EU as a whole was portrayed as weak and indecisive and therefore incapable of effectively addressing the humanitarian crisis on the border with Belarus. This narrative largely corresponds to the coercive mechanism of weakening described by Greenhill (2010: 38) which means coercers' intent to manipulate the decision making of their targets under the threat of debilitating a county as a whole because of incoming so-called migration flows.

> According to the political scientist, a few thousand migrants brought about the destabilisation of the situation in Lithuania. He said, "The country's leadership demonstrated total management incompetence; it turned out that Vilnius did not have a solution except for clearly fascist methods such as beating, tortures and even killings of people to intimidate refugees and forcefully push them out." (SB.BY, 4 August 2021)

Title: *"The only way to solve the crisis is to follow Minsk demands"*

Narrative: The lasting solution to the migrant crisis for the EU is to suspend sanctions, resume financial assistance, and restart cooperation with Belarus.

Interpretation: This narrative contends that the EU countries cannot resolve the so-called migration crisis without resuming full-fledged cooperation with the Belarusian regime. It is deeply linked to the previously discussed narrative in that it serves as the proposed course of action for the authorities of the EU countries to avoid their political and societal destabilisation. It can also be regarded as the underlying message of the whole sb.by website reporting on the crisis in question. According to the publications coded under this narrative, admitting migrants located in the borderland with Belarus is imperative but is not a sustainable solution to the humanitarian crisis.

Additionally, the EU should soften its policies and engage in a dialogue with the Belarusian regime unconditionally. Such steps are implied to be the lesser evil for the EU countries which otherwise risk facing much more problematic consequences of the so-called migration crisis. Notably, some topical publications argued that suspended cooperation with Minsk amounts to "double standards" of the Western countries given their occasional cooperation with other brutal foreign regimes.

> Considering that you are fine to discuss negotiations with the Taliban, please be so kind as to sit and talk to the Belarusian authorities, whom you used to have normal neighbouring relations with [...] Until they realise that the problems can only be solved together, this situation will remain in place. (SB.BY, 10 September 2021)

"Political agitation"

Title: *"EU countries' migration policies are facing stiff popular opposition"*

Narrative: The people of Poland and the Baltic states openly oppose state migration policies. The crisis on the EU-Belarus border deepens social cleavages in the EU countries.

Interpretation: Whereas the previously discussed narratives concentrated on the inefficacy of the state authorities and the incapability of the countries as a whole to resolve the crisis, this one focused on popular opposition to state migration policies. Stories under this narrative implied that the Polish and Lithuanian societies are deeply split over the issues of migration. Irrespective of welcoming or restrictive state policies, they were portrayed as unhappy about the course of action taken by respective governments. Whereas the coverage of protest actions against accommodating migrants was preferred in the case of Lithuania, topical articles tended to favour opposition to restrictive migration policies in Polish society. Many publications exaggerated the extent of public unrest in Lithuania and Poland and often tended to portray local protest actions as a quickly growing national opposition movement. This type of communication suits Greenhill's description of coercing mechanisms employed by coercers who are said to manipulate the opinions and attitudes of a targeted countries' civilian population. According to Greenhill, "Under such conditions, concession – to avoid general unrest, to avoid power-base erosion, or to simply make a crisis disappear – can become increasingly appealing, which is of course exactly the coercer's intent" (Greenhill 2010: 50).

> Protests by the building of the Lithuanian parliament have produced an even deeper split in the society and demonstrated the unpreparedness of the Lithuanian authorities to speak with the people [...] In September, Polish doctors protested and demanded decent work payments and an increase of expenditures on healthcare. In early October, people protesting in Bialystok, Wroclaw and Katowice condemned the Polish authorities for the inhuman treatment of migrants on the border. (SB.BY, 13 October 2021)

Title: *"The migrant crisis is putting Poland and the Baltic states in conflict with the EU"*

Narrative: The relations of Poland and the Baltic states with Brussels and other EU countries are straining. A lack of common approach and the absence of solidarity undermine the EU response to the humanitarian crisis.

Interpretation: This narrative revealed by the data was inductively coded and represents instances when the (un)willingness of the targeted actors to accept migrants is manipulated through the portrayal of allegedly increasing discord in relations between Poland and the Baltic states on the one hand, and other EU countries and Brussels, on the other. Their views on preferred policies in relation to the crisis on the EU-Belarus border are presented as divergent. Articles coded under this narrative also tended to question the ability of Poland and the Baltic states to make sovereign decisions over the acceptance of migrants.

> There is not a slightest doubt that Germany, which has not yet let Polish insults of Angela Merkel and 'compensation for occupation' claims go away, will return the favour [...] The [Polish elites] thought that Europe would somehow support them in the struggle with refugees and bad attitude towards them, but it is turning out otherwise [...] Thanks to an external enemy, the Poles are trying to mobilise against the east and the west [...] Poland is a harmful player undermining the EU's unity. (SB.BY, 4 December 2021)

"Triggering catastrophe"

Title:*"Poland and the Baltic states are provoking a military conflict"*

Narrative: The so-called migration crisis may soon convert into a hot military conflict due to the disturbing approach taken by Poland and the Baltic states. The sooner the crisis is resolved on the terms acceptable to Belarus, the better for everyone.

Interpretation: This narrative is based on a conspiracy about the military intentions of Poland and the Baltic states. Poland and the Baltic states are opposed to the western European countries and are said to be capable of pushing other EU countries into conflict with Belarus and Russia. Poland and the Baltic are portrayed as US's followers in many articles coded under this narrative. They either openly say or imply that the EU should influence Poland and the Baltic states to accept migrants and terminate the crisis on the Belarusian regime's terms in order to prevent a large-scale military conflict.

> Poland and Lithuania have become new crusaders of the collective West that serve as a ram and a technological mechanism in the hybrid war against Belarus and the Union State. Today, in the context of US goals, the plan is in progress to divide Europe into spheres of influence and to create military and strategic alignment out of some eastern European countries in order to promote US interests in the partition of the world. (SB.BY, 19 October 2021)

Title: *"The EU is prompting Islamic extremism"*

Narrative: In case migrants continue to be forcibly prevented from accessing the EU, a bloody response from Muslims will follow.

Interpretation: All 17 stories coded under this narrative were published in July and August 2021 and targeted either Lithuania or the EU as a whole. Although relevant items were not numerous, this narrative merits mention due to the peculiar argument about painful consequences for the targeted actors that it conveys. Topical stories argued that injuries and deaths of migrants from the Middle East on the Belarus-Lithuania border may provoke jihad and terrorist acts of Islamic extremists in Lithuania.

> Haram calling for jihad? The incident with a pregnant woman is not an ordinary one. Its consequences may be very sad for Lithuania. Violence towards a [pregnant] woman is considered haram in Islam – a prohibited action which certainly can provoke revenge from radical Islamists. (SB.BY, 22 July 2021)

Title: *"The EU is prompting mass deaths at the border"*

Narrative: Either a transit passage for migrants to western Europe is organised, or hundreds if not thousands of them will freeze and die on the border. Poland and the Baltic states risk creating a large migrant cemetery in their borderland.

Interpretation: The data revealed that this was the least popular narrative. At the same time, many more additional publications coded under the "Fascist and hypocritical EU countries humiliate migrants" narrative, which is discussed below, portray the EU countries, mostly Poland, as responsible for the tragic deaths of migrants on the border and even for the intentional murdering of migrants. The argument put forward by the narrative in question, however, paints even broader deadly consequences in case the EU countries do not quickly accept migrants and make concessions to the Belarusian regime. This narrative, therefore, just as the two other narratives in the "triggering catastrophe" category, proposes a highly negative scenario in case non-welcoming policies of the targeted actors continue. All three can also be viewed as arguments feeding the pro-migrant views in the targeted countries and therefore as contributing to deeper social cleavages over the migration issue which serve to manipulate the decision making of the targeted countries' leadership.

> In case the Baltic countries do not create a safe corridor for the refugees through their territories, soon – as awful as it may sound – a large Iraqi-Afghan cemetery may appear on our border. The cemetery will have around 2,000 graves. However, Poland continues to deliberately escalate the situation without paying attention to the readiness of the German authorities to accept migrants. (SB.BY, 11 November 2021)

"Blame shifting"

Title: "Fascist and hypocritical EU countries humiliate migrants"

Narrative: The EU betrayed values and humanist attitudes. Migrant kids and women are prevented from accessing the EU, humiliated, at times even murdered. Poland, the Baltic states, and the EU as a whole have become racist, fascist, and Nazi.

Interpretation: This is the most salient narrative which is found in 918 publications out of 1,565 (59%). It implies that the so-called migration crisis would have not emerged if the EU countries had been committed to human rights and human rights protection. Dozens of topical articles called Poland, the Baltic states, and the EU fascist, racist, and Nazi. Others labelled them as "criminal juntas" and "cannibal countries" and characterised their actions as "genocide and crimes against humanity" and "international terrorism". Refugee centres in EU countries are called "concentration camps" in many stories. In many instances, the word "refugee" is used interchangeably with the word "migrant" implying that the EU countries are legally bound to accept all third country nationals coming from Belarus. By and large, stories coded under this narrative imputed a lack of humanism and integrity to Poland, the Baltic states, and the EU. An earlier study based on the visual analysis of topical publications in the "Belarus Segodnya" newspaper corroborates this interpretation saying, "In the visual rhetoric of the regime the authoritarian spectacle of human vulnerability and suffering is co-constitutive with the trope of the inhuman cruelty and hypocrisy of Poland, Lithuania, and the EU, nations said to be responsible for beatings, torture and 'genocidal' killings of the stranded refugees" (Kazharski 2023: 385). The popularity of this and other "blame shifting" narratives attests to Greenhill's prediction that coercing actors tend to exploit hypocrisy to increase success of their coercing strategies.

> The Polish army is the army of punishers and murderers. The Polish leadership are criminals and scoundrels, political adventurers, which are ready to kill their people for the US services and their own illusory goals. Our border with Poland has turned into a brotherly grave and a sort of monument to the victims of repressions of the Polish leadership against their people [...] It is clear that Poland stood against the whole world and became a terrorist country which is ready to preside over the revival of the Fourth Reich. (SB.BY, 20 December 2021)

Title: *"The West has provoked the migrant crisis; accusations of Belarus are absurd"*

Narrative: The flows of migrants are the result of EU/US/Western policies. Belarus has nothing to do with higher numbers of migrants. It provides life-saving protection and humanitarian aid to migrants and cares about them as much as possible.

Interpretation: This narrative is found in nearly a half of all analysed publications which makes it the second most popular one. The involvement of Western countries

in foreign military interventions in the past is presented as the major source of the so-called migration crisis. Migrants are accordingly portrayed as victims of the upheaval in the foreign countries produced by the EU and US. Some stories contend that migration flows are facilitated by the authorities of Lithuania and Poland which are said to smuggle migrants to Germany. Others attribute the crisis to the EU's sanctions and disruption of border cooperation with Belarus. Additional reasons behind the origin and persistence of the crisis encountered in relevant stories include the EU's alleged welcoming call to asylum seekers and the use of the same clandestine routes by migrants from the Middle East countries that were previously created for Belarusian dissidents fleeing political persecution. This narrative serves to increase the cost of moral hypocrisy for EU countries and to reinforce the arguments which manipulate their (un)willingness to accept migrants by casting full blame for the origin of the crisis on them. None of the analysed stories gives the Belarusian side at least partial blame for the crisis. Hundreds of stories invariably praise the Belarusian regime's response to the crisis and speak about the medical and social care that migrants received in Belarus. The state media outlet therefore consistently exploits inclusionary rhetoric to criticise the migration policies of the EU countries.

> We categorically reject assertions about the Belarusians side's involvement in the creation of the migrant crisis on the border with the EU. Belarus is not the source of this problem. People from the Middle East countries are fleeing war and poverty. You, European politicians, have promised these refugees a better life [...] The Council of the Republic [the name of the upper chamber of the Belarusian parliament – author's note] has been assisting poor people from the very first day. Decent living conditions were provided to them and the situation is under control. (SB.BY, 22 December 2021)

Title: *"The migrant crisis is a pretext; the West is challenging Belarus"*

Narrative: The so-called migration crisis is a pretext for Poland, the EU, Ukraine, and NATO to escalate the situation and increase military presence along the borders with Belarus. The EU countries and Western bodies intend to provoke a military response from Belarus and Russia.

Interpretation: It is the third most dominant narrative which promotes a conspiracy about the hostile objectives of Western countries. Publications coded under this narrative invoke malevolent intentions of EU countries – and at times of Ukraine as well – to destabilise Belarus or even organise a military attack on it. Some articles suggested that such development will provoke a military response from Belarus and Russia as the country's military ally. Interestingly, this narrative was spread in the period of Russia's preparations for a large-scale invasion of Ukraine. While no publications were coded under this narrative in the months of June-July 2021, they were consistently identified in the rest of the monitoring period. It is similar to the "Poland and the Baltic states are provoking a military conflict" narrative discussed above but

differs from it in two important respects. First, it contends that the crisis is a pretext or a prelude to Western military aggression and therefore advances a blame shifting argument, whereas the previously discussed narrative presented a military conflict as a hypothetical negative scenario resulting from provocative actions of Poland and the Baltic states. Second, the narrative in question does not counterpose Poland and the Baltic cases to other western European countries as in the former.

> The situation with migrants on the Polish border is just a pretext to justify favourable changes in the balance of power and to threaten Belarus and Russia as eastern neighbours. There are no other reasons for [Poland's – author's note] high level of militarisation. (SB.BY, 29 October 2021)

Title: "Poland and the Baltic states exploit the migrant crisis to their benefit"

Narrative: The so-called migration crisis is inflated by the authorities in Poland and the Baltic states in pursuit of economic and political advantages both domestically and internationally.

Interpretation: This narrative is a form of blame shifting as it portrays Poland and the Baltic states as boosters of the crisis. Many relevant stories contend that "crisis" is an inaccurate definition of the situation on the border because arguably it is manageable and intentionally aggravated by the authorities of Poland and the Baltic states. They do so to extract economic and political advantages such as higher approval ratings and diverted attention of their populations from economic problems, enhance the image of the EU's defenders and an improvement of political relations with Brussels, and larger financial assistance from the EU. The interview of former Belarusian foreign minister Uladzimir Makei cited below was one of the stories coded under this narrative.

> We understand that Poland greatly benefits from distracting attention away from its domestic problems. We are observing that the opposition's influence is on the rise following the return of Doland Tusk to Poland. [The goal is] to distract attention from a quarrel with Brussels over human rights, media freedom, actions of the legislative, and so on. It is clear that Poland decided to benefit from the migrant crisis in this situation. I believe that this is an entirely silly approach which will not bring dividends to anyone. It is only bringing the situation into a deadlock. (SB.BY, 12 November 2021)

Discussion and conclusions

This study deploys narrative analysis of stories on the topic of the humanitarian crisis on the EU-Belarus border published on the sb.by website between the 1st of June 2021 and the 31st of March 2022. It might be expected that Greenhill's predictions about coercive strategies used in engineered migration cases are reflected in the con-

tent of the Belarusian state media narratives about the crisis on the EU-Belarus border. The article findings, indeed, greatly point in this direction.

The major narratives identified in over 1,500 analysed articles heavily manipulated the ability and willingness of the targeted countries and the EU to accept migrants. Topical articles present a desperate situation that the EU countries and the EU itself, confronted with higher numbers of migrants, allegedly find themselves in. Either Poland and the Baltic states accept and accommodate all migrants attempting to get to the EU through the Belarusian territory, and will become heavily destabilised and perhaps even see their statehoods crumbling. Or they restrict access to migrants and will lose their moral standing, undermine relations with the EU and western European countries, and give rise to bloody radicalism. The only feasible way to resolve this difficult dilemma, the Belarusian state media implied, is to concede to demands of the Belarusian regime including the suspension of EU sanctions, resumption of the EU's financial assistance, and restoration of political relations with Minsk. The crisis is thereby presented as the definite triumph of the Belarusian side versus the helpless EU countries put between a rock and a hard place.

Four out of eleven narratives that were derived from the narrative analysis were organised into "capacity swamping" and "political agitation" categories named after coercing strategies proposed by Greenhill. Narratives in the "capacity swamping" grouping contest the targeted countries' capacity to accommodate migrants, contend that growing migration flows are severely destabilising the EU countries and that the EU cannot resolve the humanitarian crisis without making concessions to Minsk. The "political agitation" category consists of the narratives which argue that societies of the targeted countries strongly oppose state migration policies, and that the crisis is provoking a conflict between Poland and the Baltic states on the one hand, and other EU countries and Brussels, on the other.

"Blame shifting" narratives concerning the cause of the crisis and the reasons behind its persistence have been placed under a separate category. Many of them offer conspiracy-driven and implausible explanations of the crisis's origin. The targeted countries are portrayed as fully responsible for the crisis and various antagonistic rhetoric in relation to them is often used. The corresponding narratives increase hypocrisy costs for the targeted actors and intend to strengthen other types of narratives. None of the analysed items assumes even a partial responsibility of the Belarusian side for the despairing situation which thousands of migrants found themselves in; it is invariably shown as a humane and caring actor. Altogether, the portrayal of the crisis by the sb.by website is one-sided and tends to exploit the suffering of migrants in favour of the Belarusian regime's political goals.

The additional group of "triggering catastrophe" narratives projects various cataclysms for the targeted actors and high cost of not resolving the so-called migration crisis on the terms of the Belarusian regime. The narratives belonging to this category contend that due to restrictions on the access of migrants, the EU countries are

prompting Islamic extremism, bringing about mass deaths on the border, and triggering a military conflict. In contrast to the "capacity swamping" arguments which tend to question the ability of targeted countries to accommodate arriving foreigners, these narratives lay out hypothetical, usually catastrophic-like, consequences of not accepting migrants.

The analysis of a large dataset of articles published in the key state newspaper provided some insight into the tactic of the Belarusian regime's propaganda. The article serves as a contribution to the CEM theoretical framework proposed by Greenhill and to the analysis of the Belarusian CEM case in particular. It demonstrates how media narratives promoted by the state actor involved in an engineered migration case may greatly underpin its coercing strategies.

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