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# The migration crisis as a tool of hybrid warfare – Analysis of selected cases at the borders of the European Union

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**Abstract:** *The aim of this research is to analyze the migration crisis as an element of contemporary hybrid warfare, with particular emphasis on its impact on the security of the European Union. The research focuses on the phenomenon of human smuggling through Poland, which in the geopolitical context is an example of activities in which criminal organizations are used to achieve the goals of third countries. The main problem was formulated: How is the migration crisis, especially organized crime, a tool of hybrid warfare, and what are the consequences of this phenomenon for the security of the European Union? Accordingly, a research hypothesis has been formulated that assumes that the migration crisis, including organized crime, affects political and social destabilization in the European Union countries, and its intensification is directly related to the actions of third countries that use this practice as a tool of hybrid warfare. The research was carried out using the analysis of documents and statistical data, taking into account reports of border services (Border Guard and Frontex) and the analysis of literature on the subject. In addition, the case study method was used in relation to selected cases of detained and revealed foreigners for crossing the state border contrary to the provisions of the law or attempting to cross the state border contrary to the provisions of the law. This analysis allows us to understand the mechanisms of action organized in the context of broadly understood hybrid warfare.*

**Key words:** *security, border, crisis, migration, hybrid war*

## ADMISSION

**T**he migration crisis plays an important role in complex strategies of hybrid warfare today, becoming a tool of political pressure and social destabilization within the borders of the European Union. Traditionally seen as a socio-economic phenomenon, migration is

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increasingly being used in hybrid activities that combine a variety of means of confrontation below the threshold of conventional war. Such operations are aimed at weakening state structures, creating social divisions and influencing the political decisions of member states and EU institutions.

An example of the instrumentalisation of the migration crisis was the situation on the Polish-Belarusian border in 2021 and 2022, where Alexander Lukashenko's regime deliberately directed groups of migrants from the Middle East to the EU's external borders. This operation was widely interpreted as an attempt to destabilise the EU and a response to the sanctions imposed on Belarus after the rigged presidential elections and repression of the opposition. Similar actions have been observed before, for example on the Greek-Turkish border in 2020, where Turkey threatened to "open its borders" in order to put pressure on the EU in the context of financial support for refugees.

Introducing migrants into the context of hybrid warfare changes the traditional view of security, requiring the European Union to adapt its response mechanisms. These situations highlight the need for a comprehensive approach to border protection, countering disinformation and creating integrated tools to counter such forms of political pressure. Analysis of cases such as the crisis on the border with Belarus or in the Mediterranean region allows for a better understanding of the dynamics of this type of threat and the development of effective response strategies.

#### **MIGRATION ON THE POLISH-BELARUSIAN BORDER AS AN EXAMPLE OF HYBRID ACTIVITIES**

Illegal migration poses a significant challenge to the internal security of the state. Due to their dynamic nature, they are often treated as a dangerous element of migration flows. Border control of people entering the territory of a given state is one of the most important elements of state sovereignty. For this reason, illegal migration is treated as an attack on the sovereignty of the state, which may pose a threat to the ability of the state to exercise control over its spatial and territorial domain<sup>4</sup>.

The first attempts at migration blackmail on the part of the Lukashenko regime took place as early as 2002, when in the final phase of accession negotiations between Poland and the European Union, Belarus threatened to allow about 150,000 migrants to enter Europe, allegedly staying in Belarus. Further threats to bring migrants to the Belarusian-EU borders with Poland, Lithuania and Latvia appeared in 2010-2011, when after a meeting of the Border Committee of the Union State of Belarus and Russia in response to the tightening of EU sanctions, General I. Rachkouski warned that the border service would focus on protecting its own territory, and not on protecting neighbouring countries. A noticeable strengthening of border protection was to occur on the Belarusian-Ukrainian section of the state border at the expense of its sections with Poland, Lithuania and Latvia. According to the border services of Belarus, the decision was dictated by an increase in smuggling, as well as the desire to even out the disproportions in border protection. In the opinion of the Belarusian authorities, the border section with the EU was better guarded than the Belarusian-Ukrainian section of the state border<sup>5</sup>. Belarusian journalist T. Giczán stated that the Operation Lock, developed in 2010-2011, was aimed at forcing the European Union to provide financial assistance to strengthen

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<sup>4</sup> A. Kukuła, *Protection of the state border by the Polish Armed Forces in the conditions of illegal migration*, Scientific Papers Pro Publico Bono 2022, No. 1 (1), p. 350.

<sup>5</sup> N. Orłowska-Czyż, *Minsk escalates the threat on the Belarusian-EU border*, Analyses, Centre for Eastern Studies, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/pl/publikacje/analizy/2012-05-30/minsk-eskaluje-zagrozenie-nagranicy-bialorusko-unijnej>, [accessed: 17.08.2023].

the border of Belarus<sup>6</sup>. Along with the announcement of the weakening of the state border protection, an intensive media campaign was carried out in Belarus aimed at linking illegal migration with the terrorist threat. The public media reported on operations carried out by the security services related to the liquidation of organized groups responsible for the smuggling of people, while indicating that illegal migrants are mostly linked to terrorist organizations.

The current migration crisis on the external borders of the European Union: Polish-Belarusian, Lithuanian-Belarusian and Latvian-Belarusian, was caused by the political crisis related to the presidential elections in Belarus. As a result of another rigged presidential election, which took place on August 9, 2020, A. Lukashenko received 80.2% of the votes. His main opponent, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, came second, with 9.9% support. who immediately after the announcement of the elections left for Lithuania for fear of persecution.

The crisis on the Polish-Belarusian state border is a tool of political and geopolitical pressure that has two logics: local and global. Local logic is Lukashenko's interest in forcing the West to make political concessions, freezing sanctions imposed on Belarus and getting it out of international isolation. This logic is completely subordinated to the global logic, i.e. the interests of Russia, which imposes

its rules of the game on the EU and NATO in order to establish a new world order<sup>7</sup>.

The crisis on Belarus's border with EU and NATO countries can be divided into two phases. In the first phase of the operation in 2020, Lithuanian border guards detained 80 people who had illegally crossed the Belarusian-Lithuanian border. In 2021, more than 4 thousand people were detained in Lithuania alone<sup>8</sup>. In the second phase of the operation, the actions of the Lukashenka regime were mainly aimed at Poland. They were preceded by changes in the Belarusian law on staying in the border zone. Belarus relaxed the Code of Administrative Offences by abolishing, m.in other things, the penalty for illegal stay in the border area, and in June 2021, during the border crisis, the Belarusian Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced the suspension of the implementation of the readmission agreement with the EU in response to the sanctions imposed by them<sup>9</sup>. In August 2021, about 2100 people tried to forcibly cross the Polish-Belarusian section of the state border protected by the Podlaski Border Guard Unit.

In the summer of 2021, a new phenomenon emerged at the EU's external border with Belarus, which was categorised as the instrumentalisation of migration. The instrumentalization of migration has many dimensions and takes place on many levels<sup>10</sup>. *Instrumentalisation of migrants is a situation where a third country triggers irregular migration flows into the Union by actively encouraging or facilitating the movement of third-country nationals to, into or from its territory and subsequently to the external borders, where such actions indicate that a third country intends to destabilise the Union or a Member State. and where the nature of such actions may threaten the basic functions of the State, including its territorial integrity, the maintenance of public order or the protection of national*

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<sup>6</sup> M. Oskierko, *The Migration Crisis on the Polish-Belarusian State Border*, [in:] *Threats to NATO's Eastern Flank in the Aspect of Internal Security of Border Areas*, (eds.) D. Dachowicz, L. Elak, Z. Ciekanski, Prof. Leszek J. Krzyżanowski Edition of the Managerial Academy of Applied Sciences in Warsaw, Chełm-Warsaw 2022, p. 205

<sup>7</sup> P. Usov, *Militarization of the Migration Crisis* [in:] *The Dictator's Border. Poland and Belarus in the face of the border crisis. Report IV* (eds.) J. M. Nowakowski, J. Ołędzka, M. Rust, O. Shevchenko, P. Usov, K. Wańczyk, A. Papko, A. Pukszo, University of Warsaw, Centre for East European Studies, Warsaw 2021, pp. 30.

<sup>8</sup> M. Konieczny, *Operation "Sluice" – the refugee crisis related to the smuggling of illegal migrants across the Polish-Belarusian border*, *Roczniki Administracji i Prawa* 2022, XX, Issue 2, p. 92

<sup>9</sup> K. Wysocki, *The Impact of Reflexive Management on the Escalation of the Migration Crisis on the Border of Belarus with the European Union*, *Cybersecurity and Cybercrime*, 2024, Vol. 1(3), pp. 6-7.

<sup>10</sup> A. Nitszke, *Instrumentalization of migration, proceduralization versus humanization of the asylum policy of the European Union*, *Politeja* No. 1(88/1), 2024, p.

*security*<sup>11</sup>. The practice of the so-called instrumentalisation of migrants has been used by the regime of Alexander Lukashenko to test the ability of Poland, Lithuania and Latvia to protect their state borders, and at the same time to test the effectiveness of the European Union in responding to such tensions and threats<sup>12</sup>.

The authors of the article analysed the available statistical data developed by the Border Guard. The table below presents foreigners broken down into citizenships detained directly on the state border, in the border zone and outside the zone, who crossed or attempted to cross the Polish-Belarusian state border against the law. From the data prepared by the Border Guard, the authors of the article conclude that in the years 2021-2024, on the Polish-Belarusian section of the state border in the direction of Poland, the largest group of detainees were migrants from the Middle East and Africa, citizens of: Iraq (1742), Syria (731), Afghanistan (669), Somalia (395), Eritrea (274), Ethiopia (260), Yemen (186), Iran (168), Sudan (111) and citizens of other countries in the number of less than several dozen foreigners.

**Table 1. Foreigners detained/revealed by the Border Guard for crossing the state border contrary to the law or attempting to cross the state border contrary to the provisions of the law from Belarus to the Republic of Poland.**

Citizenship	2021 r.	2022 r.	2023 r.	I półrocze 2024 r.
Afghanistan	447	25	88	109
Eritrea	0	0	9	265
Ethiopia	4	2	14	240
Iraq	1557	167	16	2
Iran	55	40	35	38
Yemen	19	15	23	129
Somalia	68	3	38	286
Sudan	2	22	11	76
Syria	272	79	86	294

Source: In-house analysis based on Border Guard data

## ORGANISED CRIME AS PART OF HYBRID WARFARE

The free movement of people, capital, goods and services in the European Union has a positive impact on the development of a given country, while increasing the risk of the threat of human smuggling. The main contributor to the scale of trafficking is its profitability, and its growth is further driven by closely interlinked social and economic factors<sup>13</sup>. The transit location of Poland affects the scale of activities and the level of organized criminal groups, whose activities are usually focused on

<sup>11</sup> Request. Regulation on situations of instrumentalisation in the field of migration and asylum, Strasbourg, 14 December 2021, COM(2021) 890 final.

<sup>12</sup> A. Gruszczak, *Migration Crises in Europe after 2015: Parochialism in Three Scenes*, [in:] *Deinstitutionalization of Public Policies and the War in Ukraine and Migration Challenges in Poland*, (eds.) K. Jasiński, M. Pacek, ed. European Centre of the University of Warsaw, Warsaw 2023, p. 237.

<sup>13</sup> R. Woźniak & D. Sowulewski, *Forms of Smuggling, the Scale of the Phenomenon and the Level of Disclosures*, [in:] *Combating Smuggling. A collection of good practices. Different perspectives – a common goal* (eds.) E. W. Plywaczewski, E. Kowalewska-Borys, Difin, Warsaw 2013, p. 39.

satisfying the demand<sup>14</sup> related to human smuggling. Polish Therefore<sup>15</sup>, the Polish-Belarusian section of the state border, which is the external border of the EU, shows the important role Poland plays in shaping the security of the European Union in a holistic approach and in the aspect of migration control<sup>16</sup>.

The smuggling of people from Polish to Western Europe is carried out by both individuals, groups of two to several people, who are not systematically involved in this activity, organized criminal groups systematically involved in smuggling people, as well as organized criminal groups (multi-criminal) that have both control over a specific territory and influence<sup>17</sup>. With the increase in the migration crisis, organized criminal groups have emerged on the Polish-Belarusian section of the state border willing to transport migrants from Polish to Western Europe. According to the Border Guard, people involved in the smuggling of illegal migrants initially arrived in their own cars. Later, however, they began to rent vans in Polish. They also hired drivers who paid 4 thousand zlotys for a ride from Podlasie to Germany. On the other hand, foreigners were charged a fee of 10,000 to 13,000 dollars for organized smuggling from their country to one of the countries in Europe<sup>18</sup>.

From January to June 2024, the Border Guard detained 357 organizers of illegal border crossings and their helpers, which is an average of 59 smugglers per month. Of the 357 organizers and couriers detained in 2024, 202 were apprehended in Podlasie<sup>19</sup>. Despite the increased number of Border Guards, Police and soldiers, as well as the sealing of the border, illegal immigrants are still arriving in Germany.

Based on statistical data, the authors of the article stated that in the years 2021-2024, the Border Guard detained/identified 4594 foreigners who crossed or attempted to cross the state border from Polish to Germany at the border with Germany. The largest group of detainees were migrants from the Middle East and Africa, citizens of: Syria (1234), Iraq (566), Afghanistan (467), Yemen (158), Iran (113), Eritrea (76) and Somalia (69). Detailed data of foreigners detained/disclosed by the Border Guard for crossing the state border against the law or attempting to cross the state border against the law from Polish to Germany are presented below in Table 2.

**Table 2. Foreigners detained/revealed by the Border Guard for crossing the state border contrary to the law or attempting to cross the state border contrary to the law from Polish to Germany.**

Citizenship	2021 r.	2022 r.	2023 r.	First half of the year 2024 r.	Sum
Afghanistan	42	85	179	161	467
Eritrea	1	3	15	58	76
Iraq	453	92	11	10	566
Iran	14	32	44	23	113
Yemen	47	42	50	19	158

<sup>14</sup> J. Kawa, *Introduction to the Issue of Illegal Markets – Economic Perspective*, [in:] *Illegal Markets: Origin, Scale of the Phenomenon and the Possibility of Counteracting*, (eds.) W. Plywaczewski, P. Chlebowicz, Olsztyn 2012, p. 33

<sup>15</sup> R. Mroczek, *The cross-border nature of the crime of trafficking in human beings. Criminal and Criminological Legal Issues*, Difin, Warsaw 2024, p. 317.

<sup>16</sup> P. Olbrycht, *Security of the Republic of Poland in the context of the situation on the Polish-Belarusian border in August-December 2021 – legal possibilities and actions taken*, *Polityka i Społeczeństwo*, 2(20) / 2022, p. 152.,

<sup>17</sup> A. Hołub, B. Tomaszewska-Hołub, *Refugees of the 21st Century. Space of threats – space of challenges*, *Nowa Polityka Wschodnia* 2022, No. 4 (35), p. 35.

<sup>18</sup> K. Szwed, *They smuggled people, and now they face up to 12 years in prison*, <https://www.strazgraniczna.pl/pl/aktualnosci/10993,Przemycali-ludzi-a-teraz-grozi-im-nawet-12-lat-wiezienia.html?search=4416600>, [accessed: 27.07.2024]

<sup>19</sup> *Human smuggling has slowed down. Migrants are less likely to manage to get through from Belarus*, <https://www.rp.pl/przestepczosc/art40712881-przemyt-ludzi-wyhamowal-migrantom-rzadzciej-udaje-sie-przedostac-od-strony-bialorusi>, [accessed: 15.07.2024]

Somalia	8	1	19	41	69
Syria	135	173	804	122	1234
Other Nationalities	434	381	545	550	
<b>In total</b>	<b>1134</b>	<b>809</b>	<b>1667</b>	<b>984</b>	<b>4594</b>

Source: In-house analysis based on Border Guard statistics for 2021, 2022, 2023 first half of 2024.

The above data are presented in Figure 1.

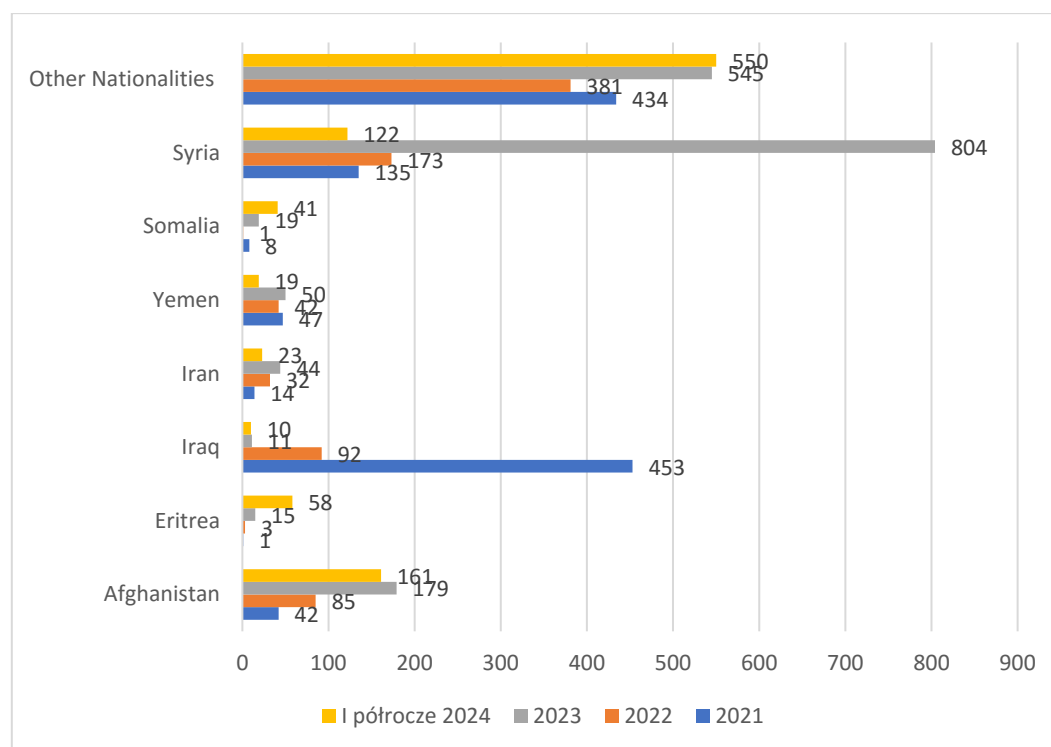


Figure 1. Foreigners detained/revealed by the Border Guard for crossing the state border contrary to the law or attempting to cross the state border contrary to the law from Polish to Germany.

Source: In-house analysis based on Border Guard statistics for 2021, 2022, 2023 first half of 2024.

The year 2023 brought another increase in the pressure of irregular migration, which largely reflected the increasing geopolitical turbulence in Europe's neighbourhood. In 2023, more than 442,000 illegal border crossings (IBCs)<sup>20</sup> were detected at the EU's external borders: around 380,000 at entry and 62,000 at exit. The number of detected cases at entry increased by 17% compared to 2022, making 2023 the third consecutive year with a significant increase in the number of illegal entries<sup>20</sup>. Figure 2 shows the detections of irregular border crossings at the EU's external borders.

In connection with illegal migration, 16 October 2023 Germany has temporarily resumed border controls on its land borders with Austria, the Czech Republic, Poland and Switzerland. According to the German authorities, the return of border controls is intended to reduce irregular migration, ensure the country's internal security, and protect against terrorism and cross-border crime at the internal borders of the Schengen Area. Due to the increase in migratory pressure, on 16 September 2024 not only border control with Austria, the Czech Republic, Poland and Switzerland was extended for another year, but border control at all German land borders with France, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Belgium and Denmark was extended.

<sup>20</sup> *Annual Brief 2023*, Frontex.

In conclusion, in the next few years, European border management will continue to face very difficult geopolitical conditions characterised by a potential increase in migration flows and cross-border crime.

Organized crime is one of the key elements of modern hybrid warfare, as its activities are often mixed with broadly understood state action to destabilize regions, influence political decisions and undermine the legal order. Criminal groups, taking advantage of loopholes in legal systems and institutions, pursue illegal interests that can be used to achieve geopolitical goals, such as destabilizing states, manipulating migration, or disrupting economies.

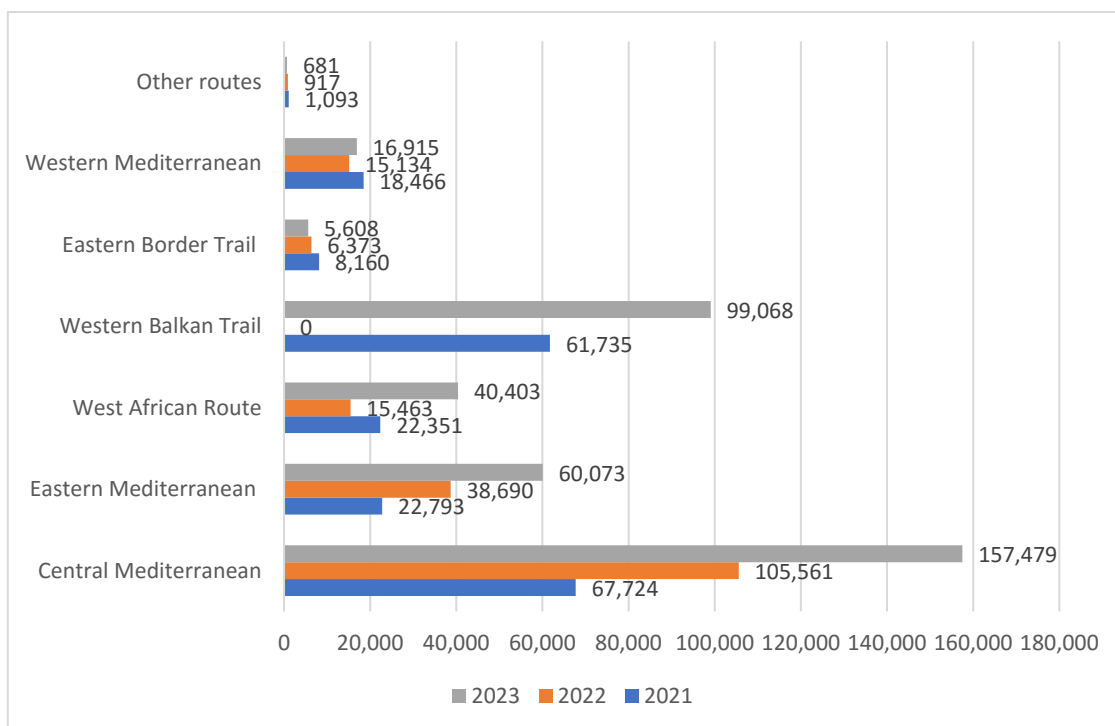


Figure 2. Detect irregular border crossings at the EU's external borders.  
Źródło: Annual Brief 2023, Frontex.

Organised crime as a tool of hybrid warfare uses means such as human smuggling, drug trafficking, money laundering and disinformation to strengthen its influence and weaken the security of countries, including the European Union. Such activities, which are often difficult to attribute to a specific state actor, can lead to significant internal and external tensions, especially when criminal organizations cooperate with states that want to use these methods to exert pressure on other countries (e.g., migrant smuggling or the spread of extremist ideologies).

The conclusions from the analysis of this phenomenon show that in order to effectively counteract organized crime as an element of hybrid warfare, it is necessary not only to tighten the activities of law enforcement services, but also to develop preventive strategies that can prevent the use of such methods of destabilization by states with hostile intentions. Countering smuggling of human beings and other forms of hybrid crime requires stronger international cooperation, better intelligence sharing, and a more integrated approach to border protection and critical infrastructure.

## THE EUROPEAN UNION AND HYBRID THREATS

Countering hybrid threats is one of the main strategic challenges of the EU, which sets the directions for the development of the Union's capabilities in the field of international security<sup>21</sup>. The EU is stepping up its efforts to counter hybrid threats, which pose a contemporary challenge to international security. These threats include activities bordering on traditional forms of conflict, such as cyberattacks, disinformation, instrumentalization of migration or sabotage of critical infrastructure, as well as information manipulation to destabilize democratic processes.

One of the important elements of the EU's response was the establishment of new sanctions mechanisms against entities involved in hybrid activities, in particular in the context of Russia's aggressive actions. The sanctions include asset freezes and visa bans against individuals and entities that engage in activities such as information manipulation, cyber acts and violations of the rule of law. These measures are intended to prevent further destabilising campaigns and strengthen internal security Unii<sup>22</sup>. W maju 2024 roku UE ogłosiła powstanie Hybrid Rapid Response Teams (HRRTs). These teams, composed of experts from member states, are to support countries in countering hybrid threats by offering rapid support in crisis situations. The creation of the HRRT, announced in the EU Strategic Compass, is a response to the increased risk of cyberattacks and disinformation and a sign of solidarity among Member States in the face of new challenges<sup>23</sup>.

An important step was also the adoption of the Cyber Resilience Act, which introduces requirements for the design of secure software and hardware, and the Cyber Solidarity Act, strengthening the capacity of Member States to respond to large-scale cyber incidents. These regulations respond to the increase in cyberattacks in recent years and aim to improve security coordination across the EU.

The EU is also working to counter radicalisation and disinformation by working with online platforms that are committed to swiftly removing extremist content, and by providing financial and organisational support to protect public spaces. These actions demonstrate the EU's comprehensive approach to hybrid threats, which takes into account both technological and societal aspects<sup>24</sup>. The EU underlines the multidimensionality of hybrid threats using coercive and subversive measures targeting critical vulnerabilities<sup>25</sup>. Hybrid threats range from cyberattacks on critical information systems, to disrupting critical services, to undermining public trust in government institutions and deepening social divisions<sup>26</sup>.

In summary, the EU is developing multidimensional strategies and tools to counter hybrid threats, combining prevention, operational and sanctions measures. In the face of growing threats, such as cyber-attacks or information manipulation, united action by Member States is crucial to protect democratic values and the security of citizens.

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<sup>21</sup> F. Bryjka, *Development of EU capabilities to counter hybrid threats*, no. 9, (117), 2022, p. 1.

<sup>22</sup> *Nowy reżim sankcji: Unia Europejska odpowiada na kampanie hybrydowe Rosji - Polska w Unii Europejskiej*, Portal Gov.pl, <https://www.gov.pl/web/ue/nowy-rezim-sankcji-unia-europejska-odpowiada-na-kampanie-hybrydowe-rosji>

<sup>23</sup> *Hybrid threats: Council paves way for deployment of rapid response teams - Consilium*, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/pl/press/press-releases/2024/05/21/hybrid-threats-council-paves-the-way-for-deploying-hybrid-rapid-response-teams/>

<sup>24</sup> EU Cyber Resilience Act. Shaping Europe's digital future, <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/pl/policies/cyber-resilience-act>

<sup>25</sup> H. Wyrębek, *Hybrid threats to the information security of the state*, *Polityka i Społeczeństwo*, No. 1, 2023, p. 320.

<sup>26</sup> P. Szymański, *NATO and the European Union in the Face of Hybrid Threats*, "Centre for Eastern Studies", No. 328, 2020, p. 1.



## SUMMARY

To sum up, the migration crisis is one of the tools of modern hybrid warfare, used by states or groups with geopolitical interests to put pressure on the European Union. This phenomenon manifests itself primarily in the instrumentalization of migration by regimes that deliberately direct the waves of refugees to the EU borders to exacerbate the political and social crisis in the member states. Examples of such actions include the migration crisis on the Polish-Belarusian or Turko-Greek borders, which were aimed at weakening the EU's internal solidarity and influencing political decisions in Brussels. These actions highlight a new reality in security policy, where hybrid threats are intertwined with classic migration challenges.

The conclusions of the analysis indicate that the migration crisis as a tool of hybrid warfare not only threatens the stability of the EU's borders, but also requires the Union to take a faster and more integrated approach to crisis management, including at both the operational and legal levels. Increased cooperation with neighbouring countries, better securing of external borders and more effective fight against disinformation are key elements of strategies that can help mitigate the impact of such threats.

To sum up the above analysis, there is a need to further monitor the development of migration situations at the EU borders, as well as to implement new tools and procedures to respond in the event of an escalation of such crises. This requires an understanding of the evolving strategies of third countries and flexibility to respond to new ways of using migration for political purposes. In addition, further research is needed on the effectiveness of current defences and how to improve them to meet the challenges of today's hybrid threats.

In the face of the growing complexity of threats related to migration and hybrid warfare, it is also crucial to develop international analyses and cooperation with organizations that have experience in managing migration crises and ensuring security in regions with high geopolitical tension. Only such an integrated approach will allow us to effectively counteract the use of migration as a tool to destabilize the EU.

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