

*RSIS Commentary is a platform to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy-relevant commentary and analysis of topical and contemporary issues. The authors' views are their own and do not represent the official position of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced with prior permission from RSIS and due recognition to the author(s) and RSIS. Please email to Mr Yang Razali Kassim, Editor RSIS Commentary at RSISPublications@ntu.edu.sg.*

---

## **Weaponising Migrants: Belarusian Blackmail & Multilateralism**

*By Frederick Kliem*

### **SYNOPSIS**

*The Belarusian dictator Lukashenko is currently launching a hybrid attack on the European Union by sending migrants to the EU border. This method is as old as it is cynical. The biggest problem is that hostile actors can so easily undermine multilateralism.*

### **COMMENTARY**

THE IMAGES are tragic. Thousands of Middle Eastern and African migrants are [trapped](#) in no-man's-land between Poland and Belarus, Europe's last dictatorship under the leadership of President Alexander Lukashenko.

Belarus proactively recruits hopeful migrants by granting special visas and flying them to Minsk from various places of origin only to then arrange transport to the poorly fortified border with Poland and Europe's border-free Schengen Area.

#### **Migration as a Weapon**

Polish authorities have responded with emergency laws that allow so-called pushbacks — illegal expulsion of asylum seekers without due process. Thousands of national police and military personnel patrol the area, with EU support.

Unable to return to Belarus, where migrants are denied re-entry, the people are stuck in between. This is never a comfortable situation; in Eastern Europe's harsh Winter months, it is costing lives.

The EU, especially Germany and Poland, are blaming Lukashenko for a cynical strategy of using human beings as weapons to both retaliate against European

sanctions and demonstrate his leverage. This is [neither the first time](#) the plight of hopeful refugees is being abused this way, nor is Lukashenko the only one [who has ever exploited](#) European fears of mass-migration.

Migration is precisely where the EU is at [its most vulnerable](#), not only since the 2015 refugee crisis. Societal divisions, the rise of the far-right, and many intra-EU political conflicts are the result of, at least severely exacerbated by, Europe's mismanagement of migration.

### **Exploiting Europe's & Multilateralism's Weakness**

No other policy area lends itself as much to exposing and exploiting Europe's dilemma: a normative and legalistic identity must respect human rights, especially the right to asylum, and due process; yet the nature of European integration and its guaranteed rights and economic security for individuals make it not only an attractive migration destination but also a highly fragile polity.

Current pushbacks, walls and barbed wire along the border with Belarus brutally visualise this predicament, and it is precisely these images that Lukashenko's perfidious strategy seeks.

The fault does not lie with the migrants seeking a better life for their families. Likewise, Polish authorities are unfairly accused of breaking international law. Securing the EU's external borders is a necessary, indeed an honourable task. But these are only patchwork attempts at tackling the symptoms.

It is ironic and devastating to watch dictators and strongmen succeed at bullying the EU. But their ability to create such images does not speak to their power as much as it speaks to multilateralism's weaknesses. Despite decades of deep integration and trust-building, national disagreements still prevent the EU from producing a functioning [migration regime](#).

Multilateralism is innately disadvantaged by a consensus imperative. Multilateral policy decisions are imperfect compromises among diverse, sometimes competing national interests.

Even if consensus is reached, the process is slow and tedious, and populist nationalists often blame multilateralism to gloss over domestic failures or play to nationalist instincts. This creates divisions, weakens multilateral legitimacy, and it opens space for external interference.

### **Multilateral Resilience**

Lukashenko's attack is particularly perfidious, but all organisations of regional integration, indeed multilateralism as such, are under threat from malign external actors seeking to create and exploit inter-governmental and intra-societal divisions to advance their strategic interest.

["Divide and conquer"](#) strengthens those actors, who do not seek partnerships and cooperation but dominance and zero-sum advantages.

Freshwater cut-offs at transboundary rivers, strategic investments in lesser developed economies, sending ethnic minorities or refugees to particularly vulnerable countries — the possibilities of hybrid attacks to undermine multilateralism are endless, and it is easy to identify [possible equivalents in Asia](#).

As far as Lukashenko — and illegal migration in general — are concerned, fortifying Europe is necessary, but not sufficient. Brussels must react with harsh sanctions and under no circumstances bow to Belarusian blackmail.

More importantly, the EU must increase its resilience by respecting its own principles meticulously, and by devising a functioning migration regime that both secures borders and respects Europe's humanistic identity. Lastly, Brussels must engage a multitude of partners who indirectly make Lukashenko's attack on Europe possible — the countries of origin, airlines, etc.

### **Best Defence: More Not Less Multilateralism**

This is something of a blueprint for enhancing the resilience of all multilateral processes and institutions against malign external influence.

The best defence is not securitisation, which only leads to legitimisation of martial responses in the name of national defence and erodes precisely those principles and values that make multilateralism strong. The best defence is not less multilateralism but more.

The key to neutralising external attacks on the integrity of multilateralism is to engage others and have legal processes in place for contingencies. Multilateralism's comparative advantage are multidimensional relationships and the facilitation of dialogue and trust-building to mediate estrangement.

Multilateralism is inclusive and respects all countries' needs by finding a *modus operandi* of reciprocal trade-offs. Diversification of partnerships offers not only multiple avenues to assert leverage, but it also offers alternatives, thereby reducing one-dimensional dependencies.

### **Unity Against Unilateral Coercion**

The confidence to do so rests with the trust in mutually agreed procedures and standards, followed by all. The less flexible and wavering these are, the stronger the unity. Clichéd but true, the strength of multilateralism is the belief that unity and reliable, legalistic process create strength through cooperation. This means often tedious processes but is the best guard against unilateral coercion.

What is needed is a clear demonstration of multilateralism's resilience, that regional organisations can manage and respond to external division tactics. This applies to the EU as much as to other organisations under pressure from those who seek to weaken them.

---

*Frederick Kliem is a Research Fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore.*

---

**S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU Singapore**  
Block S4, Level B3, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798  
T: +65 6790 6982 | E: [rsispublications@ntu.edu.sg](mailto:rsispublications@ntu.edu.sg) | W: [www.rsis.edu.sg](http://www.rsis.edu.sg)