When Migration Becomes a Weapon: Is Europe Prepared?

PART 1 — INTRODUCTION

[Speaker 1 - host - Linda Dāldere-Lapāne]

Migration has been one of the most divisive political issues in Europe for years.
It has shaped election campaigns, fuelled political tensions and raised difficult questions about border security, national sovereignty and the right to seek asylum.
But for some European countries, migration has also become something else entirely – a tool which adversaries use to attack them.
I'm Linda Dāldere-Lapāne, a journalist from Latvia's TVNET, and in this episode of LensEU, we're exploring the weaponisation of migration – how the movement of people can be deliberately exploited to put pressure on other countries. Together with fellow journalists from Poland, Germany and Croatia, we'll look at how this tactic works, what consequences it can have for European societies, and how the European Union is responding.
And this is a subject that hits particularly close to home.
For more than five years, Latvia has been facing sustained migration pressure from neighbouring Belarus. What began as a crisis at the European Union's external border has developed into a persistent security challenge, one that Latvian authorities regard as a deliberate attempt to destabilise the country.
And despite years of efforts to strengthen border security, the pressure continues.
Recent developments suggest that the tactics used against Latvia are becoming increasingly aggressive.

PART 2 — HOW MIGRATION BECAME A WEAPON

[Speaker 1 - Linda Dāldere-Lapāne]

To understand what is happening at Latvia's border today, we need to go back to the summer of 2021.
Relations between Belarus and the European Union had deteriorated sharply following the disputed presidential election in Belarus and the violent crackdown on protests.
The EU had imposed sanctions on Alexander Lukashenko's regime.
And then, thousands of people, many from the Middle East, began travelling to Belarus on the promise of an easier route into the European Union.

Some arrived on flights to Minsk, before being transported towards the borders with Lithuania, Latvia and Poland.
European governments accused Belarus of deliberately organising these movements in retaliation for EU sanctions.
It was a striking example of how migration could be used to put pressure on neighbouring countries without conventional military force.
But while the events unfolding on Europe's eastern border appeared extraordinary, the tactic itself was far from new.
American political scientist Kelly M. Greenhill has identified at least 81 historical cases of what she calls *coercive engineered migration* — the deliberate manipulation of people's movements to achieve political objectives.
During the Cold War, East Germany facilitated the movement of migrants towards West Germany to extract political and economic concessions.
Decades later, Libya's former leader Muammar Gaddafi repeatedly threatened Europe with increased migration unless his demands were met.
Different governments, different circumstances — but a similar political calculation.
The goal is not necessarily to move large numbers of people across a border.
Sometimes, the threat of an influx can be enough to influence another government's decisions.
And Greenhill's research suggests that this strategy has often worked. In nearly three-quarters of the cases she examined, those using migration as a coercive tool achieved at least some of their objectives.
But why?
One important reason is that migration is already a politically sensitive issue in many democratic societies.
It can provoke disagreements over security, national identity, public resources and the responsibility to protect those seeking asylum.
And governments deliberately manipulating migration flows may seek to exploit these existing divisions.

PART 3 — LATVIA: FIVE YEARS ON THE FRONTLINE

[Speaker 1 - Linda Dāldere-Lapāne]

This is also what makes the Belarusian operation particularly revealing.
Latvian authorities accuse the Belarusian regime of deliberately facilitating and sustaining migration pressure as part of a hybrid campaign against Latvia and, by extension, the European Union. The goal, according to Latvian officials, is to undermine border security, exhaust resources and create instability. And despite years of

strengthened border protection, the pressure has continued, and the methods used have become increasingly confrontational.

In 2024, Latvian border guards prevented 5,388 attempts to cross the border irregularly from Belarus. In 2025, that number rose to more than 12,000. And by late October 2026, the total had already exceeded the figure recorded during the entire previous year.

But increasingly, Latvian authorities are also concerned about deliberate acts of sabotage and intimidation.

By October 24th this year, they had recorded 61 cases of damage to border infrastructure, compared with 23 throughout the whole of 2025.

Surveillance cameras have been destroyed or stolen, fences have been cut, and those responsible have sometimes escaped back into Belarus before border guards could intervene.

On October 6th, the situation took a particularly alarming turn.

According to the Latvian Armed Forces, three masked and apparently armed men attempted to force a group of at least twenty migrants across the border, threatening Latvian soldiers in the process.

Hours later, masked individuals entered Latvian territory, damaged an electricity distribution box and stole surveillance cameras before retreating to Belarus.

But perhaps the most significant recent development is that Latvia has begun investigating the organisation behind these operations.

In July, the Prosecutor General's Office opened a criminal investigation into suspected coordinated activities directed against the country's border security.

Prosecutors say the available evidence points to a criminal organisation involving at least five people, suspected of coordinating irregular crossings and systematically damaging infrastructure to undermine the work of Latvian border guards.

For the first time, Latvian prosecutors are examining the actions of Belarusian officials as part of a criminal investigation into this pressure campaign.

And in late October, new details emerged about how the suspected operation works.

Latvian public broadcaster LTV's investigative programme *De facto* reported that migrants travelling towards the EU through Russia and Belarus may pay around five thousand US dollars for the journey, often using cryptocurrency.

They are reportedly transported to camps close to the Latvian border, where some remain for days and others for months.

Prosecutor Andris Aleksejevs described how uniformed officials allegedly check whether migrants have paid for their journey. Those who have not may be forced to damage Latvia's border infrastructure – or face physical violence and torture.

It means that people seeking to reach Europe are likely deliberately channelled towards Latvia, kept near its border and then coerced into participating in acts of sabotage.

And while the identities of those carrying out individual attacks are not always clear, Latvian officials have repeatedly accused Belarusian authorities of enabling the broader operation.
In fact, Latvia's Border Guard chief has suggested that some perpetrators may be members of organised criminal networks rather than Belarusian state officials themselves.
That distinction does not necessarily rule out state involvement. But it does make identifying those directing the operations and establishing responsibility more complicated.
This is also a reminder that the migrants themselves may be victims of coercion, even as their movements are being exploited to threaten another country's security.
For Latvia, the consequences are very real. The country has had to maintain enhanced border security measures for years, reinforce surveillance infrastructure and deploy additional security personnel.
In August, the government launched Operation *Vilkatis*, bringing together the Border Guard, Armed Forces and other institutions to strengthen its response. The operation has since been extended until the end of December. Latvia has also received assistance from Estonia, Finland, Lithuania and Poland.
And this is where the wider European significance becomes clear. What is being targeted is not only Latvia's national border. It is also an external border of the European Union and NATO.
Deliberately undermining its security is therefore not simply a bilateral problem between Latvia and Belarus. It is a direct challenge to the integrity and security of a border shared by European allies.
And Poland knows this challenge particularly well.
Its border with Belarus has also been subjected to sustained migration pressure since 2021. But the consequences there have extended beyond border security, deeply affecting political debates and public attitudes towards migration.
Bartosz Kocejko-Szukalski, deputy editor-in-chief at the Polish investigative newsroom OKO.press, explains how the crisis has divided Polish society – and why those divisions continue to matter five years later.

[Speaker 2 - Bartosz Kocejko-Szukalski]

In the summer of 2021, the crisis on the border with Belarus caught both the Polish state and society by surprise. The arrival of migrants, mostly from the Middle East but also from other regions in the forests along the border, triggered two different responses. On the one hand, the government, then led by the right wing Law and Justice Party, began tightening border security. It put up barbed wire fences and sent the military to towns and villages along the border. At the same time, it tried to use

people's fear for political gain and portrayed migrants in a dehumanizing way. At press conferences they were presented as direct threats to Polish citizens, often in openly racist terms. The authorities also began carrying out mass pushbacks, often refusing to accept asylum applications. On the other hand, civil society groups and volunteers got involved on a large scale, helping migrants at the Polish-Belarusian border by bringing them food and providing medical assistance. The migration crisis was also a humanitarian crisis with tragic consequences. According to a report by the “We Are Monitoring” Association, which collects data on the humanitarian crisis at the Polish-Belarusian border, 107 people have died there so far. Repeated pushbacks are believed to have contributed to many of these deaths. Today, there are relatively few migrants at the Polish-Belarusian border, but the current government, a coalition of center, right and left wing parties, has largely followed the previous government's approach. It has built a modern border wall, continued pushbacks and suspended the right to apply for asylum at the Polish-Belarusian border. And this is perhaps the most lasting and paradoxical effect of the crisis. While fighting a hybrid attack by an authoritarian regime, Poland has given up some of the protections provided by humanitarian law, protections that were previously seen as one of the foundations of liberal democracy.

PART 4 — BEYOND THE BORDER: EUROPE'S POLITICAL DIVISIONS

[Speaker 1 - Linda Dāldere-Lapāne]

The experience of Poland shows that the consequences of weaponised migration can extend far beyond the border itself.
Even when governments manage to prevent irregular crossings, the political tensions created or intensified by such a crisis can persist for years.
And this is particularly significant in Europe, where migration has already become one of the most divisive political issues.
Of course, not every country has experienced migration being deliberately weaponised by a hostile state. But the political vulnerabilities that make this tactic effective are much more widespread.
Germany offers one particularly striking example of how polarised the debate over migration has become.
In 2024, the investigative newsroom Correctiv uncovered a secret meeting involving figures from the far-right Alternative for Germany party, or AfD, and other participants.
The investigation revealed discussions about so-called remigration — including proposals that could affect even German citizens with migrant backgrounds.

Jean Peters, one of the journalists who led the investigation, explains what was discussed at the meeting, how the revelations affected German society, and what followed politically.

[Speaker 3 - Jean Peters]

We were able to observe several AFD officials discussing their plans. Among them were leading figures from the party apparatus like Ulrich Siegmund and a close aide to Alice Weidel, the head of the party. Her assistant was in the room as well they talked about how to push forward so-called remigration on many fronts, including media interventions and social media.

"It all started with the very first presentation, the one by the right extremist Martin Sellner. That was the secret plan, as we called it, or the host himself called it the master plan.
Now, what does remigration actually mean? Amongst other things, it means a racist expulsion of people from Germany. Whether the term implies expulsion, displacement, deportation, or so-called voluntary departure, has become subject of numerous court rulings. And that is exactly the nature of this word. It's an umbrella term, a euphemism. It goes beyond typical neo-Nazi foreigners out rhetoric. That was a point that shocked so many people because it crossed significant lines. It even includes German citizen. In a follow-up question on site, they were described as the biggest problem, something that would have to be solved through a project leading decades. Martin Sellner said it would have to be done with tailor-made laws. And of course, then came the aftermath. Many people in the AfD adopted the term, while others distanced themselves from it. Even at the European level, there were consequences. Marine Le Pen declared that she wanted nothing to do with it and ended her cooperation with the AfD.
The political impact was very, very strong. Federal Ministry of the Interior took action, and of course, a great many people took to the streets to demonstrate, more than ever in the history of Germany. Various networks formed new alliances, and I think that's the most important impact.
The campaign to ban the AfD gained momentum, and it eventually led to an expert legal opinion commissioned by a Society for Civil Rights, the Gesellschaft für Freiheitsrechte. And all of this came out of a movement that spread across all of Germany.
The so-called “Omas gegen rechts”, the grannies against the right, became much, much stronger. They have since become the largest women's movement in Germany. In short, it all had very strong social impacts."

But the question is: What is the state of migration debate in Germany today, and what does it have to do with our investigation? Following our reporting, I can see a certain trend that also goes on the other side. Alongside the protest movement, many right-wing ideas have spilled over into the mainstream, the so-called bourgeois center, if you want."

[Speaker 1 - Linda Dāldere-Lapāne]

Germany's domestic political debates are not, in themselves, evidence of migration being weaponised by a foreign government.
But they demonstrate how politically charged the issue has become — and how an externally engineered migration crisis could potentially amplify disagreements that already exist.
And Germany is hardly alone in facing political tensions over migration.
Croatia, for example, has not experienced the same kind of state-orchestrated migration pressure as Latvia or Poland. But as a country responsible for managing one of the European Union's longest external land borders, migration remains an important political issue.
Our colleagues at the Croatian newsroom Telegram explain how these concerns have shaped the debate.

[Speaker 4 - Irena Frlan Gašparović]

Croatia hasn't actually experienced that specific type of weaponized migration pressure like some other EU member states. Still, the Croatian government understands the position of Latvia, Lithuania, or Poland. The main reason is simple geography. Croatia is responsible for managing one of the longest external land borders in the entire European Union. Inside the country, the political debate revolves around a different question. Centered on a fear that is mostly stoked by right-wing populists, the risk of Croatia becoming a permanent so-called hotspot for irregular migration.
These right-wing politicians are driving this narrative, from time to time even advocating for sending the military to patrol the borders. Yet they rarely explain what the purpose of that radical step would be, or what the army would actually do differently on the ground.
On the other hand, the government insists that there is no extraordinary or unmanageable pressure on the external borders. However, the government also consists of right-wing parties, so it is usually keen to accept any EU proposal or initiative that goes in the direction of a greater state control over borders and stricter asylum and migration policy.

[Speaker 1 - Linda Dāldere-Lapāne]

Croatia's experience is clearly different from that of Latvia or Poland. But it illustrates how debates over migration and border security can shape domestic politics even without a direct campaign of migration instrumentalisation.
And the Croatian government's position also points to another challenge: while European countries may broadly agree on the need for stronger border controls, they do not necessarily agree on how those policies should be implemented.

PART 5 — IS EUROPE PREPARED?

[Speaker 1 - Linda Dāldere-Lapāne]

So, how is Europe responding to these challenges?
The EU has introduced new rules designed to help member states deal with migration crises, including situations where another country deliberately uses migrants as a tool of political pressure.
Its new Pact on Migration and Asylum, which came into application in June 2026, gives countries facing such situations access to additional support and certain emergency procedures.
And in late October, the European Commission proposed a significant expansion of Frontex, the EU's border and coast guard agency, to strengthen border protection and improve responses to emerging threats.
But European governments do not necessarily agree on how far these measures should go.
One particularly controversial idea is the establishment of so-called return hubs in countries outside the EU, where people ordered to leave the Union could be transferred. Human rights organisations have raised concerns about the implications for migrants' rights. And some member states worry about the consequences for their own borders. As our Croatian colleagues explain, this is a particular concern for their government.

[Speaker 4 - Irena Frlan Gašparović]

But there is one major exception where the government shows extreme caution. The European debate over establishing so-called return hubs for migrants in non-EU countries. These detention centers have been highly criticized by international NGOs from a human rights perspective, but that is not why the Croatian government is cautious.

They don't object to the idea of these centers in theory. They just insist that these hubs must not be open in non-EU countries that directly border Croatia. Because they fear it would intensify pressure on Croatian borders.

[Speaker 1 - Linda Dāldere-Lapāne]

And there is another dilemma.
Countries facing deliberate attacks on their borders need effective ways to defend themselves. In Latvia, for example, recent discussions about expanding border guards' powers to use firearms have raised questions about how to balance security with the proportional use of force.
These are difficult choices, particularly when the migrants involved may themselves be victims of exploitation and coercion.
And they reveal why there is no simple solution to weaponised migration.
Stronger borders, better coordination and clearer rules can make Europe more resilient. But they cannot, on their own, prevent a hostile government from deliberately creating a crisis.

PART 6 — CONCLUSION

[Speaker 1 - Linda Dāldere-Lapāne]

So, is Europe prepared?
Compared with five years ago, the EU has gained experience, strengthened its rules and begun developing new tools to respond.
But as Latvia and Poland have shown, this is not only about managing migration. It can involve real, sustained attacks on a country's border — attacks that also affect the security of the European Union and NATO.
And as our colleagues in Germany and Croatia have illustrated, migration remains an issue capable of exposing deep political divisions, even in countries facing very different circumstances.
Europe's challenge is therefore twofold: to protect its borders against deliberate interference, and to ensure that those seeking to destabilise it cannot turn existing political disagreements into an even greater vulnerability.
That’s it for this week’s episode of the LensEU podcast – zooming in on what drives Europe’s community. Join us again next week!

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