

# DGAP POLICY BRIEF

## If Russia Uses Migration as a Weapon, Europeans Should Respond in Kind



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Around 442,000 people have so far fled Ukraine – not just to the EU, but also to neighbors like Moldova. This is a humanitarian issue, and should not be conflated with “migrant instrumentalization” (MI), whereby a state pushes people across a border to coerce the EU to change position. Yet Russia is likely to employ MI in this way, especially if it moves deep into Western Ukraine. Drawing on an in-depth study, we show how the EU can meet this specific threat.

– We identified four profiles of actors which might seek to use MI against the EU: (1) strong states like Russia, (2) proxy states like Belarus, (3) weak states like Ukraine, and (4) non-state actors such as militias or smugglers in places like Libya.

– The nature of MI is such that the EU can best respond through “deterrence by punishment.” Using the four profiles, it should therefore prepare a toolbox for ratcheting up the costs.

– But if the EU responds to MI by creating fortress Europe, it will only play into the hands of its rivals. It should adopt a light-touch and cooperative response, especially when dealing with weak states.

– Another reason to tread carefully is that Russia is positioning its own “strong state” model as an alternative to Western liberalism. This may be attractive for post-colonial states that have seen scant rewards for their embrace of economic interdependence.

## THE RETURN OF MIGRATION INSTRUMENTALIZATION

Russia has begun its invasion of Ukraine, and the EU is experiencing large-scale migration from its direct neighbor.<sup>1</sup> Experts have projected that up to five million Ukrainians could flee a Russian invasion (Syria produced 6.8 million); and Poland, home to 2 million Ukrainians,<sup>2</sup> is already experiencing an influx of women and children (and outflow of fighting-age men). Most frontline EU states are bullish about their ability to cope, but there are concerns about reception capacities and the fact that only 35% of Ukrainians have been vaccinated against Covid-19.<sup>3</sup> Fear of migration from war-torn Eastern Europe is not new. In the 1980s, Western Europeans advocated stable relations with the Eastern Bloc in response to projections that as many as 60 million people would flee a collapsing USSR. And in the past five years, Moscow has again started using the fear of migration to coerce and destabilize Europe, targeting Finland and NATO allies like Turkey and Norway by pushing migrants across their borders.

Until recently, there had been precious little discussion between EU lawmakers and experts regarding migrant instrumentalization (MI).<sup>4</sup> And, although countries like Poland have been pressing the EU to integrate MI into its regular assessments of their border vulnerabilities, the results were diffuse and specific to each member state. Last year, however, the regime in Belarus engaged in a particularly brazen and cruel campaign of MI, pushing Iraqi Yazidis, Syrian and Iraqi Kurds, and various other refugees to the country's borders with Poland, Latvia, and Lithuania in retaliation for EU sanctions. We analyzed the phenomenon for the European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats,<sup>5</sup> assessing Europe's vulnerability to

MI, as well as possible countermeasures. In this DGAP paper, we reiterate and update the study's findings to inform the general debate. After all, MI exploits public misperception for its effect, and the study found the EU was not as vulnerable as is commonly believed.

Since we carried out the analysis, the EU has begun developing countermeasures. It responded to the situation at the border with Belarus with two proposals<sup>6</sup> that would allow EU members to derogate from asylum and border rules if a hostile state instrumentalizes migration to prevent them from carrying out critical state functions. Yet neither proposal looks set to be implemented properly even at the Belarusian border, where MI activities could well return. Poland has criticized the EU for what it sees as making the wrong kind of derogations, and actually tying its hands. Moreover, neither proposal seems suitable for the situation at the border with Ukraine, a friendly neighbor intent on good cooperation – but one where a hostile power like Russia might, for instance, spread disinformation about the character of the people fleeing into the EU. Therefore, although our analysis preceded the EU's defensive push, little has really changed in that regard.

## MI AT ALL EU BORDERS: NO "ONE-SIZE-FITS-ALL" APPROACH

The EU Commission's proposals are specifically attuned to the types of action perpetrated by Belarus, and to the geography characteristic of the Polish borderlands.<sup>7</sup> European human rights NGOs have warned that the Commission is trying to "universalize"<sup>8</sup> these derogations from EU asylum and border procedures, applying them across the length of the Schengen border – to Greece's eastern flank, where

1 Reuters, „More than half a million people have fled Ukraine, U.N. says,” February 28, 2022: <<https://www.reuters.com/world/more-than-half-million-people-have-fled-ukraine-un-says-2022-02-28/>> (accessed February 28, 2022).

2 Katie Livingstone, “Poland Unprepared for Waves of Ukrainian Refugees,” Foreign Policy, February 27, 2022: <<https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/02/27/poland-ukraine-refugees/>> (accessed February 27, 2022).

3 World Bank Data, “Multilateral Leaders Task Force on Covid-19: Ukraine,” February 25, 2022: <<https://data.covid19taskforce.com/data/countries/Ukraine>> (accessed February 27, 2022).

4 This is despite (or perhaps because of) the authoritative analysis by Kelly Greenhill: Weapons of Mass Migration: Forced Displacement, Coercion, and Foreign Policy (Cornell University Press, 2010).

5 Roderick Parkes, András Rácz, Alia Fakhry, “Migration Instrumentalization: A Taxonomy for an Efficient Response,” European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats (forthcoming).

6 European Commission, “Asylum and return: Commission proposes temporary legal and practical measures to address the emergency situation at the EU's external border with Belarus,” Press release, December 1, 2021: <[https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP\\_21\\_6447](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_21_6447)> (accessed February 27, 2022).

7 The Commission proposals permit Poland, Latvia, and Lithuania to reduce the number of border points where migrants can claim asylum; extend the period before they offer claimants access to the asylum process and, thus, to the country's territory; and shorten the time permitted for handling asylum claims so applicants can be kept in detention for the full period of the procedure.

8 Catherine Woollard, “Editorial: Asylum Mini-Package: Derogations through the Backdoor,” ECRE, January 21, 2022: <<https://ecre.org/asylum-mini-package-derogations-through-the-backdoor/>> (accessed on February 25, 2022).

Turkey has long been accused of instrumentalizing migration movements, or to Cyprus.<sup>9</sup> We echo this warning from a security perspective: The Commission is offering an extremely narrow and introspective response to a highly varied international threat that could affect any of the EU's borders – its 65,000 km coastline, its 14,000 km land border, or its 300+ airports, not to mention its world-wide scattering of overseas territories. Universalizing this response will make the EU more vulnerable, not less.

In mid-2021, we were asked to look at MI because of concerns about multiple entry points.<sup>10</sup>

- In the space of 48 hours in May 2021, **Morocco** pushed 8-10,000 people across the border to the Spanish exclaves of Ceuta and Melilla. The trigger appears to have been the decision by Spain to offer hospital treatment to a rebel leader from Western Sahara, a territory for which Rabat seeks EU recognition of its sovereignty claims. Matters calmed down only after Spain replaced the foreign minister who had greenlighted the hospital treatment and reversed a move to appoint her chief of staff as ambassador to Russia.
- Between March and April 2021, Russia sent thousands of troops to its border with **Ukraine**. Ukraine is a friendly and responsible neighbor to the EU, intent on closer relations no matter the immediate cost to itself. Still, EU states feared the westward emigration of Ukrainians even without conflict as thousands of young Ukrainians had fled military conscription in 2014. Ukraine might theoretically engage in a form of MI, using its inability to manage outward migration or secure its borders as a means to call in Frontex or an EU crisis-management operation, thus giving the EU skin in the game with Russia.
- On the EU's southern border, **Libya** drew attention. By promising to beat back political Islamists and bring stability to the region, strongman securocrat General Haftar had won support from France and Russia even while challenging the country's unity government. But with his retreat from Tripoli, a new power shuffle was under way. EU governments worried that Russia might start

## Universalizing its response will make the EU more vulnerable, not less

to make new alliances with militias and smugglers, sending migrants across the Mediterranean to distract the West from its activities in Eastern Europe. There were questions about whether EU member states' own deals with Libyan militias were robust enough to prevent this.

- The situation on the border with **Belarus** was also escalating. Even before the imposition of EU sanctions in response to the Ryanair hijacking in May, the regime in Minsk had sent a trickle of people across the border to Poland. Now Belarus used its sanction-hit national airline to bring Iraqis and others into the country, supplementing its budget by charging migrants up to USD 10,000 for their passage to Europe. There was evidence that it enjoyed tentative Russian backing, with Moscow keen to see how the EU would respond. The situation ended when the German government reached over the heads of the most affected EU member states to speak directly with Moscow and Minsk.

### TAXONOMY: A TOOL TO IDENTIFY, ATTRIBUTE, AND PROHIBIT MI

The task we set ourselves was to create a taxonomy of migrant instrumentalization. MI ranks as a low-cost form of action available to the EU's rivals.<sup>11</sup> Consequently, the EU's response needs to be equally efficient and low-cost, and that means having a good system to help it quickly identify, attribute, and/or delegitimize MI actions. We established a four-way taxonomy of MI means and motives, modelled around four types of MI perpetrators:

9 N.N., "Slovenia's Hojs warns of emerging migration crisis in Cyprus," Euractiv, December 10, 2021: <<https://www.euractiv.com/section/eu-council-presidency/news/slovenias-hojs-warns-of-emerging-migration-crisis-in-cyprus/>> (accessed February 25, 2022).

10 Cp. full study for full data.

11 This is due to the ready availability of irregular migrants and refugees, and the relative weakness of international migration norms which might lead to global criticism.



**1. Strong states like Morocco** (and Turkey, Iran or Russia). These are countries that can direct migrants across the EU's border, often over the heads of their own civil society. Sometimes they even use their own nationals as pawns, removing ethnic minorities such as Kurds or Chechens, whose expulsion may seem conducive to national cohesion. These states have the capacity to act in multiple theaters, sometimes via client governments and proxies. In such cases, the migrants in question tend to be a mere by-product of the conflict that is their primary focus, and they use the threat of migration to distract the EU from their more nefarious actions.



**2. Proxy states like Belarus** (or proxy governmental actors like Hezbollah). These perpetrators neighbor the EU but have stronger relations to another larger patron like Russia, Turkey or Iran. Nonetheless, they can be considered the prime actors in some MI cases because they do not always instrumentalize migration at the behest of their larger partner. Rather, they feel that they have no legitimate means to influence the EU, perhaps because the patron has shrunk those options with its own behavior, and so use a migration crisis to gain an advantage relative to both the EU and their patron. If the proxy state is the prime actor, this is a case of the "tail wagging the dog." But even if this is the case, the patron state will usually see some advantage in acting against the EU.



**3. Weak states like Ukraine** (or weak self-declared states like Kosovo). These states use migration flows in order to mutualize their domestic problems and draw in the EU. These problems can include anything from domestic unemployment to problems of territorial integrity and violent conflict. Their MI actions are tricky to identify

or condemn because these states may have legitimate reasons to demand solidarity from the EU. They may find themselves sitting on a major migrant transit route to the EU, allowing them to legitimately demand support in controlling it. But they might also use the situation to press the EU to side with them in a conflict, to gain access to military equipment, or to reverse international sanctions.



**4. Non-state actors like Libyan militias** (but also smugglers, and even organizations like the World Food Programme). This class of perpetrators see MI as a means to achieve politico-commercial goals and take on more state-like attributes. That might mean controlling borders to assert their control over territory, providing services to a local population, drawing rents from travelers or even the EU, or securing a measure of recognition from Europe. Although we included the World Food Programme in this category, it is worth reiterating that the vast majority of humanitarian organizations do not subject the EU to this mix of migration control, fund-raising, humanitarian services, and disinformation campaigns – but some do.<sup>12</sup>

To verify this four-way taxonomy, we looked at around forty historical examples of MI in Europe since the Schengen crisis of 2015. Some instances were well-known and self-evident, for instance between Turkey and Greece in 2015, or Russia and Finland/Norway in 2016.<sup>13</sup> Others were lesser known, for instance when, in spring 2016, Romania proposed the establishment of a joint Black Sea fleet with Turkey, Ukraine, and Bulgaria, and in a bid to coerce Bulgaria into supporting it, Turkey engaged in MI.<sup>14</sup> There were also some more complex actions that were hard to pin down but hinted at the capacity of a "strong state" like Russia to play MI games across multiple geographies.<sup>15</sup> This cross-check against 40 known or suspected cases validated the taxonomy.

12 In December 2014 the World Food Programme (WFP) warned that a wave of Syrian refugees would move on to the EU unless Europeans increased their funding for the WFP's work in Lebanon, where huge numbers of Syrians were sheltering. When a wave of refugees did hit Greece in 2015, WFP officials cited this as proof of its warnings, and succeeded in raising more funding. Subsequent research showed that the refugees were coming not from Lebanon but directly from northern Syria, as the fighting moved northwards through the country. The WFP was reportedly aware of this, but nevertheless made the same plea at Christmas the following year.

13 Piotr Szymański et al, "Enforced cooperation: the Finnish-Russian migration crisis," OSW, Analysis, April 6, 2016: <<https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2016-04-06/enforced-cooperation-finnish-russian-migration-crisis>> (accessed February 25, 2022).

14 N.N., "Bulgarian leaders speak on 'Black Sea fleet' plan, tensions with Turkey," *Sophia Globe*, June 16, 2016: <<https://sofiaglobe.com/2016/06/16/bulgarian-leaders-speak-on-black-sea-fleet-plan-tensions-with-turkey/>> (accessed February 25, 2022).

15 One such instance was the evidence from 2019 that Russia had directed migration flows at the US and EU borders. This apparently led President Trump to renew his calls for a wall on the border with Mexico, which in turn drew funds from the US defense budget away from military mobility in Europe. This move undermined governments like Poland's, which were both anti-migrant and pro-Trump, and struggled either to criticize or to justify the repurposing of the US defense budget.

### POLICY IMPLICATIONS: IMPROVING “DETERRENCE BY PUNISHMENT”

It proved surprisingly easy for us to create this comprehensive taxonomy for classifying examples of MI. Certainly, it proved far easier to categorize and find patterns in MI actions than it has been to do the same for other similar threats, such as cyber-attacks or disinformation campaigns. The next question, therefore, was what use EU and NATO risk analysts and policy-makers should make of this seeming wonder instrument. The availability of a comprehensive taxonomy held out the prospect of getting away from the EU’s usual rather reactive “deterrence by punishment” and moving towards a more forward-looking “deterrence by denial.”

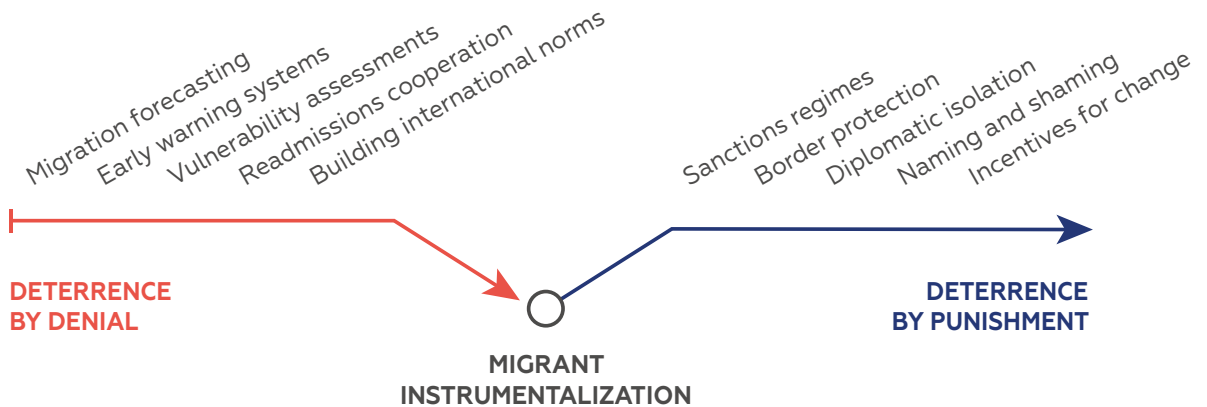
The latter of these two types of deterrence means anticipating MI threats to the EU, then pre-emptively plugging vulnerabilities, thus denying the hostile state the opportunity to act. The former means responding to actions once they occur, reactively ratcheting up the costs by means such as sanctions. The cheapest option when it comes to defense and crisis is usually the former: If the EU can rely on a taxonomy like this to zero in on its vulnerabilities and prevent a conflagration, it can avoid costly tit-for-tat, or – ideally – prevent crises from arising in the first place. To our surprise, however, we found that even a

comprehensive taxonomy like ours offered few ways to anticipate attacks or narrow down vulnerabilities, meaning that “deterrence by denial” was not viable.

The reasons for consigning the EU to a reactive/punitive posture are, however, important because they tell us something about the nature of MI as a tool:

- **It is easy to identify cases of MI when they occur, but it is near impossible to predict them.** It was relatively straightforward for us to build a taxonomy to describe the forty past cases of MI that we had identified. But in order to predict when perpetrators would resort to MI in future, we would have also needed to have coded non-cases of MI – the thousands of times when the EU’s neighbors had the opportunity to instrumentalize migration but did not do so. Remember, for instance, that Belarusian President Lukashenko (himself a former border official) started threatening to push migrants into Western Europe as far back as 2002,<sup>16</sup> but only followed through after two decades. Knowing when perpetrators will act is virtually impossible, but reacting quickly is remarkably easy.
- Whilst reactivity is therefore the default response, there were in fact positive reasons for the EU to choose to be reactive. **MI tends to be an overt form of coercion unlike, say, an attack**

## 1 – FORMS OF DETERRENCE



16 Kelly Greenhill, Weapons of Mass Migration: Forced Displacement, Coercion, and Foreign Policy (Cornell University Press, 2010).

**on the EU's critical infrastructure or a disinformation campaign.** Border crossings have little political effect if they do not reach the public domain, and the perpetrator can extract little benefit if it does not demonstrate its capacity to "turn off the tap" or clarify its political demands. Furthermore, MI involves human beings, a ready source of Human Intelligence for the EU to learn about the perpetrator's methods, although this takes some time. Nevertheless, this makes attribution and response rather easier, and may also help the EU to mobilize a coalition of countries of origin like Egypt or Jordan, which are under pressure to prevent their citizens being used as pawns by, for instance, Belarus.

- Likewise providing a positive reason for the EU to resort to deterrence by punishment, MI turned out to be less of a low-cost method than we had initially assumed, making it relatively easy for the EU to ratchet up the costs for perpetrators. Very often, the perpetrators faced considerable domestic costs already, as migrants became stranded, citizens in their borderlands were alienated by the willful chaos, or minorities reacted against the treatment of their ethnic kin. The EU might believe, for instance, that Turkey has nothing to lose from instrumentalizing migration, but our analysis of one case from 2018 showed that when Ankara threatened to open the floodgates to the EU, around 30,000 people started moving across Turkey to the EU, and around 500,000 more began moving across Syria towards the Turkish border.

**We reached the conclusion, therefore, that the EU's basic posture should be based on deterrence by punishment:** It should prepare a toolbox to ratchet up the costs of MI, based on the four profiles: (1) strong states, (2) weak states, (3) proxy states, and (4) non-states. The four categories of perpetrator are after all quite steady and internally cohesive, meaning that it is possible to put together a toolbox ready to use in a crisis. Moreover, even seemingly difficult-to-recognize categories – the actions of weak and proxy states – are made easier to identify and deter by this taxonomy.

When dealing with proxy states, for instance, a pre-prepared response would focus on increasing the costs for the patron state (Russia in the case of Belarus) in order to widen fissures between proxy and patron. This might involve the EU punishing the patron state even when the patron can plausibly deny

involvement, introducing measures which de facto punish the patron rather than singling it out for attribution and punishment. In the case of Russia and its proxy Belarus, this could mean identifying rules that are already on the statute books but are under-implemented and whose proper application would de facto hit Russia hard, even without attributing it a role in the MI action. Anti-money laundering rules would be an obvious example.

### SMART DEFENSE: THE EU NEEDS TO AVOID "SELF-CONTAINMENT"

Deterrence by punishment may sound like it involves creating a toolbox comprised solely of punitive sanctions, reactive defensive measures, and displays of decisive power politics by the EU. Not so: An EU which pursues that course will soon find itself trapped in what one interviewee described as "self-containment," wherein the EU surrounds itself by fences and uses its economic ties with neighbors primarily for punishment and coercion. Rather, this is about a light touch and sometimes even cooperative response – something particularly necessary when handling potential weak state perpetrators like Ukraine, which may be tempted to engage in MI in order to gain help from the EU.

## The EU's should prepare a toolbox to ratchet up the costs of MI

Carrots just as much as sticks can provide a powerful deterrent even for hostile states: If the EU can show that the perpetrator is squandering the opportunity for cooperation open to other states then that too is a way of ratcheting up the costs. The EU, moreover, can usefully remind itself that migration is a global phenomenon and that it has potential allies world-wide among other countries subject to MI or those which see their citizens instrumentalized in MI actions: Building a coalition of these states against the perpetrator will often be more effective than unilaterally introducing sanctions. A narrowly punitive/defensive course, on the other hand, risks

squandering friendships and allowing the perpetrator to push the moral blame onto the EU.<sup>17</sup>

Indeed, an EU which perceives itself as under permanent threat of MI is likely to play precisely into the hands of its rivals, turning itself into fortress Europe, and it is worth here reiterating three findings from the report:

- **In almost all the cases we examined, the EU was not the “natural” destination for the migrants, and as time passed MI flows proved to be largely artificial and increasingly costly for the perpetrator.** The EU’s worldview is inherently Eurocentric, and it tends to picture itself at the center of a huge regional economy stretching out as far as Ukraine in the East, Nigeria and Ethiopia in the South, and Latin America in the West, the natural destination for this vast region’s refugees and underemployed. This assumption is valid up to a point, but its Eurocentrism means that the EU tends to miss how artificial many MI actions are and how easily they can be deterred with temporary, light touch actions. Belarus initially found it easy to recruit Iraqis to move to Europe, for instance, but its brutality in pushing people across the border and a rise in prices gradually reversed that.
- In most of the cases, moreover, the **EU’s embrace of top-heavy and protectionist geopolitics made its fear of migration flows self-fulfilling**, fueling smuggling networks throughout its neighborhood and fueling a sense of moral impunity amongst perpetrators.<sup>18</sup> The EU’s vulnerabilities are in fact often better handled in a decentralized manner focused on keeping the border open. This is the approach that has been traditionally practiced by border guards on the Finnish-Russian border, who meet regularly with their counterparts on the other side, engaging in confidence-building and mutual threat assessments. This meant that each side could prevent their capitals from playing geopolitics, and also gave border officials a deep knowledge of the other side’s local border weaknesses and trade depen-

dencies that they could use to their benefit if the other side did start playing games.

- Lastly, in almost all forty of the cases we examined, **there was a fine line between cooperation and coercion among the perpetrators of MI – even Russia.** When it targeted Finland with an MI campaign in 2015-16, for instance, Russia was looking for a resumption of diplomatic relations after Crimea. Similarly, when Turkey targeted Greece and the EU more generally around the same time, it wanted the EU to recognize its humanitarian efforts and to help protect it from MI action by Russia, which was pushing Syrian refugees across its own border. And in 2021, even as Morocco pushed people across its borders with Spain, it never stopped cooperating on returns: 300 irregular migrants returned to Morocco within 24 hours, and 5,000 within a week. Perpetrators historically have often been looking for a release from international sanctions and rehabilitation.

## FROM THE GENERAL TO THE SPECIFIC: REACTING TO THE RUSSIA SITUATION

Our thinking in all this was based on the status quo ante – the international situation before Russia broke norms and started a major conflict at the EU’s border. So is the taxonomy still relevant? Do its fine distinctions between types of MI campaign hold, let alone the underlying exhortation for a light touch EU approach based on a cooperative perspective?

At first glance, no. If the EU is subject to MI in the course of the Russian invasion, then it will likely be on such a monumental and brutal scale that any taxonomy and tailored toolbox will be all but useless. Russia has form here: In December 2015, Turkey shot down a Russian Su-24M at the Turkish-Syrian border. As part of its reprisals, Russia began bombing right up to the Turkish border, dislodging thousands of internally displaced Syrians who had been sheltering there and pushing them into Turkey. This brutal use

17 It is worth noting that states like Russia and Morocco are migrant destinations in their own right. Morocco, like other African states, is trying to build up its own immigration regime, and it risks squandering that every time it engages in MI. Morocco is opening itself to migrants from West Africa not only in order to leverage their transit to Europe, but also to build its own prestige in the UN, to play king-maker between Anglophone and Francophone West Africa, and to gain access to brains and investors. If the EU responds to Morocco in too heavy-handed a manner, it draws the blame to itself and makes its assumptions about a mass influx more likely.

18 EU attempts to “externalize” its borders, building defenses in places like Libya, has backfired. As the EU tried to secure Libya’s southern borders from transit migrants, it seems to have created opportunities for smugglers and militias, ignoring the fact that many African migrants were actually looking for work in Libya, and sidelining potential allies from cities and ethnic minorities. Furthermore, member states like Poland, which have called for the EU to adopt a more classic form of geopolitics, would probably have the most to lose if it did, as this would embolden big member states like France and Germany to bypass them, making deals directly with MI players like Russia.

of MI marked a turning point in the Syrian conflict, with Turkey forced onto the back foot.<sup>19</sup> Russian state media gleefully reported that the Turkish president had been forced into a groveling apology. This method could be repeated here in Europe.

This will be case if the war goes badly for Moscow, as a reckless Russia no longer holds back in Ukraine, believing that it is fighting a war that it must win at any cost and not a war of conquest to control and govern Ukrainians, so freeing itself from any qualms about committing acts of atrocity and entering a long partisan war in which no constraints pertain. But the taxonomy might still have a use here: The taxonomy will be useful for describing different kinds of MI actions, allowing it to draw up international norms focused on proscribing the most egregious forms of MI action and drawing a line to the kind of MI that a weak state like Ukraine might perpetrate. Such distinctions matter in the face of a Russian adversary which likes to engage in “whataboutism” and lawfare.

If Moscow is struggling, moreover, the EU will no longer face MI actions from a masterful Russian power acting in multiple theaters such as Ukraine, Belarus, and Libya. Rather, it will face a series of uncoordinated MI actions, with Russia unwittingly allowing other types of players – Belarus, for example – to behave opportunistically, acting as a proxy but seeking its own advantages relative to both the EU and Russia. There may be examples of MI from other strong states – a disgruntled Turkey, for instance, angry at the lack of EU solidarity in the Black Sea. And it is even conceivable that Russians themselves might become the object of MI campaigns, for instance if economic measures cripple the country’s Central Bank, causing runs on banks, a spike in urban unemployment and, eventually, mass outward migration.<sup>20</sup>

All the same, it is hard to escape the feeling that all this talk of MI is rather petty and Eurocentric given the scale of the challenge to international order.

And yet the taxonomy tells us something about international order, too. Until now, we have tended to think of phenomena such as MI and “hybrid threats” as acts of pointless vandalism, the defacement of the “rules-based international order.” We speak of “the weaponization of everything,” in which Russia acts as a risk-taking spoiler, indiscriminately weaponizing open economies and interdependence. That was indeed how we initially approached the taxonomy, treating MI as a tool of wanton destruction and destabilization. And yet, we also know that “strong states” like Russia are trying to promote their own version of international order, and are not acting indiscriminately. Russia is in fact a normative power.

## CONCLUSIONS: BREAKING RUSSIA, THE NORMATIVE POWER

In today’s global order, the “strong state” is the prime challenge to the liberal model associated with the US and EU, and Russia is a constitutive player – a “normative power” in the language of the EU (at least when talking about itself). As such, it still matters to Russia how it is perceived in other parts of the world. Indeed, over the course of the last century, Russia has tried repeatedly to form an anti-Western alliance across Africa and Asia, setting itself up as an alternative model for Europe’s former colonial possessions. Its own imperial leanings have not prevented this. In 1955, for instance, when states like India and Indonesia met in Bandung in search of a shared posture, Russia (and China) tried to seize on the momentum, seeking to lead, criticizing the West, and disclaiming their own imperialist reputation.

The taxonomy may be useful from this more geostrategic perspective. If Russia is to promote its autocratic “strong state” model to other states and turn them against the West, it needs to prove various things to various parties – parties across Africa and Asia which might aspire to be “strong states” but currently fall into the categories of “weak,” “proxy” or even “non-states.”

19 At the time of writing, Western and Central Ukraine have not been invaded, and have been offering shelter to Ukrainians displaced from the south and east and south of the country. On February 26th, moreover, Ukrainian security services denied a rumor that Russian helicopters had landed near to the city of Brody. There has also been speculation that Russia intends to separate Ukraine into two states, taking Kyiv, and leaving a rump in the West. So the idea of Russia bombing up to the border with the EU still sounds far-fetched. But if Russia resorts to MI as a central tactic in the course of this campaign, then it is likely to repeat the kind of action it carried out in Syria, driving people across the border in huge numbers by targeting urban centers in the border region and other areas hosting large numbers of the internally displaced. MI might also become a side effect: If Russia decides to lay heavy sieges on major Ukrainian cities, like Kyiv and Kharkiv, the suffering of the encircled civilian populations might push additional hundreds of thousands to flee Ukraine.

20 To the naked eye, the range of MI actions that might hit Europe if Russia escalates the conflict in Ukraine may appear bewildering. Yet the situation can be handled with relative precision by four sets of carrots and sticks to be used against the four groups of MI actors. As a “strong state,” Russia’s own actions are likely to occur in multiple theaters, including the Balkans and North Africa, but these are unlikely to be its primary focus or to be sustained for very long. That being said, Russia’s actions do make it likely that other actors will engage in MI targeting EU, and it is necessary for Brussels to differentiate between them – between a proxy state like Belarus (which may seize a moment of relative advantage over the EU and Russia), a weak state like Ukraine (which may be tempted to use any domestic displacement of people as a means of mutualizing its problems and drawing in the EU), and a zone ruled by non-state actors like Libya (where Russia may try to play rival militias off against the EU).





## RUSSIA AS A NORMATIVE POWER: THE STRONG STATE MODEL

If, for an instant, we picture Russia not as a destructive spoiler but as a constitutive global power, then President Putin's position seems once more to be predicated on appealing to states in Asia and Africa and rallying the malcontents of Western-led globalization, offering a different model of global cohabitation. In the 1990s, Western states signaled to the world that global economic integration and state-building were not only compatible, but mutually-reinforcing as global economic integration would help developing states build a middle class that would contribute to their administration. Reagan and Thatcher even encouraged states in Africa and Asia to streamline themselves, reducing the trappings of statehood – be it national administration or a national airline – in a bid to develop their economies. Vast swathes of the globe today feel duped.

In hindsight, this recipe of “economic interdependence + state-building” seems to have been uniquely suited to advanced Western nation-states like those in North America and Europe, and only a handful of newly-independent countries in Africa and Asia have really thrived. Today, former colonial possessions from Morocco to India appear to be looking for an alternative model, one that mixes nation-building and a degree of autarky. That a revanchist former empire like Russia might have a shot at leading this new international order – certainly sound odd – but governments of former colonies are genuinely watching on. Here, EU members – particularly those in the west – should be aware of how the Belarus-Poland tensions were viewed outside of Europe.

Recall, for instance, how the regime in Minsk re-purposed its national airline, Belavia, to transport migrants, boosting Belarus's national budget in the face of EU sanctions. This move was not just tactical but also symbolic – it was about showing the viability of a different, non-Western, non-Reaganite model of statehood. Outside of Europe and the West, this brazen move was perceived and even welcomed as an assertion of the strong state model (at least, that is the picture from a straw poll of analysts). Furthermore, the EU's attempts to portray itself as a passive victim alienated partners in Africa and Asia: The EU embodies a particularly tricky combination of post-modern statehood and deep economic integration, which former colonies can never hope to achieve; Belarus was using its own strong state model to exploit the EU's vulnerabilities.

First, Russia must show that it is not itself a proxy, dependent on China for its freedom of action. Second, it must show that it does not treat its former imperial vassals like Belarus as mere “proxy states.” Third, it must not bully smaller states like Ukraine, thus setting an unfortunate precedent for “weak states” elsewhere. And, finally, it cannot afford to unleash chaotic non-state forces in other theaters such as Libya, since this directly undermines the applicability of the strong state model to other parts of the world.

If all this is so – and this is a highly speculative analysis – it means that the EU can use its taxonomy of “strong states,” “proxy states,” and so on not merely as a means of identifying and classifying individual MI

actions, but to understand and actively tear apart any new international alliance around the “strong state” model, demonstrating the inherent tensions within Russia's posturing. The EU must show the perpetrators of MI that it understands their underlying grievances and the difficulties of state-building in an integrated global economy. And it must show them that, although they might like to be autarkic “strong states,” they are only inviting themselves to be bullied by bigger neighbors. That means ditching Eurocentric talk of “migrant instrumentalization” and replacing it with an understanding that Europe is engaged in an ideological battle for the future of international order – one in which the EU is not universally seen as the good guy.



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