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Against the background of Russia's war against Ukraine, the engineered migration crisis on the European Union (EU)-Belarus borders became much less visible.¹ Yet, subversive activity also carried on as the Polish border guard continued to report having turned back dozens of people from Africa and Asia trying to cross the border into the EU. This weaponisation of migration undertaken by the regime in Belarus should be understood in a much broader context and placed alongside other authoritarian strategies, capitalising on various vulnerabilities. In this sense, it is not dissimilar, for example, from Moscow's tactic of threatening the world with a global food crisis with the interruption of grain supplies from Ukraine.² Dictatorial regimes use these vulnerabilities and, coupled with the power of the modern media, stage morbid and terrifying shows for a global audience. These authoritarian spectacles are meant to emotionally sway the public, weaken elected governments, and blackmail democratic societies into compliance with authoritarian goals. This analysis will focus on the examination of how authoritarian regimes exploit the various vulnerabilities of the contemporary world, with particular attention to energy and food interdependence, 'whataboutisms', and the Belarus-Poland border crisis.

Exploiting Vulnerabilities

Authoritarians have learned to take advantage of the structures of interdependence which link them to democratic states through such policy areas as energy security, food security or border control.³ To make blackmail more efficient, authoritarian regimes find ways of exerting strong normative pressure, using the sophisticated media environments that democracies usually provide. With the growing role of the *visual/in* media communication, this blackmail tends to occur through a particular type of *spectacle* or performance that the authoritarians engineer for various audiences at home and abroad.

Generally speaking, interdependence between authoritarian regimes and democracies has been deliberately structured and often under the guise of the liberal philosophies of 'openness' and 'engagement'. This can be summed up by the now largely infamous German formula of *Wandel durch Handel* – creating or reinforcing different types of vulnerabilities. In material terms this can, for instance, be energy interdependence; as the case of Russian energy exports and the European market clearly demonstrates. Furthermore, in the short term, authoritarian regimes can have an advantage over democratic societies where decision-making is sensitive to public moods and the vulnerabilities reflected by both macroeconomic indexes and the situation of individual households.

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There are also other forms of interdependence which can, to a different extent, involve both normative and material aspects. For instance, Moscow's tactic of targeting warehouses and burning (or stealing) Ukrainian grain is arguably aimed at engineering a global food crisis. This could entail both material and normative consequences for Western

countries. On the material side, famines can cause a significant deterioration of the security environment in the EU's neighbourhood and beyond, as they are likely to trigger wars, revolts, and massive flows of irregular migration.

On the normative side, the theme of Western responsibility for the food crisis has been promoted by Kremlin mouthpieces and, in some parts of the world – such as Zimbabwe – those seeds have fallen on fertile soil due to recent memories of Western colonialism and anti-Western rhetoric. Thus, by targeting the vulnerable *globally*, the Kremlin has directly and indirectly exploited normative vulnerabilities stemming from Western colonial legacies.⁴

Terrorism and authoritarian spectacles

Slovak prime minister Eduard Heger and others identified the tactic of targeting Ukrainian grain stockpiles and blocking its exports as *terrorising* innocent people.⁵ The term 'terrorism' has had no consensual definition, either among academics, or within the international community and it has also become rather trite over the years.⁶ However, deliberately targeting vulnerable civilian populations is usually seen as one of the core elements in its conventional definitions. That is what distinguishes terrorism from other, more 'legitimate' forms of political violence, such as standard wars that are fought according to principles aimed at minimising the collateral damage (known as the *jus in bello*).

Another essential aspect of terrorism stems from the fact that its immediate targets are normally distinct from its *target audiences*. By randomly targeting the vulnerable, terrorists try to sway a much broader population. In effect, terrorism can be seen as an extreme strategy of *political communication*. In this sense, it is inseparable from the available *media environment* which becomes one of its facilitating causes. The ISIS phenomenon, for instance, relied heavily on YouTube for broadcasting its morbid beheading shows to the world; its 2014 destruction of the Palmyra heritage had all the attributes of a *spectacle* staged for global audiences.⁷

This brings forth the category of the *visual* alongside vulnerability. This is also where the tactics of authoritarian regimes can overlap with the more conventional 'terrorists', as they harness not only the existing vulnerabilities but also the unique powers of the visual and the performative, the latter of which can even multiply the former. Andrey Makarychev has recently remarked that, with respect to Russia's war against Ukraine,

observers have clearly underestimated the role of the *spectacle* and the extent to which the latter can be taken.⁸ Indeed, since 2014, the so-called 'Ukraine crisis' (which was *de facto* the first phase of the Russo-Ukrainian war) the world has been able to view Russia's projections of imperial memory and narrative. These range from the utopian dreams of *Novorossiia* and the imperialist 'White Guard' reenactor Strelkov-Girkin, who denies Ukraine the right to exist, to the framing of the war in the Donbas as 'anti-fascist struggle,' symbolically recreating the 'Great Patriotic War of the Soviet people'.⁹

As Lisa Gaufman demonstrates in her 2017 book, these 're-enactments' appealed to powerful tropes rooted deep in the identities of post-Soviet Russians, though internationally, beyond the *Postsovieticum*, they had limited if any success.¹⁰ In 2022, the domestic role of the spectacle of war and the valourisation¹¹ of violence and conquest should not be underestimated, both at the collective and the individual level. In a telling story, a young Russian volunteered to participate in the invasion of Ukraine in the hope that this would impress his former wife into returning to him.¹² Some prominent commentators tend to 'Westphlain'¹³ regimes such as Russia's in terms of their presumed cold and strategic calculus, but neglect the performative, emotional, and identitarian aspects, which Moscow clearly instrumentalises in order to pull on the heartstrings of its Russian citizens.¹⁴

The hybrid migration crisis engineered in 2021 by Aliaksandr Lukashenka at the borders with Belarus' neighbours falls into the same pattern. It was both an instance of harnessing various vulnerabilities and a spectacle staged for various audiences. Naturally, it was far from the first time that migration as such was instrumentalised. Previously, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan capitalised on irregular migration flows across the EU's southern borders, and Russian authorities used the northern migration route to engage in subversive activities against Finland and Norway.¹⁵

However, the 2021 'hybrid' migration crisis was unprecedented for the EU's Eastern flank, in terms of the numbers of irregular migrants entering the Polish-Belarusian, Lithuanian-Belarusian, and Latvian-Belarusian borders. As opposed to the irregular migration flows from the south, this engineered crisis was characterised by a higher degree of involvement from local authorities on all sides of these borders. Regime-affiliated travel agencies were trafficking migrants from faraway countries using regular

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flights and providing full 'logistical support' for a fee. Those migrants that were subsequently intercepted by the Polish or Lithuanian border guards and decided to turn back were threatened and beaten by Lukashenka's units.¹⁶ They prevented them from returning home via the same route, leaving them wandering in the primeval forest in no man's land, without food, water, or medical assistance.

Limits of the EU neighbourhood policy

The roots of the engineered migration crisis lay in yet another form of vulnerability through interdependence that the EU had developed in recent years. The launch of the Eastern Partnership in 2009 started a new cycle in relations with Lukashenka's Belarus. It marked a change from the previous policy of sanctioning to 'constructive engagement,' which was supposed to slowly push the authoritarian regime in the direction of economic and political reforms. The EU's technocratic approach also involved investing in Belarus' border management capabilities.¹⁷

Thus, the European neighbourhood policy hinged on the idea of building 'a ring of friends' and an eventual *security community*, promoting good governance resilience and best practices in the hope of creating a win-win situation and stimulating (supposedly mutually beneficial) reform.¹⁸ However, in practice this also meant that the autocrats on the EU's rim fulfilled the role of the 'guardians' of European borders, assisting Brussels in the management of migration flows and fighting narcotrafficking. This implicit deal was cited by Lukashenka himself, when, infuriated by the new round of sanctions, he told the West: 'We stopped drugs and migrants. Now you will eat them and catch them yourselves.'¹⁹

The stolen election and the shocking, unprecedented, violence against the protestors starting in August 2020 marked an end to a period of rapprochement that Minsk enjoyed with the West, in the wake of Russia's 2014 aggression against Ukraine. A number of EU countries had declared Lukashenka illegitimate, though the more sensitive economic sanctions actually did not arrive until the forced landing of Ryanair Flight 4978, which directly jeopardised EU citizens. In reaction, the US charged the regime authorities with 'air piracy',²⁰ and the Polish leadership was quick to use the term 'state terrorism.'²¹

For Lukashenka, the immediate instrumentality of the engineered crisis lay in blackmailing the West into a conversation about solving a problem he personally created, and thus forcing the Western leaders to recognise him once again as a legitimate interlocutor. The strategy backfired. German Chancellor Angela Merkel held a phone call with Minsk, but the press office notably specified that she had talked to a certain *Herr Lukaschenko* (Mr. Lukashenka), deliberately avoiding any reference to the president of Belarus.²²

A spectacle of 'whataboutism'

The broader political significance of the engineered crisis is impossible to understand in abstraction from the performative, personal, and emotional sphere. Thus, the targeting of the Baltic states and Poland is no coincidence, considering that since 2020 these countries have been particularly uncompromising with their Belarusian neighbour. Poland and Lithuania actively sheltered Belarusian political prisoners and leaders of the democratic movement, like Sviatlana Tsikhanoŭskaya and Pavel Latushka. Latvia had

its entire diplomatic corps expelled from Minsk after the official red-and-green flag was replaced with the pre-Lukashenka white-red-white Belarusian flag at the IIHF Ice Hockey World Championship in Riga, in May 2021.²³

It is also worth noting in this context that Lukashenka has long been an ardent fan of hockey and, furthermore, the 2021 IIHF Ice Hockey World Championship was supposed to be hosted jointly by Minsk and Riga, but the international hockey authorities were forced to reconsider under mounting public pressure. Apart from the personal factor of a dictator who had always been described as particularly vengeful, the broader political significance of the engineered crisis lay in its *spectacle of performed whataboutism*.

To begin with, it served as a projection to divert and mirror the terrifying image of the Belarusian authorities that was formed in 2020 by their mass beatings and torturing of protestors. This could only be achieved by portraying their neighbours as complicit in even more grotesque forms of cruelty. State television in Belarus routinely accused Poland and Lithuania of committing mass atrocities against the refugees and used the Polish deserter Emil Czecko to spin the disinformation narrative of 'genocide.' Czecko, who was later found hanged in a Minsk apartment, claimed that he was himself executing twenty migrants *per day* on the Polish side of the border.²⁴

It is no secret that Belarusians have been deeply traumatised and shocked by terror and the unprecedented cruelty of the police. The mass anti-violence protests in August 2020 were, in fact, a form of the 'solidarity of the shaken'.²⁵ Many did not have clear answers as to how it could ever come to this, and some even refused to believe it, suggesting that the atrocities were instead being committed by Russian units – a hypothesis never confirmed. Here, one can even speculate that the symbolic mirroring of the atrocities through the spectacle of performed 'whataboutism' was the regime's own warped way of compensating the deep societal trauma.

In another notable performance, Lukashenka was shown on state TV, addressing thousands of migrants amassed at the border.²⁶ He claimed that 'his task was to help them in trouble' and promised 'to work together on their dream'. Regime journalists juxtaposed the 'kind' Lukashenka with the 'cruel' Poles and Lithuanians. This spectacle of 'care' or 'pastoral power' exercised over a large group of people came in contrast with the earlier scenes of 2020, when many protestors publicly rejected and mocked Lukashenka's paternalist authority. During one of the speeches which he delivered at a factory, desperately trying to win back popular support, the workers shouted 'Leave!' and 'Go f**k yourself' in a manner previously inconceivable.²⁷ To Lukashenka, who always styled himself as the 'popular president,' in possession of a direct, intimate connection with the so-called 'ordinary people,' this was a devastating blow.

The 'hybrid' migration crisis spectacle was also performed for international audiences. With respect to the neighbouring countries, this included the threat of being invaded by an aggressive crowd of people, who were also culturally different from Central and East Europeans. This aspect was, of course, something that the Central and Eastern European societies, with their general lack of enthusiasm for multiculturalism, had been particularly wary about in recent years.²⁸ Apparently, border guards on the Belarusian

side were stimulating the migrants' aggressive behaviour, providing them with stones and sticks, prompting them to rush the Polish border.²⁹ Statements were also made to the effect that jihadis from the Middle East might be infiltrating the migrants, which, in some minds, could be read as a veiled threat to arm the migrants with deadlier weapons, like firearms.

New life for an old myth

The Polish side predictably picked up on the threat narrative, as the ruling Law and Justice party previously capitalised on the European migration crisis of 2015.³⁰ This was also a perfect opportunity to boost the sovereigntist, nationalist rhetoric. Polish right-wing media framed the crisis as a war, indeed one of many that their country was fighting in Europe.³¹ Poland famously refused to turn to Brussels for help, rejecting the idea of the EU participating in the evaluation of asylum applications.³² 'We will prevail, we will not burst,' proclaimed President Andrzej Duda.³³ Poland would once again be the *Antemurale*, the heroic lonely guardian of the common European border.

At the same time, the image of the hybrid 'threat' coming in the guise of foreign migrants also reinforced the domestic political divides, as right-wingers accused the 'liberal elites' of false humanitarianism, of abandoning the interests of the national community, and sympathising not with Polish soldiers and the border guard but with the culturally alien migrants; the 'big boys from Iraq who were on their way to Germany to receive social benefits.'³⁴

The spectacle of the 'hybrid' migration crisis thus exploited the vulnerability of the democratic societies in the face of polarisation across sensitive and controversial issues. This applied both to the domestic ruling coalitions, whom the regime could try to 'punish' through their anti-multiculturalist voters, and to the broader East-West normative divide in the EU, which emerged sharply in 2015 over the refugee quota issue.³⁵ Ultimately, the spectacle was also meant to demonstrate the alleged normative *hypocrisy* of the West, which could now look like it was combining lip service to universal values with blunt disregard for the lives and rights of migrants who were caught in the no-man's-land, between the two heartless sovereigns.

There should be a solid reflection among the EU member states on the vulnerabilities created by interdependence, whether accidental or intentional.

Notably, Poland attempted to minimise the normative fallout by declaring a state of emergency and restricting the access of activists and journalists to the border areas. Yet, images of vulnerability and victimhood leaked, as was the case with the photograph of a barefoot refugee girl sitting in the midst of a cold, primeval forest.³⁶ The photo was

taken by a Russian journalist, and some disputed its spontaneous nature, but the power of the *visual* works beyond the claims of authenticity.

This victimisation of migrants thus became a symbolic weapon and, indirectly, an appropriation of their victimhood. Consequently, this should also be understood in the much broader context which pertains to how authoritarians exploit the various vulnerabilities of the contemporary world. Using the power of the media, and above all the rich visuals created with the help of modern technologies, they stage horrific spectacles which then become integrated into a cynical symbolic economy. The looming global food crisis resulting from Russia's war against Ukraine, and the stealing and destruction of grain, falls into the same pattern. These regimes operate within the same technological and social environment as those whose vulnerabilities and structural interdependencies they exploit. When it comes to this strategy of exploiting vulnerability to create a macabre spectacle, the comparison to terrorism that some have already made is more than merely a slur, and it therefore should be developed in a conceptual and theoretical manner.

Policy Recommendations

Practical, that is, diplomatic and legal aspects could also follow. Firstly, there should be a solid reflection among the EU member states on the vulnerabilities created by interdependence, whether accidental or intentional. Secondly, the inherent unpredictability of authoritarian regimes at the EU's margins and their proneness to transgress the boundaries of what is seen as prudent and 'rational' behaviour should be taken into account; previous mistakes in dealing with these regimes should be systematically reflected on. Thirdly, the general approach by the European Union should thus be overhauled in favour of a more consistent and responsible long-term strategy, which acknowledges these challenges as systemic and constant, not simply as occasional 'deviations' from an otherwise linear democratic transition process. Finally, this would include anticipating the long-term risks of the various forms of interdependence and learning how to think beyond the logic of the electoral cycle and factional interests, which tend to make the job of manipulating and blackmailing democratic societies easier for authoritarians.

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