

Narrative Report

"Migration Crisis on the Border of Belarus with Poland, Lithuania, Latvia"

Background

In response to the support of Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia for peaceful protests in Belarus against the falsification of the results of the presidential election in August 2020, and especially to the imposition of sanctions on official Minsk because of the forced landing of a *Ryanair* aircraft in May 2021, the Belarusian authorities, together with the Russian Federation, have organised a major migration crisis at the border with the countries members of the European Union. By coordinating their actions, they have created an opportunity for potential asylum seekers from Asia and Africa to illegally cross the border with the European Union through land points in Belarus. Tens of thousands of migrants, taking advantage of the visa-free status between Russia and Belarus, arrive in Belarus on Russian visas and make numerous attempts to cross the border illegally. Polish, Lithuanian, and Latvian border guards predictably prevent this. Western governments have initiated the construction of fences on the border with Belarus and constantly raise the issue of illegal migration on various international platforms.

Methodology

How do Belarusian state media present this problem and what narratives do they promote? Our sample covers 9 media outlets, including the main state-owned media, as well as two regional state-owned media outlets. These are BelTA news agency, specialised multimedia portal *videobel.by*, official websites of TV channels Belarus 1, ONT, STV, as well as the publishing house "Belarus Today", regional news agency "Minsk Prauda", regional edition "Gomelskaya Prauda" (news portal "Pravda Gomel") and regional newspaper "Astravetskaya Prauda".

The sample consists of 42 media texts, approximately equally from each media outlet, published at the end of September and the first half of November 2024. This is not a complete list of publications on this topic, but it is sufficient for obtaining representative data.

Main part

Belarusian state media often refer to the topic of the migration crisis on the border of Belarus with Poland, Lithuania and Latvia, but create a fundamentally different picture of what is happening.

There are several main groups of narratives promoted by the state media on this topic.

The first group of narratives covers that the **migration crisis on the border with Belarus was provoked not by the actions of Belarus and Russia, but by the Western countries themselves**. Belarus found itself in this situation only because of its geographical location and transit status. Belarus also suffers from the crisis, but it does nothing contrary to international law and general humanitarian norms, helps migrants as much as possible, and constantly calls to stop violence and abuse of people.

Belarusian state media claim that the main reasons why citizens of Asian and African countries are forced to leave their homes **are the actions of the European Union in these countries**, which led to "wars and destruction" (4). *"The homes of these people have been destroyed, the countries have been looted" (20), "These people did not come there with aggressive intentions, they came to hide from the war" (24), "If we talk about today's illegal migration, which we are considering in the framework of the conference, and about what gives rise to it, first of all, these are conflicts, the cause of which is, unfortunately, that they are all man-made, the collective West" (32)*. State media do not provide arguments in favour of this thesis, do not explain what wars we are talking about, only state "the responsibility of Western countries" as a well-known fact that does not require proof.

At the same time, Belarusian state media **accuse the Western states directly of the failure of migration policy, and indirectly - of corruption**: they say that they welcome some immigrants, while they persecute others, and they do it primarily for reasons of personal financial gain. *"It turned out that the previous government fought the so-called influx of illegal immigrants into Poland with one hand, pulling money from the budget to build an expensive fence, and with the other - for bribes - allowed hundreds of thousands of migrants to cross the EU border in an accelerated manner without any reason. 366,000 visas were sold to migrants from Muslim countries alone" (22). "The country is in a migratory deadlock - and its top officials are persistently pursuing an irrational policy on this issue. Our western neighbour understands perfectly well that it has proactively and thoughtlessly broken the mechanism of migration flow management, formed on the basis of Belarusian inclusiveness in the sphere of border cooperation" (28)*.

As for the question why the crisis appeared in the second half of 2021, and why it did not happen before, the state media put forward the following explanation. The point, they say, is that such migrants existed before. However, Belarusian border guards received resources to contain them. Now, when Belarus is not only deprived of international support for the suppression of illegal migration, but also exists in the conditions of severe economic sanctions, it **has neither opportunities nor desire to fulfil its obligations**: *"We honestly, frankly said: we will not kneel before you with a noose around our necks and we will not*

catch migrants. Do with them what you want. You wanted to employ them - employ them. But most importantly, you have unleashed an economic war against us, and not only an economic war, why should we defend you? This is the whole denouement of this migration crisis" (13). "The problem of illegal migration is not a problem of Belarus alone. Our country is a transit country, illegals try not to stay here. They come here only to get to the European Union" (20). "Earlier, before the EU imposed sanctions on Belarus, this problem did not exist. The UN International Organisation for Migration provided funding so that migrants arriving in our country could be assisted in accommodation, food, and return to their states. Now the funding has been stopped and the burden has completely fallen on the budget of Belarus, although these funds are needed for internal issues" (27). "It was Belarus that was pulling a huge share of responsibility for border security in the region. It was on our borders that the pressure of migratory aspirations was dissected through the competent and conscientious work of a whole set of measures and efforts of the competent services of the country to separate the flows of migratory transit to the West. Poland did not appreciate and literally refused this good-neighbourly service and got involved in anti-Belarus intrigues and sanctions arbitrariness" (28).

Thus, while Belarus used to detain illegal migrants at the border with the European Union, after the Western countries unleashed "economic genocide" against Belarus (13), Belarus is free from such actions.

The second group of narratives is about **what goals the "collective West" wants to achieve with the help of the crisis on the border**. According to Belarusian state media, "*the West uses migrants as a tool, as a weapon*", "*migrants are used as a weapon against such countries as Belarus or Russia*" (1). The state media do not explain how this "weapon" will act. They put into the mouth of an "international expert" the idea that although "*Belarus and Poland are neighbours. But our relations are in the most tragic situation. In my opinion, this is primarily the fault of the Polish authorities, who, I don't know why, want to change the power in Belarus, to disrupt the economic and social order that exists here. They want to be able to sell everything to the West or steal it, just like in Poland*" (3).

One of the goals that the West allegedly pursues with the help of the migrant crisis is **the construction of a "new iron curtain", which European countries want to barricade from Belarus**. "*The head of state asked a rhetorical question: why has the West again built an 'iron curtain' against which countries have been fighting for many decades*" (35). "*Latvia continues building defences on the border with Russia and Belarus, Baltnews reports. It is noted that the work is taking place near the Friendship Mound memorial, which was created at the border junction in honour of the unity of the Russian, Belarusian and Latvian peoples*

in the fight against fascism. According to Baltnews, concrete blocks are being erected at the memorial site, anti-tank hedges are being installed, and an anti-tank ditch is being dug" (39). "In Poland, construction of a line of defensive fortifications has begun as part of the Eastern Shield programme" (41).

In contrast to the "building of an iron curtain" by the European Union, the state media claim **that Belarus is incredibly open and cite visa-free entry as proof.** *"We are not closing ourselves off from the world. Visa-free travel was established for residents of more than 30 countries, so that everyone could see with their own eyes how and what Belarusians live, and if they want, they can stay. But the West makes a lot of efforts to isolate us and create an additional point of tension. Thus, another step in this direction has been made. Work is underway on the Polish-Belarusian border to build an electronic barrier on the Bug River, reported in the programme "Week" on STV. And Lithuania is preparing to deploy a thousand American military personnel near the Belarusian border" (18).*

The third group of narratives - in terms of frequency and volume of references in the state media it is the leader - is **about "atrocities" of Polish, Lithuanian and Latvian border guards against people illegally crossing the border of their countries with Belarus.** A lot of space and efforts are devoted to the promotion of this thesis, thus, in the sample under consideration such materials made up more than a half of all texts. Belarusian state media describe in colour the cases of clashes between migrants and border guards, pointing out the arbitrariness and cruelty of the latter towards not only adult migrants, but also children and pregnant women. As evidence, the media use the testimonies of the victims, their wounds of various kinds, as well as allegations based on nothing. Materials on this topic are very emotional, aimed at attracting the attention of the audience. *"In the last two years alone, we have documented over 50 deaths of foreigners killed by Polish, Lithuanian and Latvian security forces. The number of those subjected to cruel physical treatment during deportation to the territory of Belarus, including pregnant women and children, runs into hundreds" (4). "People caught on the other side are met with aggressive, inhuman attitudes. They are beaten, using various means of restraint, rubber sticks. It comes to beating with rifle butts, using pepper gas. They are deprived, especially in the cold season, of warm clothes to prevent re-entry into their territory, and are forcibly pushed out. People are injured, such cases have been recorded" (5). "At least 60 people have died so far, which we found in close proximity to the state border. Most of all on the section with Poland - 27 people, with Latvia - 24, Lithuania - 9. The body of a Somali citizen was found in the Latvian section. He had a friend with him, who said that they were trying to get to the territory of Latvia. They successfully got into this territory, but met with a virtually fascist, inhuman attitude on the part of law enforcement bodies of the neighbouring state" (6). "It was here, in the damp, cold*

forest next to the Polish fence, that our border guard found them. The 15 people, natives of Syria, Somalia and Algeria, could not leave the place on their own. Exhausted and beaten, they were begging for help. These refugees had experienced the full force of European democracy: Poles beat them with batons on their backs and heads, shot them with rubber bullets and set them on service dogs. Despite pleas for mercy, the guards used pepper gas" (16).

To confirm this narrative, the Belarusian state media also refer to the critical assessment of the film "Green Border" by Agnieszka Holland by a number of Polish politicians. *"The film unvarnished showed how Polish border guards serve - they mock and brutally beat defenceless people. The demonstration of "true Polish democracy" did not please the head of the republic. He said that the film denigrates the military, and that only pigs can watch it in the audience" - quote - "only pigs" (17).* The Belarusian state media are silent about the fact that the film, which raised important social problems and caused heated discussions in Polish society, despite the head of state's rejection of the film, continues to be shown legally on the screens, which is possible only in a democratic society.

In this group the materials with the narrative that, according to the testimony of Polish citizen Emil Cieczko, **"Polish border guards executed at least 240 people in autumn 2021"** deserve separate consideration. On 11 November, the Belarusian authorities awarded "the second international human rights prize 'For Peace and Human Rights'", established by the "Emilie Cieczko International Charitable Foundation". *"This prize attracts more and more attention by the fact that its main message is the defence of peace and basic human rights. It is not for nothing that it is named after Emil Cieczko: we know this simple Polish boy who crossed into the territory of the Republic of Belarus and told about the atrocities that were committed on the territory of Poland with migrants and refugees trying to get to the European Union. This award emphasises the importance of the message that the Republic of Belarus carries out to preserve humanitarian human values, to preserve international humanitarian law. These are very important things, which are declared by the majority of public organisations, but, unfortunately, are not implemented by every country. That is why today's award is very important. It is a recognition of those people who invest their efforts in preserving human lives" (2).*

According to the testimony of Polish defector soldier Emil Cieczko - according to the version of the Belarusian authorities, he committed suicide - Polish border guards carried out a mass execution of migrants. *"During the investigation of the criminal case, Cieczko, a serviceman of the armed forces of the Republic of Poland, who crossed into the territory of the Republic of Belarus, was repeatedly questioned as a witness. According to him, from 8 to 19 June*

2021, he personally participated in and witnessed the mass systematic execution without trial of 241 people. Women and children were among those killed," said Alexander Rudko, deputy head of the department for investigation of crimes against the person and public security of the main investigation department of the central office of the Investigative Committee of the Republic of Belarus" (11). "The Investigative Committee revealed shocking data: in June 2021, Polish security forces executed more than 240 people without trial. The sketches of the servicemen who ordered the execution have been compiled" (15). Nevertheless, despite such shocking "facts", after the awarding of the Emil Czeczko Prize, information about it practically ceased to appear in the state media.

The fourth group of narratives is about the "double standards" of Western countries with regard to what is happening in Belarus and in Belarus. Belarusian state media assure their audiences that *"there is a collapse of all the postulates of democracy in the world. We see: there is democracy for ourselves, and there is democracy for export. One of the reasons for the current events in the world is the migration crisis, the President said. He drew attention to the fact that the deaths and beatings of refugees and migrants on the territory of the countries of the collective West have become a terrible daily reality. But the world media are silent about it, while accusations of Belarus in the creation of this crisis do not leave the front pages. "We are "guilty" of this global migration crisis. While the main route of these people has not changed for many years - up to half a million people pass through the Mediterranean Sea and the Balkan Peninsula every year. Europe is unable to restore order at home, but it knows well how to distract from internal problems - to appoint an external enemy" (37).*

State media broadcast the following narratives:

- It is not us who use migrants as weapons, but the collective West is waging a hybrid war against Belarus and Russia with their help.
- Belarus, on the contrary, protects peace and human rights and provides all possible assistance to migrants.
- Polish border guards and police officers are not just cruel to migrants, but violate all norms of international law and any notion of humanism.
- Poles who raise the issue of inhuman treatment of migrants and their use by Western countries to destabilise Belarus are oppressed at home, so they are forced to become political emigrants.
- The coverage of the topic of migrants in the Western media is carried out in accordance with the "policy of double standards": the Western states are

"allowed everything", while any actions of the Belarusian authorities are fiercely criticised.

Narrative group	Narrative content	The function of narratives	Techniques used
1st	The migration crisis on the border with Belarus is provoked by the actions of the Western countries themselves, not Belarus and Russia.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Shift the responsibility for the migration crisis to European countries. -Demonstrate the failure of the EU migration policy and hint at the high level of corruption in Western countries. -Justify their own actions by referring to the withdrawal of international support and "economic genocide" 	Contrast, false dilemma, substitution of notions, opposition, silence

2nd	The purpose of the migration crisis is to disrupt the economic and social order in Belarus.	<p>-Demonise European countries, especially neighbouring countries.</p> <p>-Demonstrate the desire of European countries to "close", "isolate" themselves from Belarus with the help of concrete barriers</p> <p>-To emphasise Belarus' peaceful and friendly policy through "open borders" (visa-free regime)</p>	Contrast, false dilemma, substitution of notions, opposition, silence
3rd	Polish border guards and police officers are not just cruel to migrants, but violate all norms of international law and notions of humanism.	Demonise European countries, especially neighbouring countries, both at the level of their governments and ordinary citizens (border guards, police officers involved in violence against migrants)	Contrast, false dilemma, substitution of notions, opposition, silence
4th	The coverage of migrants in the Western media is carried out in accordance with the "double standard policy"	Demonise Western countries, present them as enemies of Belarus.	Contrast, false dilemma, substitution of concepts, opposition, silence

Recommendations based the report

These narratives affect different audiences:

- Inside Belarus: they form an image of the West as an aggressor and defend the regime's domestic policy.
- On the international scene: create the appearance of a humanitarian crisis by trying to discredit the EU.
- In EU countries: increase tensions by triggering public debate and criticism of the EU authorities.

Foreign policy implications:

1. Aggravation of relations between Belarus and the EU: imposition of sanctions against Belarus, deterioration of diplomatic ties.
2. Strengthening ties between Belarus and the Russian Federation: increasing Minsk's dependence on Moscow in the financial and political spheres.
3. Growing tensions within the EU: divided opinions among member states on approaches to migration policy.
4. The deterioration of the EU's image in some regions: using the crisis to create an image of Europe as unable to deal effectively with humanitarian issues.

Ideological impact

Internal control: the Belarusian regime uses the crisis to consolidate internal support, emphasising the "success" of its policy against external pressure.

Propaganda: active use of emotionally charged narratives ("atrocities" of European border guards, "hypocrisy" of the West) to manipulate public opinion inside and outside Belarus.

Hybrid warfare: the crisis was part of a wider campaign to weaken the EU and promote the Russia-Belarus agenda.

Summary of recommendations

For the EU:

- Strengthen support for humanitarian organisations to assist migrants at borders.

- Support transparent journalistic investigations exposing the actions of the Belarusian regime.
- Develop coordinated communication strategies to refute narratives.

For international organisations:

- Conduct independent monitoring missions at the border.
- To emphasise violations of international law by Belarus.

For civil society:

- Create platforms to inform the public about the real situation.
- Support initiatives to document violations of migrants' rights.

Conclusion

The migration crisis on Belarus's border with the EU is the result of planned actions of the Belarusian regime and its partners. Addressing this problem requires coordinated efforts at the international level, transparency and active countering of propaganda. It is important for the international community to keep pressure on the regime in Belarus, while supporting humanitarian initiatives and strengthening its communication strategies.



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