

UNIVERSITY OF TARTU

Faculty of Social Sciences

Johan Skytte Institute of Political Studies

Triinu Roosna

**DISCURSIVE DIFFUSION OF A SECURITY NARRATIVE -
WEAPONIZATION OF MIGRATION ON POLAND'S AND
LITHUANIA'S EASTERN BORDER**

MA thesis

Supervisor: Thomas Michael Linsenmaier

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines how the framing of the EU-Belarus border crisis as “weaponised/instrumentalised migration” diffused across Lithuanian, Polish and European Union level political discourse between 2021 and 2023. This crisis marked a shift in how migration could be framed, as it was increasingly portrayed not as a societal or humanitarian challenge, but as a deliberate instrument of hybrid aggression orchestrated by the Belarusian regime against the European Union member states. While existing literature has examined the legal, humanitarian and security dimensions of the crisis, minimal attention has been given to the discursive process through which this framing emerged, spread and became institutionalized across different levels of governance.

The theoretical framework combines securitization and Europeanisation theory in order to explain both the content of the framing and the mechanisms through which it travelled between different levels. The analysis focuses on three possible diffusion mechanisms of uploading, downloading and cross-loading. The empirical analysis applies qualitative discourse tracing to official communications from the offices of the President and Government of Lithuania and Poland, as well as from the European Council and European Commission Presidents. The study systematically traces the emergence, escalation and institutionalization of key formulations of wordings in the EU-Belarus crisis across the period from mid-2021 to 2023.

The findings demonstrate that the diffusion of the framing followed multiple directions. The European Union institutions were the first to use the wording of “instrumentalisation”, which was later downloaded into Lithuanian and Polish communications. Lithuania developed the “hybrid attack” framing, which was subsequently uploaded to the European Union level. Poland adopted both of these framing through cross-loading and by downloading.

The thesis contributes to the literature on migration securitization, Europeanisation and hybrid threats by providing a systematic empirical account of how the “weaponised/instrumentalised migration” framing diffused across levels of governance during the EU-Belarus border crisis. More broadly, the findings demonstrate how security framings can evolve through interaction between different actors, with each political level contributing different elements of the security discourse.

INTRODUCTION

In the summer of 2021, large numbers of migrants started to cross the borders of Lithuania and Poland through Belarus. Within the next weeks, the Presidents and Governments of both affected countries, were describing what was happening at their borders as a “hybrid attack”, which was a deliberate act by another state to use human beings as an instrument of coercion against European Union member states. European security language development through this crisis is significant due to the fact that before 2021, the concept of a hybrid threat was seen often as part of Russia’s cyber, military or informational operations. It was not seen as a movement of people. After 2021, Frontex’s Strategic Risk Analysis (2022), the European Commission’s proposal for a regulation addressing the instrumentalisation of migration (2021) and the EU Strategic Compass (2022) all incorporated “instrumentalised” or “weaponized” migration as a recognised category of hybrid threats. Something had therefore changed in how the European Union understood and named this phenomenon.

Migration has been a politically sensitive topic within the European Union and previous migration crises have been securitized within European political discourse. However, these earlier securitizing framings were mostly framed within the societal sector, where migration was associated with concerns about identity, social cohesion, integration and domestic stability (Huysmans, 2000; Buzan et al., 1998). During the 2015–2016 European migration crisis, migration was framed through debates concerning border control, terrorism, cultural integration and the capacity of European societies to place a large number of arrivals. While migration has been a politically contested and securitized topic, it has generally not been framed as a weapon used by a hostile foreign state actor against the sovereignty and territorial integrity of European Union member states.

Therefore, the EU-Belarus border crisis introduced a different security logic. Lithuanian and Polish officials increasingly described migration not as a humanitarian or societal challenge, but as a form of “hybrid attack” and eventually “weaponised/instrumentalised” migration orchestrated by the Belarusian regime. Within this framing, migrants themselves were no longer constructed primarily as the source of threat. Instead, the threat originated from the strategic actions of Belarus, which was accused of using migration flows as an instrument of geopolitical coercion against the European Union. This represented a notable discursive shift

in European migration securitization from a predominantly societal-sector framing toward a securitized political-sector framing focused on sovereignty, territorial integrity and external coercion.

What makes this development important is that the framing did not remain limited to Lithuanian and Polish domestic discourse. Over time, similar language increasingly appeared within European Union institutional communications, strategic documents and regulatory proposals. Understanding how this framing travelled across governance levels and became institutionalized within broader European Union security discourse forms the central puzzle of this thesis.

This thesis investigates the process in which the framing of migration as a hybrid threat developed in the context of the EU-Belarus border crisis and how it diffused across Lithuanian, Polish and the European Union level of discourse between mid-2021 and 2023. Understanding how this discursive shift occurred is important not only for understanding this particular crisis but for understanding how the European Union security language evolves more broadly. As Gkliati (2023) has argued, the concept of instrumentalisation of migration represents a significant evolution in the securitization of migration management in Europe. It is one with real legal and political consequences for how states respond to irregular migration at their borders.

This thesis contributes to the existing literature by providing an empirical analysis of a discursive shift in European security politics. Existing literature on the securitization of migration within member states have largely explored how migration becomes associated with identity, integration, border control and domestic security concerns within national political discourse (Huysmans, 2000; Buzan et al., 1998). Other scholars have examined how European Union institutions increasingly incorporated migration into broader frameworks of internal security, crisis governance and border management (Mitsilegas, 2022; Gkliati, 2023) and overall concept of coercive engineered migration and hybrid pressure (Greenhill, 2010; Greenhill, 2016).

At the same time, the EU-Belarus border crisis itself has attracted scholarly attention from legal, humanitarian and security studies perspectives. Existing research has analyzed the legality of border practices and pushbacks during the crisis (Bodnar, Grzelak, 2023; Mitsilegas, 2022) and explored the increasing securitization and militarization of migration discourse during the crisis (Gkliati, 2023; Liszkowska, 2024).

However, the development of the term “weaponised/instrumentalised migration” as a hybrid threat in the European Union framework during the EU-Belarus border crisis has received minimal attention despite this crisis having implications for the European Union and state-level policy developments (Bodnar, Grzelak, 2023) and in the development of hybrid warfare (Łubiński, 2022; Filipec, 2022). The aim of this thesis is to examine how the framing of the EU-Belarus border crisis as “weaponised/instrumentalised migration” developed and diffused across Lithuanian, Polish and European Union political discourse between 2021 and 2023. The thesis seeks to identify the mechanisms through which this security framing travelled across governance levels and became incorporated into broader security discourse.

The theoretical framework of this thesis looks at the intersection of two bodies of literature - Europeanisation and securitization. The Europeanisation framework has developed tools for understanding how political ideas, norms and policies travel between national and supranational levels of governance through downloading from the European Union to member state level, uploading from member state to the European Union level or cross-loading directly between member states (Radaelli, 2003; Börzel, 2002; Major, Pomorska, 2005). Securitization theory which has been developed by the Copenhagen School explains how political issues are discursively constructed as security threats and what political consequences follow from this construction (Buzan *et al.*, 1998; Balzacq, 2010).

This thesis brings these two frameworks together to address a question that neither can answer alone. This research will not only focus on how a security framing was constructed, but also on how it travelled across levels of governance and became institutionalized at the European level. The EU-Belarus border crisis offers a good study of this process, because the discursive shift is well-documented and because it produced concrete European Union level legislative and strategic outputs that can be traced against the national-level discourse.

The central research question of this thesis is “How did the framing of the EU-Belarus border crisis as “weaponised/instrumentalised migration” diffuse across Lithuanian, Polish and EU-level political discourse between mid-2021 and 2023?” This question is chosen to be open about the direction and mechanism of diffusion. Whether the framing originated at the national level and was uploaded to the European Union, was developed simultaneously by Lithuania and Poland through cross-loading or whether the European Union level of framing influenced national discourse through downloading, is an empirical question that the analysis will address during the research process, rather than focusing on a single direction of diffusion.

Based on the theoretical framework presented in the chapter 1 of this thesis, three theoretical expectations will be developed using the aforementioned three mechanisms. These theoretical expectations will be eventually assessed in the empirical analysis to develop an understanding about the direction and mechanism of the diffusion in the case of the EU-Belarus border crisis. If downloading is the dominant mechanism, then the European Union level discourse will have developed the “weaponised/instrumentalised migration” framing first and subsequently Lithuanian and Polish discourse would have followed this lead. If uploading was the dominant mechanism, then state-level discourse in either Lithuania or Poland would have preceded the European Union level adoption of this framing. However, in that case, it is possible that one of the states uploaded this discourse to the European Union level and the other state eventually downloaded it. If cross-loading is the dominant mechanism, Lithuanian and Polish discourses would have developed the framing in parallel through bilateral interactions by influencing each other’s discourse development, then eventually the European Union level would have adopted the discourse framing through member state’s uploading.

This thesis uses discourse tracing as methodology. Discourse tracing was developed by LeGreco and Tracy (2009) to systematically analyse the formation and diffusion of discursive practices across different levels of governance. The empirical data consists of official political communications published on the official websites of the President and Government of Lithuania, the President and Government of Poland and the key European Union institutions including the European Council and the European Commission. Data is collected chronologically across the full period of mid-2021 to 2023 and selected purposively on the basis of the presence of framing language related to weaponized migration, hybrid attack, hybrid aggression or instrumentalisation of migration.

The thesis is structured as follows. Chapter 1 develops the theoretical framework, introducing the key concepts of Europeanisation and securitization. Chapter 2 presents the research methodology, explaining the research design, case selection, method and data collection principles. Chapter 3 presents the overview of the case and previous research within the main topic of this thesis. Chapter 4 presents the empirical analysis of Lithuanian, Polish and European Union level discourse, tracing the development and diffusion of the weaponized migration framing across each unit of observation. Chapter 5 presents the conclusions of this thesis.

1. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: EUROPEANISATION OF SECURITY DISCOURSES

This chapter develops the theoretical framework of the study which will guide the empirical analysis of this thesis. The central question of this research is “How the framing of the EU-Belarus border crisis as “weaponised/instrumentalised migration” diffused across Lithuanian, Polish and European Union levels of political discourse between mid-2021 and 2023=” requires two analytical frameworks. Firstly, the chapter on Europeanisation provides the conceptual tools to understand how political ideas, norms and discursive framing travel between different levels of governance within the European Union. Secondly, the chapter on securitization theory explains what is being diffused as it explains the process in which a political issue is discursively constructed as a security threat and how this construction shapes political responses. Together, these two chapters create a framework for analysis of migration in the light of the EU-Belarus border crisis. This framework helps to understand this crisis, which has been named as an instrument of hybrid warfare, the direction and mechanism of this discursive diffusion across governance levels in Lithuania, Poland and the European Union. This part of the thesis is structured in a way that the first section introduces the concept of Europeanisation, its key causal mechanisms of downloading, uploading and cross-loading. The second section of this study introduces securitization theory, explains the sectoral logic through which different kinds of threats are constructed and elaborates on the concept of macro-securitization as a tool for understanding how security framings spread beyond the domestic level. This chapter concludes with a summary of the central argument.

1.1. Europeanisation

Europeanisation is widely recognised as one of the most contested concepts in European Union studies. It has been used to describe a broad range of phenomena such as emergence of a new form of governance in European Union; change in national institutional structures as a response to European integration; policy-making power developing from national level to the European Union level and vice versa; modernisation of a state to European Union standards; adoption of West European state model; strategy of giving a new identity and power; cultural integration; and many more. (Harmsen, Wilson, 2000; Buller, Gamble, 2002; Radaelli,

Saurugger, 2008; Bandov, Kolman, 2018) The scope of these definitions reflects the complex nature of the term, which can have completely different functions and meanings depending on the analytical context in which it is used. However, as Flockhart (2010) argues, all these varied meanings can be seen as different approaches to explain different ways of diffusing the European ideas and practices across political systems.

For the purposes of this thesis, Europeanisation is understood through Radaelli's (2004:3) definition as the processes of construction, diffusion and institutionalisation of formal and informal rules, procedures, policy paradigms, styles, ways of doing things and shared beliefs and norms which are first defined and consolidated in the European Union's public policy and politics and then incorporated into the logic of domestic discourse, identities, political structures and public policies. This definition is chosen because it captures both the multi-directional nature of the process, which is important for this study of the EU-Belarus border crisis, and the discursive dimension in which the shared beliefs and norms are incorporated into the domestic political discourse. This discursive dimension presents this study empirically by helping to understand how the framing of the Belarusian border crisis as "weaponised/instrumentalised migration" moved across Lithuanian, Polish and European Union level of political discourse between mid-2021 and 2023.

Europeanisation can affect several dimensions of political life. A common distinction is between effects on polity, which are political institutions and structures, policy, which is the substance and content of governance decisions and politics, which is the processes, actors and dynamics of political competition (Graziano *et al.*, 2013). To these three dimensions, discourse must be added as a distinct object of Europeanisation. Discourse refers here to the shared ideas, frames, narratives and interpretive concepts through which political actors make sense of issues and communicate to the wider public. Domestic actors may draw strategically on European-level discourse to legitimize policy choices already made at the national level, while simultaneously attempting to shape the direction of the European Union level narratives. (Radaelli, Saurugger, 2008) Europeanisation of discourse is therefore not a passive process of reception, but an active and contested one. This is what this dimension of discourse in this thesis traces empirically.

The notion of Europeanisation being a process in which domestic politics is shaped by European policy-making is developed from the fact that the European Union institutions have a legal supremacy over national law. This has been stated to be the main reason why states adopt policy changes from a "top-down" manner. This dynamic has been described in the

literature as coercive isomorphism. It is a process through which states are pressured into adopting similar institutional forms and policy approaches through external legal and normative obligations. (Lodge, 2000:90-92) In order to comply with European Union requirements, member states have to reach the institutional requirements established by the European Union level (Knill and Lehmkuhl, 1999:2). According to Connolly (2008:8,10) Government institutions do not exist in an isolated vacuum as different European Union decisions have an effect on everyday matters. The significance of change that European policy-making brings diverges from state to state and even between policy areas within the same state.

However, states still have their autonomy and opportunity to participate in the policy-making of the European Union and therefore have an influence on outcomes and can be defined as a “two-way process”. Member states are interested in shaping policy-making according to their interests. On the other hand, they also have to accept and implement outcomes of such policy-making. (Buller, Gamble, 2002; Flockhart, 2010; Börzel, 2002) This two-directional aspect means that Europeanisation should not be understood solely as a top-down process of adapting to the European Union’s rules and policies. It involves multidirectional interaction in which domestic actors both respond to and seek to influence European policy-making processes. Understanding Europeanisation as a multidirectional process provides the foundation for analysing how political discourse interacts and evolves with European Union level narratives and especially, how a particular framing of a security crisis can travel in multiple directions simultaneously. The following sections examine the specific mechanisms of downloading, uploading and cross-loading to understand these directional dynamics in greater depth.

1.1.1. Downloading

“Top-down” Europeanisation, otherwise known as “downloading” refers to a process in which developments at the European Union level lead to changes within the domestic level. According to Buller and Gamble (2002) downloading can be understood as a “/.../ situation in which distinctive forms of European governments transform aspects of domestic policy /.../”. Similarly, Bache and Marshall (2004) have defined top-down Europeanisation as “redirection or reframing of domestic politics in ways that reflect policies, practice and preferences of actors and institutions on EU level”. These definitions emphasise the fact that political dynamics originating at the European level are capable of reshaping national policy

frameworks, administrative practises and political discourse. Downloading is therefore not simply a technical or administrative process, it is also a process through which the meaning of political issues can be redefined from above.

This concept is rooted in the understanding that the European Union institutions have a legal supremacy over national law (Lodge, 2000:90,91). As a result, member states are required to comply and adopt legislation, regulations, policy guidance and other decisions made at the European Union level (Knill, Lehmkuhl, 1999:3). In order for European policy-making to be implemented on a national level, pressure has to be applied (Bache, Jordan, 2006 cited through Hang, 2011). Knill and Lehmkuhl (1999) have distinguished three primary mechanisms for downloading - positive integration, negative integration and framing integration.

Positive integration mechanism has the purpose of reshaping and reforming already existing domestic policies to protect the market from negative effects. States have to align their already existing models to the European model, even if the pressure to do so is not inherently from the European Union level, but rather from internal market safeguarding. This usually demands administrative reform or complete change of legislation. Negative integration is the opposite of the aforementioned. It does not deal with negative effects caused by the market, but rather maintains and secures the functioning and access of the market. Instead of forcing the member state to entirely reframe the policy, this mechanism simply recommends making regulations compatible with the requirements by removing parts which do not align with current policy-making decisions. However, framing integration instead of setting clear rules or changing the existing domestic policy, changes the political discourse to encourage a broader reform in a new political decision-making environment. (*Ibid.*,:2-4) Downloading does not necessarily involve adopting legal obligations. Instead, it can influence discursively by shaping how political actors at the national level understand, intercept and communicate a given issue (Radaelli, Saurugger, 2008). This discursive element of downloading is important when the object of diffusion is not a regulation or directive on physical paper, but instead a security framing which in its ways defines how an issue becomes a threat, how it is represented and what kind of a response is needed.

The extent to which downloading can lead to domestic change is not uniform across member states. According to Börzel and Risse (2003:1,2) “misfitting” of the policy, adaptational pressures which have risen due to this incompatibility and how institutions react to these pressures, showcase the different outcomes of European level policy. When a state has a

significant “misfit” between policy being implemented and existing national structures and capabilities, they face stronger pressures to adjust their political discourse and institutions to the European standard. Policy misfit can cause non-compliance due to it not following domestic policy goals, leading to states being interested to upload their own to the European level, instead of downloading European Union policies. Conversely, when European Union policies fit within the existing national system, the need for change and therefore as well pressure, is significantly reduced. This concept of adaptational pressure therefore shows that downloading does not automatically guarantee institutional transformation but it rather cooperates with existing domestic structures and policy discourse. (*Ibid.*, 5)

In this thesis, downloading as a mechanism would indicate that the framing of the EU-Belarus border crisis as “weaponised/instrumentalised migration” originated at the European Union level and was eventually adopted by the Lithuanian and Polish discourse. If that expectation is true then the European Union institutions would have been the first to construct this migration discourse and subsequently Lithuania and Poland would have adopted and reproduced this framing in a response to the European Union’s influence.

1.1.2. Uploading

“Bottom-up” Europeanisation, otherwise known as “uploading” refers to a process in which developments at the domestic level lead to changes within the European Union level. It is an effective way for a state to minimise the cost of European policy-making and to maximise the benefits. According to Börzel (2002) it “/.../ reduces the need for legal and administrative adaptation /.../” because less is needed administratively and financially to implement the policy into the national framework. It also provides a platform to find common solutions to domestic situations that a single member state is no longer capable of handling on their own or through their own policy and institutions, due to the changed nature and/or transnationality of the issue, such as organised crime, immigration, etc. Even more, if a state is successful in uploading their domestic regulation that evidently has a lower standard than what is common in the other member states, the “uploading” state is possibly giving themselves a competitive advantage. In a case, when a state does not have any infrastructure in place for a European Union top-down policy implementation, the state now has a duty to maintain and build up necessary policy fields and institutions, which can become a resource-heavy process. That is why a bottom-up approach can be the preferred option as it gives more agency and advantages to the uploading member state. Nonetheless, it may cause competition between

high and low regulating countries, when one tries to upload a policy narrative with a competing state in the same field, but with totally opposite solutions. Furthermore, it may disadvantage less capable states due to lack of action capacity and resources. Additionally, no single European state is capable of implementing their national policy as a singular European policy. The European negotiation process will shape the overall narrative of the policy and eventually include interests of other states. (Börzel, 2002) However, for the purposes of this thesis the cost-benefit logic of uploading can be less important than its discursive dimension. What member states upload is not only policy preferences or regulatory framework. They also upload interpretive frames to understand what a problem is, why it matters and what kind of response it demands. When a state uploads a discursive frame successfully, it does not merely influence what the European Union decides. It also shapes how the European Union and eventually other member states think and talk about an issue that is important for that particular member state. This mechanism allows member states of the European Union to upload a security framing that originates from their direct experience with the matter, therefore allowing them not only to define the nature of the threat but also to steer collective responses in directions favourable to their own security and political preferences.

In this thesis, uploading as a mechanism would suggest that Lithuania and Poland, as the member states directly affected by the Belarus border crisis, were the first to frame the situation as “weaponised/instrumentalised migration” and that this framing eventually travelled up into the European Union level discourse. In this case, the European Union level becomes the receiver of a security framing that originated in the domestic political contexts of the two most directly affected member states.

1.1.3. Cross-loading

“Horizontal” Europeanisation, otherwise known as “cross-loading” refers to a process in which developments are shared between multiple domestic levels within the European Union. Major and Pomorska (2005:1) have defined it as “/.../ the exchange of ideas, norms and ‘ways of doing’ things between countries or other entities for which the EU sets the scene; thus change is not only ‘due’ to but takes place ‘within’ Europe.”

Unlike top-down or bottom-up mechanisms, cross-loading does not depend on formal European Union policy obligations or institutional pressures. Instead, it occurs through interactions and collaborations between member states within the European Union. These

interactions allow political actors to adopt policy ideas, practices and discourses through observation, evaluation and learnings.

Radaelli (2003:41-43) distinguishes horizontal Europeanisation as a vertical mechanism opposed to horizontal mechanisms of uploading and downloading through its absence of adaptional pressure. According to Radaelli (*Ibid.*), while aforementioned vertical processes have strong institutional requirements to bring forward change in member states, horizontal Europeanisation uses soft power of framing, diffusion and narrative to create a great image of a “good policy” and “best practice”. This creates a perception that certain approaches of policy narratives or institutional practices represent the effective or a legitimate solution to a shared challenge without a pressure to adapt, so called “goodness of fit”.

The horizontal diffusion of policy approaches may also appear in a case when the European Union institutions introduce a non-binding regulatory framework. According to Radaelli (2003:43), even policy instruments, which use soft power, can significantly influence domestic political discourse and change how political actors interpret political problems and possible solutions, therefore setting the ground for policy change. Such soft power instruments provide political actors a favourable policy discourse when advocating for certain domestic reforms or when introducing new policy ideas to the domestic debate. It also helps to shape expectations for future developments or discourses. Through this horizontal mechanism, political narratives from the European level can influence domestic political discourse without setting any formal legal obligation or pressuring institutional change. Additionally, cross-loading therefore functions through subtle, yet influential discursive diffusion. States can incorporate useful policy learnings and change through social learning and norm adaptation. Börzel and Risse (2003:2) state that socialisation and collective learning can be used to bring forward change. Cross-loading shows the importance of norm diffusion, socialisation and lack of adaptional pressures to drive member states to have a political discourse change. Member states are capable of adopting policy ideas from other member states or from broader policy debates within the European Union. These processes of mutual learning, adaptation and influencing can strongly contribute to the circulation of policy narratives across state borders and reinforce the shared nature of political discourse within the European Union.

In this thesis, cross-loading as a mechanism removes the European Union level entirely. Therefore, the “weaponized/instrumentalised migration” framing would have spread between Lithuania and Poland without the European Union level playing any role. These two states

share a border with Belarus, faced the same crisis at the same time and had strong reasons to coordinate their responses directly together. Cross-loading would therefore mean that Lithuanian and Polish discourses on “weaponised/instrumentalised migration” developed in parallel and mutually reinforced each other through direct bilateral interaction with the European Union level receiving this shared framing. It is also worth noting that cross-loading and uploading are not mutually exclusive. A pattern in which Lithuania or Poland first developed a shared framing through horizontal interaction and then jointly uploaded that framing to the European Union level, would represent a combination of both mechanisms.

1.2. Securitization

This section introduces securitization theory as a second analytical framework of this thesis. Europeanisation, introduced in the previous sub-chapter, provides the framework to understand how political ideas and discursive frames travel between different levels of governance within the European Union. However, Europeanisation does not determine what kind of content is being constructed within the discourse in which way. In turn, securitization theory explains why certain political issues are discursively constructed as security threats and against whom these discourses are constructed against. Within this thesis, securitization theory helps to understand how the framing of the EU-Belarus border situation was eventually framed as “weaponised/instrumentalised migration”.

The traditional view of security has always been seen as a military issue and application of use of force (Buzan *et al.*, 1998:1). Securitization theory which was developed by the Copenhagen school takes a step beyond the military sector and widens it by adding the political, economic, social and environmental sector. Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde (1998:22–25) argue that any political issue can be turned into a securitized issue by presenting the situations as an existential threat which needs immediate emergency measures, therefore justifying political decisions which defies normal expected political behaviour. Additionally, the audience has to accept and find resonance with this securitized issue, otherwise this issue will remain within the realm of normal politics. However, securitization does not always happen hand-in-hand with politicization of an issue. The main concept still remains as the issue is presented as an existential threat that is above all other issues and demands a response outside the normal rules of politics.

Balzacq (2010:4) has defined securitization as “/.../ an articulated assemblage of practice” in which securitizing actors strategically use heuristic artifacts such as metaphors, policy tools, emotions and more to shape how the audience views and perceives the given issue. Through this practice, the securitizing actor is interested in influencing the audience by creating a shared understanding of a referent object as under imminent threat and vulnerability. This practice is simply set up in a way to create varied interpretations, feelings and thoughts about the issue which help to steer the perception of the issue towards the actor’s political objectives. By framing the discourse around the referent object as facing exceptional and urgent danger, securitizing actors legitimize the need for exceptional and urgent political solutions and policy responses to prevent the perceived threat from becoming materialized. (Balzacq, 2010:4) Response to the security threat can be either institutionalized, in a case when the issue is recurring or only acted upon when the issue presents itself, and is therefore need-based. Institutionalized approach can be seen as part of normal politics. Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde (1998: 27, 28) have stated the disappearance of attention to a particular issue does not necessarily mean that the issue itself has been resolved. Rather, when the issue re-emerges on the agenda, participants understand that its renewed prominence signals the need for political action and resolution.

The concept of securitization can be characterized through multiple lenses. Firstly, it can be understood through the power of language and the act of speaking about the threat, which is called "philosophical". Secondly, it can be understood through practices, context and power relations of how a threat can be constructed, also known as “sociological”. These two approaches differ in the way threat discourse can be created and therefore perceived by reasons of agency and by definition of audience. (Balzacq, 2010; Buzan *et al.*, 1998:26) As Balzacq (2010:2) has stated that securitization is at once discursive and non-discursive, intentional and non-intentional meaning that security threats have varied reasons and ways of emergence, therefore no security threat falls perfectly into either of the categories and research about these threats has to borrow knowledge from both practises of philosophical and sociological. The empirical analysis that follows focuses primarily on the discursive dimension by tracing the specific language through which Lithuanian, Polish officials and European Union officials constructed the EU-Belarus border crisis as a security threat, while also attending to the political contexts in which key framing moments occurred. Understanding securitization through both lenses is particularly relevant when examining how migration becomes a security issue, as the following section elaborates.

1.2.1. Securitization of migration and the sectoral logic of threat construction

Migration is not inherently a security issue. However, it can be framed in many different ways depending on the political context and the interests of the actors involved. It can be an economic phenomenon, a humanitarian challenge or a social and administrative matter. Each one of these is a political construction with a certain type of institutional response. (Buzan *et al.*, 1998:22-25) However, the securitization of migration refers to the process in which migration is framed and treated as a security issue within political discourse and policy-making, instead of being seen as one of these aforementioned challenges.

The Copenhagen School distinguishes between five sectors in which securitization can occur - military, political, economic, societal and environmental. Migration is mainly constructed as a societal and political threat. According to Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde (1998:119,121-123) these two sectors are seen as closely related ones, but both have their own distinctions for referent objects. Political sector threats are about organizational stability of states, systems and ideologies of government through which states receive their legitimacy. The societal sector is defined through the concept of identity - how individuals see themselves as a member of a social group. The concept of a societal threat appears when a community feels a danger to their survival as a whole and there is a threat of a breakdown of the society. The common issues in societal security when it comes to the migration aspect are related to identity change of the community and dilution of the founding people of the community.

In the European context, according to Huysmans (2000) the dominant post-1980s pattern of migration securitization has been also operated primarily through the political and societal dynamic. The political construction of migration in western Europe has increasingly referred to the destabilizing effects of migration on domestic integration and the dangers it implies for public safety. This frames migrants as a challenge to national identity and heats up the topic on politics of belonging. The development of the Schengen area and the internal market further reinforced this pattern, transforming what Huysmans (2000) describes as an economic project into an internal security project in which immigration was increasingly associated with threats to the security of Europe. This showcases the securitization of the societal sector, because migration is constructed not merely as a policy or economic issue, but as a threat to the identity, cohesion and internal stability of European societies.

However, according to Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde (1998:121-123) migration can also be securitized in ways that operate through the political sector. It frames the movement of people

as a deliberate instrument of a hostile state actor. It can be a weapon deployed against the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the target state. In this framing, the existential threat is whether the people of a state continue to exist as a sovereign and if they are capable of controlling their own borders and resisting external coercion.

Understanding why migration can function as a political sector threat of this kind requires engaging with the concept of hybrid warfare. Hybrid warfare can be defined as the use of a combination of military and non-military, overt and covert means by a state or non-state actor to achieve political objectives against a target without triggering a conventional military response. (Hoffman, 2007:14; NATO, 2026) It typically involves a mixture of military instruments, covert operations, information warfare, cyberattacks, economic pressure and the exploitation of legal and institutional vulnerabilities of the target state. (Countering..., 2014:2–3; Wijnja, 2022)

A defining characteristic of hybrid warfare is its deliberate ambiguity as attacks are designed to be difficult to detect, attribute and respond to within established frameworks of international law and conventional defence doctrine. It leaves governments incapable of responding effectively as it diverts from their traditional rules of war. (Wijnja, 2022) Migration, in this context, can function as one instrument within a broader hybrid warfare framework. When a state actor deliberately facilitates or orchestrates the movement of irregular migrants toward the border of a target state, it weaponizes migration as a form of coercive pressure. (Countering..., 2014:3) The target state is placed in a position where it must simultaneously manage a humanitarian situation, defend its border and maintain its international legal obligations and all of this without a clear legal framework for treating the orchestrating party responsible.

This political sector framing that characterizes the discourse is examined in this thesis. When Lithuanian and Polish officials described the EU-Belarus border situation as “weaponised/instrumentalised migration”, they were not constructing migration as a threat to Lithuanian or Polish identity. They were constructing it as a deliberate act of aggression by Belarus against the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the European Union member states. The referent object in this framing is the state itself and inherently the European Union. This represents a significant discursive shift from the societal sector framing that has dominated European migration securitization for decades. This is a change in which dynamics and direction of travel within the EU-Belarus border crisis are the central empirical question of this thesis.

1.2.2. Macro-securitization and the transnational spread of security framings

A key limitation of classical securitization theory as developed by Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde (1998) is its primary focus on the domestic level. It focused on how a single political actor, operating within a single national context, constructs and communicates a security threat to a domestic audience. The theory was not originally designed to explain how securitization spreads across political systems, levels of governance or national borders.

According to Buzan and Wæver (2009:253-254) macro-securitizations are higher-order securitizations that operate above the level of individual states, incorporating, aligning and ranking more localized securitizations beneath them. The Cold War provides the clearest historical example as the overarching East and West existential confrontation functioned as a macro-securitization that gave meaning to the bilateral threat constructions by including it within a shared higher-order framework of existential threat. (Buzan, Wæver, 2009:253–254) Within this macro-securitization, local conflicts and security concerns were interpreted through the lens of the broader ideological struggle, making it easier for individual states to have their specific threat perceptions recognized and legitimized by allies and institutions operating at a higher level.

Since 2016, NATO and the European Union have taken as one of their priorities in cooperation to counter hybrid threats. However, this cooperation is mostly about conceptual work and policy guidance. European states are still individually responsible for their own implementation of how to counter hybrid threats. (Countering..., 2014:2,3; NATO, 2026; Wijnja, 2022) This institutional reality is directly relevant to the concept of macro-securitization. It means that a shared European-level understanding of hybrid threats, including “the weaponization/instrumentalisation of migration”, cannot simply be mandated from above. It must be constructed discursively, through the kind of uploading and cross-loading processes described in the previous sections and then integrated at the European Union level through formal policy responses.

If the “weaponised/instrumentalised migration” framing achieved macro-securitization at the European Union level by becoming the main European understanding of the EU-Belarus border crisis rather than merely a Lithuanian or Polish national framing, then it would represent precisely the kind of higher-order securitization that Buzan and Wæver (2009) describe. The domestic experiences of Lithuania and Poland would have been involved within a broader European Union level security construction, in which the EU-Belarus border

situation was rendered an existential challenge not just to two member states but to the European Union as a whole. The concept of macro-securitization therefore explains how a security framing can travel upward from the national to the supranational level and become institutionalized as the shared European interpretation of a threat. However, macro-securitization theory alone cannot explain the precise governance-level mechanisms through which security framings travel across political systems. While it explains how localized securitizations may become incorporated into broader supranational security constructions, it does not distinguish whether this occurs through uploading, downloading or cross-loading dynamics. Europeanisation therefore complements macro-securitization by providing the analytical tools necessary for tracing the directional diffusion of the “weaponised/instrumentalised migration” framing across Lithuanian, Polish and European Union discourse.

Macro-securitization follows the same basic logic as ordinary securitization. It requires the identification of an existential threat to a valued referent object and the call for exceptional measures, but it is significantly more difficult to achieve. At the macro level the state is facing a more demanding audience. Whereas domestic securitization addresses a national public already embedded in shared cultural and political contexts, macro-securitization primarily targets foreign policy elites in other states and officials in supranational institutions, who must accept and reproduce the framing for it to consolidate at the higher level. (Buzan, Wæver, 2009:258-260) Therefore, Lithuania and Poland were faced with a challenge in making their specific experience of the EU-Belarus border crisis understandable and urgent to the European Union level actors, who did not share that specific experience. It can leave governments incapable of responding effectively as hybrid threats divert from their traditional rules of war. This institutional incapacity is part of what made the securitizing move by Lithuania and Poland necessary and important. Examining the extent to which these states succeeded in uploading their security framing to the European Union level and how this framing was possibly received and adapted by the European Union actors, is one of the central topics of this thesis.

1.3. Summary and theoretical expectations

This chapter has developed the theoretical framework that guides the empirical analysis of this thesis. Drawing on Europeanisation theory and securitization theory, it has established the conceptual tools necessary for investigating how the framing of the EU-Belarus border crisis as “weaponized/instrumentalised migration” diffused across Lithuanian, Polish and EU-level political discourse between mid-2021 and 2023.

From the Europeanisation chapter, three mechanisms of discursive diffusion have been identified. Downloading describes a process in which the European Union level discourse shapes national political framings. Uploading describes a process in which national-level actors seek to transplant their understanding of a political issue onto the EU level, making it the shared European interpretation of that issue. Cross-loading describes a process in which political framings spread directly between member states without the European Union level acting as an intermediary. Crucially, all three mechanisms can operate on discourse by not only on formal policies or regulatory frameworks and they are not mutually exclusive.

Securitization is firstly a discursive process due to the outcome of a successful political act through which an issue is constructed as an existential threat to a valued referent object and exceptional measures are called for. Whether a securitizing move succeeds, depends on audience acceptance, which in the context of this thesis means acceptance by other national governments and European Union institutions. Secondly, migration can be securitized in different sectors with different referent objects. In Europe the dominant post-Cold War pattern has been constructing it through the societal sector by showing the migrants as threats to national identity. The EU-Belarus border crisis used a political sector framing, in which migration was constructed as an “instrument of hybrid warfare” with the Polish and Lithuanian state and the European Union as the primary referent object.

Together these frameworks generate the following theoretical expectations. If downloading is the dominant mechanism, then the framing of the EU-Belarus border crisis as “weaponised/instrumentalised migration” will have originated at the European Union level, with Lithuanian and Polish discourse subsequently adopting and reproducing this EU-level framing. In this theoretical expectation, the European Union institutions would have acted as the primary source of the security discourse and subsequently Lithuania and Poland would have adopted and reproduced this framing in a response to the European Union’s influence. If uploading is the dominant mechanism, Lithuania and Poland, as the member states most

directly affected by the Belarus border crisis, will have been the first to frame the situation as “weaponised/instrumentalised migration”, with this framing subsequently travelling upward into European Union level discourse. In this case, the European Union level becomes the receiver of a security framing that originated within the domestic political contexts of the affected member states. If cross-loading is the dominant mechanism, Lithuanian and Polish discourses on “weaponised/instrumentalised migration” developed in parallel and mutually reinforced each other through direct bilateral interaction with the European Union level receiving this shared framing. These theoretical expectations provide the analytical framework for the empirical part of the thesis. By tracing the emergence, diffusion and institutionalization of the “weaponised/instrumentalised migration” framing across Lithuanian, Polish and European Union level discourse, the thesis aims to identify which of the Europeanisation mechanisms of downloading, uploading and cross-loading most accurately explains the development of this security construction of the EU-Belarus border crisis.

2. METHODOLOGY

This methodology chapter provides an overview of the research methodology by explaining the research design, case selection, the choice of method, data collection and the limitations. The aim of this chapter is to explain how this research investigates the development and diffusion of the “weaponised/instrumentalised migration” framing across Lithuanian, Polish and the European Union level official discourse during the Belarus border crisis from mid-2021 to 2023.

2.1. Research design

This research investigates how the “weaponised/instrumentalised migration” framing of the EU-Belarus border crisis developed and diffused across Lithuanian, Polish and the European Union level of official political discourse between mid-2021 and 2023. This research design is single-case study focused on systematic tracing of discursive changes of the diffusion of a securitized framing of migration in the European Union across these three levels over mid-2021 to 2023 with the purpose of finding key moments in which the framing emerges, escalates and becomes institutionalized and how the possible diffusion between levels of governance developed.

This research design focuses on the specific language used by Lithuanian and Polish officials and the European Union institutions to characterize the EU-Belarus border situation. It also helps to trace how the security language evolved across mid-2021 to 2023. By identifying when particular framings first appear in Lithuanian, Polish and the European Union discourse, which actors adopt them and in what sequence and how they travel between national and European levels of governance, makes it possible to understand the mechanisms through which the framing diffused. Whether it happened through downloading from the European Union level, uploading from the national level or cross-loading between Lithuania and Poland directly. The three mechanisms of downloading, uploading and cross-loading introduced in the theoretical framework, therefore serve not only as conceptual tools, but as the analytical categories against which the empirical patterns observed in the data are assessed.

2.2. Case selection

This study is a single case study focusing on diffusion of security framing of the migration discourse based on the EU-Belarus border crisis from mid-2021 to 2023. It is important to note that Lithuania, Poland and the European Union are not treated as three separate cases in this research. Each of these entities are units of observation within this single case providing the data through which the patterns of discursive diffusion can be found and traced.

Lithuania and Poland are in the focus of this research because they were the two European Union member states most directly and immediately affected by the EU-Belarus border crisis. Both countries share a physical border with Belarus and faced the orchestrated flow of irregular migrants from Belarusian territory from mid-2021 onward. As direct recipients of this crisis, they were the first national-level actors to develop and articulate a political framing of the situation, making them the most likely origin points of “weaponised/instrumentalised migration” discourse within the European Union. Furthermore, as neighbouring countries facing the same crisis simultaneously, they had strong incentives to coordinate their responses directly, making them two likely units for tracing possible cross-loading between national discourses. Both are also European Union member states with full participation rights in the European Union level of policy-making, meaning they are capable of influencing European-level discourse through uploading while also being subjects to the European Union level of framing through downloading effects.

The European Union is selected as the third unit of observation because it represents the macro level of governance at which the shared European framing of the crisis could be institutionalized. European Union institutions have the authority and the reach to spread a particular understanding of a security situation. Tracing when and how European Union level of discourse was adopted, modified or if it preceded the “weaponized/instrumentalised migration” framing is therefore necessary for understanding the direction and mechanism of this discursive diffusion.

The purpose of including these three units is not to compare Lithuania and Poland with each other nor to evaluate their respective policy responses. The purpose is to trace the development and movement of a specific discursive frame across all three levels, so that the sequence and direction of framing adoption can be established empirically.

2.3. Method of analysis

This study uses a qualitative research design to examine how the framing of “weaponised/instrumentalised migration” was constructed and diffused within and across levels of governance during the EU-Belarus border crisis.

This thesis follows the logic of discourse tracing as developed by LeGreco and Tracy (2009). Discourse tracing is a qualitative method that analyzes the formation, interpretation and appropriation of discursive practices across different levels of political context (LeGreco, Tracy, 2009:1518). It is particularly well suited to research that examines how a particular framing or narrative develops and travels across institutional contexts over time and how different levels of discourse interact with one another to create or transform a political phenomenon, policy or understanding. (*Ibid.*, 1521)

In this study, discourse tracing is applied across two levels of official political communication. The first is the national level, covering official communications from the offices of the President and the Government of Lithuania and Poland. The second is the supranational level, covering official communications from the European Union institutions. This two-level structure corresponds to the meso and macro levels of discourse as understood in the discourse tracing framework with national-level official communications constituting the meso level and EU institutional communications constituting the macro level. (LeGreco, Tracy, 2009:1518)

The analysis focused on tracing the emergence, repetition and institutionalization of security-related formulations associated with migration during the EU-Belarus border crisis across Lithuanian, Polish and European Union level discourse. The analysis therefore focused not only on the presence of specific terminology related to hybrid threats, but also on the broader security logic within which migration was framed within this crisis. Mainly the mention of the crisis was straight-forward formulation such as “hybrid attack”, “hybrid aggression”, “weaponised migration”, “migration as a weapon”, “instrumentalised migration” and was given a clear association with either “Belarus” or “Lukashenko”, but other wordings regarding the crisis also appeared.

The analysis also examined the chronological sequencing of these formulations across governance levels. Evidence for uploading was identified where a framing first appeared within Lithuanian, Polish discourse or European Union institutional communications.

Evidence for downloading was identified where European Union institutions first articulated a specific framing that was later reproduced within Lithuanian or Polish discourse. Cross-loading was identified where similar formulations emerged in Lithuanian and Polish discourse in parallel or through direct bilateral interaction prior to their appearance at the European Union level. The analysis therefore relied not only on the content of the discourse itself, but also on the timing, repetition and institutional location of the framing across different levels of governance.

It should be noted that this study does not include micro-level discourse, which can be media coverage, journalistic commentary, public debate or expert analysis. This is a deliberate methodological choice. Focusing exclusively on official government and institutional communications produces a more internally consistent and comparable data, as all sources are produced within comparable institutional contexts and carry comparable levels of political authority.

2.4. Data collection

Data collection follows the logic of discourse tracing, which requires the systematic gathering of official communications across all three units of observation Lithuania, Poland and the European Union from mid-2021 to 2023.

For Lithuania and Poland, data is drawn from the official online communications of the offices of the President and the Government covering all communication regarding the EU-Belarus border crisis from mid-2021 to 2023. For Lithuania, the primary sources are the website of the Office of the President of the Republic of Lithuania (lrp.lt) and the website of the Government of The Republic of Lithuania (lrv.lt). For Poland, the primary sources are the website of the President of the Republic of Poland (president.pl) and the website of the Polish Government (gov.pl). For the European Union level, data is drawn from official communications of the presidents of the European Council and the European Commission. The primary sources are the website of the European Council (consilium.europa.eu) and the website of the European Commission (commission.europa.eu). For Lithuania, the final dataset included 120 official communications. For Poland, the final dataset included 44 official communications, while for the European Union level the final dataset consisted of 30 official communications. A substantially larger number of communications was processed

during the data collection stage, but excluded from the final analysis because they either did not address the EU-Belarus border crisis or did not contain securitizing or “weaponised/instrumentalised migration” related framing.

Data is gathered and organized chronologically within each entity of observation and sorted according to the level of governance from which it originates. Each data point is recorded with its date, issuing actor, statement headline, key framing language and source link. This chronological and multi-level organization allows for the systematic identification of when particular framings first appear within each unit, how they evolve over time and whether patterns of adoption or convergence are visible across units (LeGreco, Tracy, 2009:1526–1531). Rather than collecting every official statement that mentions general migration or Belarus, statements are selected on the basis of their relevance to the framing under investigation. The presence of language relating to “weaponized migration”, “hybrid attack”, “hybrid aggression”, “instrumentalisation of migration” or equivalent wordings in regards to the EU-Belarus border crisis is in observation. This purposive selection ensures that the dataset is focused on the discursive phenomenon of interest rather than on the full width of official communications on migration matters during that time period.

2.5. Limitations

Several limitations of this research design should be mentioned. Firstly, the specific focus on official government and institutional communications means that this thesis captures only the formal layer of political discourse. It does not account for how the “weaponised/instrumentalised migration” framing circulated in media coverage, public debate or expert commentary nor how it was received by domestic or European audiences. The conclusions of this study apply specifically to official political discourse and cannot be extended to broader public discourse without further research.

Secondly, as LeGreco and Tracy (2009:1526) note, discourse tracers must understand that even the most detailed datasets are still often incomplete and messy. Some relevant communications may be inaccessible, untranslated, lost from official archives or simply not published in forms that are retrievable. This is particularly relevant for Polish-language sources, where the availability of English-language official communications is less consistent

than for Lithuanian sources. Where relevant statements are available only in the native language, this thesis relies on official English translations published on government websites.

Thirdly, the study covers three years of the EU-Belarus border crisis and the selection of data points involves analytical judgments about which statements are necessary. Different selection criteria could produce a somewhat different picture of the discursive timeline.

3. BACKGROUND: THE EU-BELARUS BORDER CRISIS

The EU-Belarus border crisis in the center of this study did not emerge overnight. Its beginning comes from the deteriorating relationship between the European Union and the Belarusian regime of Alexander Lukashenko. It followed from the disputed Belarusian presidential elections of August 2020, in which Lukashenko claimed a sixth consecutive term in office amid widespread allegations of electoral fraud and a following wave of mass protests. The European Union, alongside with other Western states, refused to recognize Lukashenko as the legitimate president and extended political and financial support to the Belarusian democratic opposition. Relations between the European Union and Lukashenko deteriorated further on 23rd of May 2021, when Belarusian authorities forced the emergency landing of Ryanair flight in Minsk and arrested opposition journalist Roman Protasevich and his partner. The European Union responded with a ban on Belarusian airlines in the European Union airspace and with a fourth package of targeted sanctions. (Bodnar, Grzelak, 2023; EUAA, n.d.; OHCHR, n.d., Mills, et al., 2021:7,8) It was in this context of escalating political and economic confrontation that the EU-Belarus border situation began to develop.

From May 2021 onward, increasing numbers of migrants, primarily from Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan and several African countries, began crossing the borders of Lithuania, Latvia and Poland through Belarusian territory, having travelled to Belarus on visas. Lithuanian, Polish and Latvian officials stated from the beginning that Belarusian state actors were actively facilitating and directing these crossings by providing transportation from Minsk to the border, offering logistical support and in some cases physically directing migrants toward border crossing points. In the years preceding the crisis, Lithuania had detained approximately 70 irregular migrants per year at its border with Belarus and by August 2021 this number had risen to over 4,000 crossings since the beginning of the year. The number of applications for international protection submitted in Poland increased in 2021, reaching approximately 7,800 cases, which was nearly three times higher than the previous year. (EUAA, n.d.; OHCHR, n.d., Mills, et al, 2021) This put an increased pressure on the national asylum and border guarding systems.

The crisis developed in several distinct phases. The first phase, from May to August 2021, saw the initial escalation at the Lithuanian border. Lithuania declared an extraordinary situation on 2nd of July 2021 and followingly amended its legislation to allow the automatic

return of irregular migrants (Government of The Republic of Lithuania, 2021a). Poland declared a state of emergency in the regions bordering Belarus on 2nd of September 2021 (Chancellery of the Prime Minister Republic of Poland, 2021), restricting access to the border zone for journalists and humanitarian organizations. Both of these states took steps to reinforce their physical border infrastructure, with Lithuania announcing the construction of a physical barrier on 23rd of August 2021 (Government of The Republic of Lithuania, 2021b).

In early November, thousands of migrants were at the Kuźnica border crossing point in Poland in freezing conditions, in what appeared to be a coordinated Belarusian effort to force a mass crossing of the European Union's external border (Mills, et al., 2021:2,9,13). The images of migrants stranded in freezing forests between Belarusian and Polish border guards attracted intense international media attention and generated significant humanitarian concern (*Ibid.*; Bodnar, Grzelak, 2023:59–62). Lithuania declared a state of emergency only around the border area (Office of the Seimas of the Republic of Lithuania, 2021).

From December 2021, the number of irregular crossings declined as the physical barriers were completed in both countries and the Lithuanian parliament adopted amendments to the laws regarding migration. The European Commission published its proposal for a regulation on the instrumentalisation of migration on 14th of December 2021. (EUAA, n.d.) Russia's invasion of Ukraine on the 24th of February 2022 changed the geopolitical context, shifting the primary security concern of both Poland and the European Union toward the Ukrainian crisis, though Lithuania continued to face residual migration pressure from Belarus through 2022 and into 2023.

4. ANALYSIS: THE EMERGENCE OF THE FRAMING OF THE “WEAPONISED/INSTRUMENTALISED MIGRATION” IN LITHUANIA, POLAND AND THE EUROPEAN UNION

This chapter traces the development and evolution of the “weaponised/instrumentalised migration” framing in Lithuanian official political discourse between mid-2021 and 2023 with the aim of identifying how the framing emerged, evolved and diffused within Lithuanian political discourse during the EU-Belarus border crisis. Focusing on official communications from the offices of the President and the Government, this thesis identifies the key moments of discursive emergence, escalation and institutionalization. This enables this thesis to trace how the “weaponised/instrumentalised migration” framing developed within Lithuanian political discourse over time. The analysis is organized chronologically and thematically.

4.1. Analysis of the Emergence of the Framing of the “Weaponised/Instrumentalised Migration” in Lithuania

Lithuanian official communications about the EU-Belarus border situation began in mid-June 2021 and developed through a clearly structured discursive trajectory. The analysis below traces this development chronologically, identifying the first appearances of key terms, the moments at which they became a stable framing and the micro-clusters of language that appeared briefly before disappearing.

The earliest Lithuanian official communications about the border situation reveal a framing that had not yet crossed into securitization in the full sense of the term. On the 17th of June 2021, the President Gitanas Nausėda referred to the crisis simply as “illegal migrants crossing the Lithuanian-Belarus border” (Office of the President of the Republic of Lithuania, 2021a). This language describes the phenomenon factually without giving it meaning of a threat of any particular kind.

By the 18th of June 2021, just a day later, the Lithuanian Government introduced a notably more charged formulation, describing “illegal migrants as a weapon and a means of pressure against the EU” (Government of The Republic of Lithuania, 2021a). This is the first appearance of the word “weapon” in Lithuanian discourse, but it is used analogically rather

than as a securitized language. It is important to note that the Prime Minister Ingrida Šimonytė made this statement during a meeting with President of Latvia Egils Levits, Prime Minister of Latvia Krišjānis Kariņš and Speaker of the Saeima Ināra Mūrniece. This is the first indication that Lithuania was developing its framing in direct bilateral interaction with neighbouring states facing the same situation.

In the days immediately preceding the European Council summit of 24–25th of June 2021, both the President Nausėda and the Government began attributing clear intentionality to the Belarusian regime. On the 23rd of June 2021, the President described the migrant flow as “one of the means of pressure by the Belarusian regime on EU member states in response to the sanctions imposed” (Office of the President of the Republic of Lithuania, 2021b). On the 24th of June 2021 the President Nausėda characterized the situation as “unprecedented migration pressure” caused by a “migrant path opened by the Belarusian regime” (Office of the President of the Republic of Lithuania, 2021c). These formulations are significant as they establish deliberate Belarusian agency. However, they remain in the scope of politicization rather than securitization. In this wording, migration is a means of political coercion, but not yet a weapon of hybrid warfare. These are the early stages in which Lithuania was developing a domestic understanding of the crisis and preparing to project it upward towards the European Union level audiences.

The transition from politicization to securitization began on the 25th of June 2021, when the Prime Minister Šimonytė speaking at the European People’s Party summit in Brussels, stated for the first time that “the illegal migration is weaponised by the Belarussian regime” (Government of The Republic of Lithuania, 2021b). This is the first appearance of the verb “weaponise” in the entire Lithuanian dataset. Two observations about this moment are important. Firstly, it was the Prime Minister, not the President who made this first securitizing move. In the Lithuanian communications, the Government communication consistently leads the discursive escalation and the President seems to follow. However, behind closed doors to where the dataset is unable to reach, it is impossible to say who is leading this discussion. Secondly, the Prime Minister Šimonytė made this statement not in a domestic communication but at a European Union level political forum. From its very first appearance, the weaponization framing was oriented toward a European audience. This is consistent with an uploading strategy.

The weaponization language spread rapidly within the Government’s communications over the following days. On the 30th of June 2021, the Government used “the Belarussian

regime's weaponised illegal migration" as a matter of framing in a travel announcement (Government of The Republic of Lithuania, 2021c). Usage of this term in a routine matter might suggest the term had already begun to stabilize as a standard formulation. By the 1st of July 2021, the Government was using the wording of "regime-weaponised migration" and therefore putting the securitized blame for the EU-Belarus crisis on the regime of Belarus (Government of The Republic of Lithuania, 2021d). This repeated wording signals that the framing has become accepted within the discourse. The wording of "weaponised migration" as a term took less than one week from its first appearance to reach this status.

During this same period, a parallel micro-cluster appeared and disappeared. On the 29th of June 2021, the President Nausėda described the border situation as "the blackmail by the regime through illegal migration to Lithuania" (Office of the President of the Republic of Lithuania, 2021d). This wording, which appeared in a bilateral meeting with a Polish official, Speaker of the Sejm of Poland, Elzbieta Witek, frames Belarus as a blackmailer rather than a hybrid aggressor, positions Lithuania as a state resisting extortion rather than a state under attack. It did not recur until the statement on 28th of November 2021 titled "Prime Minister: we cannot give up our values and give in to blackmail" (Government of The Republic of Lithuania, 2021p). This occurrence happened five months later and therefore can not be assigned any strong reasoning. After this last instance, this wording was totally abandoned.

Also during this period, the President Nausėda was using notably more cautious language than the Government. In a meeting between the President of Lithuania Gitanas Nausėda and the President of the European Council Charles Michel on the 5th of July 2021, the President described migration as "a tool of political manipulation" (The Office of the President of the Republic of Lithuania, 2021e). It is a formulation that implies deliberate Belarusian intent, but does not show any previously adapted securitization. This wording by the Nausėda would persist as a recurring secondary frame used almost exclusively by the President throughout the Lithuanian dataset, appearing again and again and as late as June 2023 (Office of the President of the Republic of Lithuania, 2021g; Office of the President of the Republic of Lithuania, 2021j; Office of the President of the Republic of Lithuania, 2021i; Office of the President of the Republic of Lithuania, 2023b). It never became the dominant framing, but never fully disappeared either. It was functioning as a persistent secondary option in Presidential communications alongside the main securitized language, perhaps for specific instances and/or audiences that could be more persuaded by the political aspect of the crisis.

One of the important discursive moments in the Lithuanian dataset came on the 6th of July 2021. The Government declared for the first time that migration was “an unprecedented case of illegal migration used for political purposes as a tool of hybrid aggression” (Government of The Republic of Lithuania, 2021f). This statement introduced “hybrid” vocabulary into Lithuanian official discourse on the EU-Belarus border crisis for the first time. It is an escalation from the “tool of political manipulation” and has escalated somewhat to the securitized frame while still keeping the political aspect in mind.

The timing of this statement is directly connected to the political context. The 6th of July 2021 was the same day as a trilateral meeting in Vilnius between the Lithuanian President Nausėda, the Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and the President of the European Council Charles Michel (Office of the President of the Republic of Lithuania, 2021f). The presence of European Union level leadership in Vilnius on this date created an interested audience for this escalated framing. The state of emergency had been declared four days earlier on the 2nd of July 2021 (Government of The Republic of Lithuania, 2021e). This had created an institutional situation that needed a corresponding discursive justification.

Two days later the Government escalated the wording of the crisis further. On the 8th of July 2021, the framing reached a new wording as “Lukashenko’s hybrid war where Lukashenko has weaponised the illegal migration” (Government of The Republic of Lithuania, 2021g). This is the first appearance of “hybrid war” in the dataset, which combines both the “hybrid” wording and the “weaponization” wording in a single sentence giving it an even more serious tone and while also putting a strong focus on Lukashenko’s actions.

Simultaneously, a term appeared in the same communication as “hybrid aggression waged against Lithuania”, which can be considered as one of the “hybrid” micro-clusters. “Hybrid aggression” appeared in a couple of statements concentrated to July-August 2021 before being entirely replaced by “hybrid attack” as the dominant term (Government of The Republic of Lithuania, 2021g; Government of The Republic of Lithuania, 2021h). Like “blackmail”, this term was used a couple of times and then abandoned, most likely to give the toolbox of terms more unified focus.

The President adopted “hybrid attack” language for the first time on the 10th of July 2021. President Nausėda described the crisis as “hybrid attacks launched by the Belarus regime”. (Office of the President of the Republic of Lithuania, 2021h) It is the first appearance of the specific wording of “hybrid attack” in the entire dataset. This is important as the President’s

first use of “hybrid” vocabulary came from a meeting with the director of Frontex, which is the European Border and Coast Guard Agency, Fabrice Legger rather than from a domestic audience communication or multilateral discussions. Once again, the escalated framing appeared first in an European Union directed context.

From mid-July onward, the term “hybrid attack” was adopted across both levels of Lithuanian communication. Within days of the President’s first use on the 10th of July, both the President and the Government were using it as the standard formulation and it began appearing across an increasingly wide range of communicative contexts, such as bilateral meetings, multilateral discussions, congratulatory messages and diplomatic correspondence.

However, an important new dimension was added on the 2nd of August 2021. The President described the hybrid attack as “retaliation for the EU’s support for the Belarus civil society, opposition, and democratic processes”. (Office of the President of the Republic of Lithuania, 2021i) This is explicitly connecting the border crisis to the broader political conflict between the European Union and Belarus and framing it as deliberate revenge. On the same day, on the 2nd of August 2021, the Government introduced “a hybrid attack by the regime against the entire European Union” (Government of The Republic of Lithuania, 2021h). The shift from “against Lithuania” to “against the entire European Union” transforms the referent object from the Lithuanian state alone to the European Union as a political community of sovereign member states. This is a discursive move that has considerable strategic weight and importance. By framing the threat as directed at the entire European Union rather than Lithuania alone, Lithuanian officials were constructing the strongest possible argument for why their national security framing deserved to become the European security framing. In terms of the macro-securitization concept, this is the moment Lithuanian discourse explicitly attempts to elevate a national securitization into a higher-order European one.

On the 3rd of August 2021, the President Nausėda and the President of the European Council Charles Michel “agreed that the actions of the regime should be regarded as a hybrid attack not only against Lithuania, but against the EU as a whole” (Office of the President of the Republic of Lithuania, 2021j). This is the first time this European Union wide framing of the hybrid attack was explicitly confirmed in a bilateral meeting with the European Union level leadership. This agreement between Nausėda and Michel is an important data point as it suggests that by 3rd of August 2021, the Lithuanian framing was beginning to receive acceptance at the European Union level leadership.

Also worth noting during this period is the appearance of a second micro-cluster of a “geopolitical weapon” wording. On the 9th of August 2021, the President Nausėda described the crisis as “a hybrid attack used by Belarus as a geopolitical weapon against the EU” in a phone call with the Polish President Andrzej Duda (Office of the President of the Republic of Lithuania, 2021k). This formulation combines the hybrid attack framing with a geopolitical concept, locating the crisis within a broader framework of great power competition. It appeared only once and never recurred, but both Presidents found it important and therefore influence of cross-loading can be observed in this instance.

In a statement “Baltic and Polish Prime Ministers condemn hybrid attack by Belarus against state borders” on the 23rd of August 2021, the Prime Ministers of Lithuania, Poland, Latvia and Estonia collectively named the situation “a hybrid attack” and described “weaponising refugees and immigrants” as a deliberate strategy of destabilization (Government of The Republic of Lithuania, 2021i). It is the first time the “weaponized migration” framing was formalized in a multilateral document. The joint statement is evidence of cross-loading in the Lithuanian dataset as agreeing on a shared framing through direct multilateral coordination with Poland, Latvia and Estonia without any European Union level intermediary. This can be seen as an eventual uploading moment directed at influencing the European Union level.

From September 2021 onward, the “hybrid attack” framing became fully used in Lithuanian official discourse. It appeared not only in crisis-specific communications but also in congratulatory messages, bilateral meetings on unrelated topics and routine diplomatic correspondence. In a statement “Prime Minister wishes Slovakia a happy Day of the Constitution” on the 1st of September 2021, the “hybrid attack from the Belarus regime” was mentioned in what is a celebratory greeting message (Government of The Republic of Lithuania, 2021k). Similar formulations appeared on the 2nd of September 2021 in a meeting with Prime Minister of the Italian Republic Mario Draghi and in “Prime Minister’s greetings to Czech Republic celebrating its Independence Day” on the 28th of October 2021 and multiple other routine communications (Government of The Republic of Lithuania, 2021l; Government of The Republic of Lithuania, 2021m).

The President’s speech at the United Nations General Assembly on the 21st of September 2021 represents the furthest reach of the uploading effort (Office of the President of the Republic of Lithuania, 2021n). The same framing that had originated in Lithuanian domestic communications three months earlier was now being projected before the international

community as an attempt to establish “weaponized migration” not merely as a European security concept but as a matter of global security concern.

One of the important findings in the Lithuanian dataset concerns the timing of the first appearance of instrumentalisation language. In a meeting with Prime Minister of Poland Mateusz Morawiecki on the 17th of September 2021, the Prime Minister of Lithuania Ingrida Šimonytė described “the hybrid attack, instrumentalising irregular migration flows”. This is the first use of “instrumentalising” in the Lithuanian dataset. This appeared in a bilateral meeting between the Lithuanian and Polish Prime Ministers in Warsaw. (Government of The Republic of Lithuania, 2021m) Five days later, in a meeting with the United Nation Secretary-General António Guterres and the leaders of the Baltic states, President Egils Levits of Latvia and President Kersti Kaljulaid of Estonia, on the 22nd of September 2021, the President Gitanas Nausėda of Lithuania used “instrumentalizing migration” in a communication with multiple leaders (Office of the President of the Republic of Lithuania, 2021o). This can be seen as projecting the term to the international level. These instances establish that Lithuanian officials were using “instrumentalisation” wording as early as September 2021. After these two September appearances, the term disappeared entirely from the dataset to reappear from the 8th of December 2021 in a statement by the Lithuanian Prime Minister Ingrida Šimonytė (Government of The Republic of Lithuania, 2021q).

November 2021 was the most acute phase of the physical crisis, when thousands of migrants were stuck at the EU-Belarusian border under freezing conditions and international media attention to the humanitarian dimension was at its most intense. Lithuanian official discourse during this period remained firmly put in the hybrid attack framing, but two micro-clusters emerged and then disappeared.

The first is humanitarian wording within this crisis. In a phone call with German Chancellor Angela Merkel on the 19th of November 2021, the President Nausėda described the situation as a “humanitarian tragedy” and referred to the “humanitarian problems of migrants” (Office of the President of the Republic of Lithuania, 2021p). This is the only moment in the Lithuanian dataset where migrants are framed primarily as vulnerable subjects rather than instruments of Belarusian aggression. The context is directly relevant as German Chancellor Merkel had just spoken with Belarusian leader Lukashenko about de-escalation and the repatriation of migrants. This was a diplomatic conversation that temporarily introduced a humanitarian level into an otherwise consistently securitized discourse. The formulation

appeared only once and did not recur, confirming it as a situational accommodation to diplomatic context rather than a genuine discursive shift.

The second micro-cluster is the reappearance of “hybrid aggression”. On the 17th of November 2021, the Prime Minister Ingrida Šimonytė used “the hybrid aggression against the European Union carried out by Belarus” in a phone call with President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen (Government of The Republic of Lithuania, 2021o). This is the last appearance of this term, which had been dominant in early July but had since been largely replaced by “hybrid attack”. Its reappearance in a communication directed at the European Union Commission President is notable as it may reflect a deliberate choice to use slightly more securitized vocabulary in a formal European Union level communication at a moment of diplomatic urgency. This wording did not recur after this point.

From early 2022 onward, as the number of irregular crossings declined and the physical barrier progressively reduced new arrivals, Lithuanian official discourse entered a phase of stabilization. The “hybrid attack” and “instrumentalisation” wordings persisted but appeared with diminishing frequency and urgency. It was reflecting the physical receding of the crisis rather than any discursive shift. On the 29th of August 2022, the Government described the barrier’s completion as a response to “the hybrid attack from the Belarusian regime involving flows of irregular migrants” (Government of The Republic of Lithuania, 2022a). This statement framed the physical infrastructure as the material conclusion of the securitized response.

The joint Lithuanian-Polish government declaration on the 16th of September 2022, introduced a notably retrospective formulation of “Lithuania and Poland have repelled a hybrid attack through instrumentalised migration” (Government of The Republic of Lithuania, 2022b). The use of past tense of “have repelled” signals discursive closure. This threat had been named, faced and overcome. The securitization framing has completed its political work.

From 2022 through mid-2023, Presidential communications continued to reference the crisis periodically, but with an increasingly retrospective and comparative framing. On the 26th of April 2023, the President Gitanas Nausėda described “the Belarusian and Russian regimes orchestrated hybrid attacks, diverting and instrumentalizing illegal migration flows” in a speech at the Körber Global Leaders Dialogue (Office of the President of the Republic of Lithuania, 2023a). They were now placing the Belarus crisis within a broader pattern of

authoritarian hybrid aggression that included Russia. On the 14th of June 2023, the President used “the instrumentalization of irregular migration by the Belarusian regime” in an European Union level context (Office of the President of the Republic of Lithuania, 2023b). This shows that instrumentalisation had by this point fully consolidated as the standard term in the European Union directed communications, while “hybrid attack” remained the standard in bilateral and domestic contexts.

The final entries in the dataset from late June and July 2023 use only “illegal migration” and “irregular migrants” without any hybrid warfare vocabulary (Office of the President of the Republic of Lithuania, 2023c; Office of the President of the Republic of Lithuania, 2023d). By mid-2023 the Belarus border crisis had receded from active framing into historical reference and the specific securitization vocabulary that had dominated from July 2021 onward had been absorbed into the background of Lithuanian foreign policy discourse and no longer needed to be actively deployed as other crises took the stage in the European Union.

4.1.1. Summary of Lithuanian discourse

The analysis of Lithuanian official discourse reveals a clear, structured and changing discursive process across mid-2021 to 2023. Several findings are particularly significant for the broader argument of this thesis.

Firstly, the “hybrid attack” framing, first used on the 10th of July 2021, was already the main term in use by August 2021. This suggests that the framing that became dominant early in the crisis and stayed until the very end, was perhaps not a reactive response to events, but a deliberately constructed political narrative that preceded and shaped the response to them.

Secondly, the Government consistently led the communication of the security narrative and the President followed. The key securitized formulations, such as “weaponised”, “hybrid aggression”, “hybrid war” and “hybrid attack”, all appeared first in Government communications and were subsequently then used by the President within days.

Thirdly, the most securitized formulations appeared consistently in European Union directed and internationally directed contexts, suggesting that Lithuania was from the outset constructing the framing for a European audience as much as for a domestic one.

Fourthly, three micro-clusters appeared and disappeared, such as “blackmail”, “geopolitical weapon” and “humanitarian tragedy”. Their eventual lack of long-term usage confirms the

dominance of the “hybrid attack” framing once it was established. The parallel abandonment of the “blackmail” framing by both Lithuania and Poland, as later analysed, is particularly striking and suggests that the “hybrid” framing might have had a stronger effect on the audiences.

4.2. Analysis of the Emergence of the Framing of the “Weaponised/Instrumentalised Migration” in Poland

Polish official communications about the EU-Belarus border situation began later than Lithuania. While Lithuania had been framing the crisis in securitized terms since late June 2021, the first Polish official communications in this dataset begins from August 2021. It reflects the fact that the large-scale migration pressure on Poland’s border intensified later than on Lithuania’s. The analysis below traces the development of Polish framing chronologically and thematically from its first appearances in August 2021 through to early 2022, identifying key terms, their first appearances, moments of consolidation and the micro-clusters of language that emerged briefly and then disappeared.

The first significant Polish official communication in the dataset is the joint statement between the Prime Ministers of Lithuania and Poland on the 6th of August 2021 (Chancellery of the Prime Minister Republic of Poland, 2021a). This joint statement is important for this thesis for two reasons. Firstly, it is the first time Polish official discourse uses the term “hybrid war”, most likely as an influence from the Lithuanian officials as they had faced the crisis longer. The statement is describing the EU-Belarus border crisis as “the hybrid war initiated by the Belarusian regime against the European Union.” Secondly, it frames migration explicitly as a weapon, describing “the use of illegal migration by the Lukashenka regime as a weapon to put political pressure on the EU and its Member States.” However, this formulation of “migration as a weapon” does not become a fixed wording in following Polish communications the way “weaponised migration” did in Lithuania’s discourse. This joint statement was produced together with Lithuania and published simultaneously on both governments’ websites. Poland’s first securitized framing of the crisis therefore emerged not from an independent domestic communication but from a bilateral document coordinated directly with Lithuania. This is the first evidence of cross-loading between the two national

discourses as Lithuania had already influenced Poland to use these two terms in their Lithuanian domestic discourse.

Two weeks later, on the 21st of August 2021, the Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki used “hybrid warfare activities carried out by Belarus” and “destabilisation of EU border” in a meeting with heads of Lithuanian, Latvian and Estonian governments (Chancellery of the Prime Minister Republic of Poland, 2021b). This is the first independent Polish usage of “hybrid warfare” and the first appearance of “destabilisation” as a discourse term. Unlike Lithuania, which settled eventually on “hybrid attack”, Poland still introduced “hybrid warfare” wording in the beginning of their crisis. Both terms of “hybrid warfare” and “destabilization” will remain central to Polish discourse throughout the EU-Belarus border crisis, first wording being most likely in use due to a cross-loading from Lithuania.

On the 23rd of August 2021, the joint presidential statement with the Presidents of Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland used the wording “hybrid attacks on the European Union’s and NATO’s eastern border” (The official website of the President of the Republic of Poland, 2021a). This is the first appearance of “hybrid attack” in Polish official discourse. Yet again, this appeared in a multilateral document coordinated with Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia, not in an independent Polish communication, which showcases once again results of Lithuania’s cross-loading efforts. The following day, on the 24th of August 2021, Prime Minister Morawiecki used “hybrid attack” independently for the first time in a Polish domestic communication (Chancellery of the Prime Minister Republic of Poland, 2021c). This usage of “hybrid attack” came six weeks after Lithuania’s equivalent moment on the 10th of July 2021 and entered Polish discourse through cross-loading. It must be mentioned that the crisis started later for Poland compared to Lithuania, therefore the cross-loading effect for some basic concepts seems unavoidable.

The period from September 2021 shows a Polish discourse framing that was still developing. In the state of emergency announcement on the 3rd of September 2021, the Government used the phrase “instrumental game” (Chancellery of the Prime Minister Republic of Poland, 2021d). This is a wording that frames the crisis as political rather than something securitized.

On the 20th of September 2021, the Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki introduced a term “blackmail” that would prove to be a micro-cluster (Chancellery of the Prime Minister Republic of Poland, 2021e). Poland used this formulation in the same way Lithuania had two months earlier. They used it as a framing of the crisis as coercive diplomacy rather than

hybrid warfare. Like Lithuania's use of the wording "blackmail", it appeared twice in Polish discourse. First in September and then again in a Prime Minister statement on the 6th of December 2021 (Chancellery of the Prime Minister Republic of Poland, 2021k). After that the "blackmail" wording disappeared entirely. The abandonment of "blackmail" framing by both countries is striking and suggests that both independently found some other framing more politically useful. Here the question must be asked, if Lithuania's cross-loading efforts were once again the reason for this similar wording. However, since Lithuania did not strongly establish this term, it can be argued that "blackmail" simply illustrated the crisis perfectly at that moment for both states separately. Since this language was not uploaded in any way to the European Union level, this micro-cluster of "blackmail" seems insignificant in the bigger context of this thesis and in any analysis of cross-loading effects.

President Duda's speech at the 76th Session of the UN General Assembly on the 21st of September 2021 is important for two reasons (The official website of the President of the Republic of Poland, 2021b). First, it used "an unprecedented hybrid attack on the borders of Poland, Latvia, and Lithuania" at the presidential level on the same day Lithuania's President was making an equivalent speech at the same forum. Second, it introduced a uniquely Polish wording of "the immigrants as pawns in a political game" which frames migrants not as specifically weapons or instruments, but as chess pieces in a geopolitical contest, which could be argued to be similar things as within the chess game, those pieces are used as weapons. The President is most likely using this kind of playful framing to give resonance to the wider audience of the assembly. The same speech also used "instrumental treatment of migrants". It is the first appearance of "instrumentalisation" wording in Polish discourse. However unlike Lithuania, where "instrumentalising" also appeared in September but then returned in December-January, this formulation in Poland did recur earlier, by the 10th of November 2021. Even then it only appeared once more before disappearing.

The most critical phase of the physical crisis at the Polish-Belarusian border came in November 2021, when thousands of migrants were massed at the Kuźnica crossing point in freezing conditions. It is during this period that Polish official discourse became most distinctly different from Lithuanian discourse.

On the 9th of November 2021, during an extraordinary session of the Sejm of the Republic of Poland, Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki introduced a term "human shield" that would become uniquely characteristic for Polish framing at that moment (Chancellery of the Prime

Minister Republic of Poland, 2021g). The formulation frames migrants not merely as “instruments” of political pressure, but as victims of a tactic, using the language of international humanitarian law and securitization. It is in the same timeframe that Lithuania also developed the humanitarian language and through the same influences, mainly by German Chancellors. The same day, on the 9th of November 2021, in address to officers of the Border Guard, Police and soldiers by Prime Minister Morawiecki, which was directed explicitly at security forces rather than diplomatic audiences, he stated that “Lukashenko’s regime is using civilians as weapons for a modern hybrid war“ and therefore reinforced the “weaponisation” framing in an explicitly military setting (Chancellery of the Prime Minister Republic of Poland, 2021f).

“Human shields” is a micro-cluster that appeared concentrated in November-December 2021. It appeared on the 25th of November 2021 in a meeting with German Chancellor Angela Merkel and on the 10th of December 2021 in a meeting with the new German Chancellor Olaf Scholz (Chancellery of the Prime Minister Republic of Poland, 2021i; Chancellery of the Prime Minister Republic of Poland, 2021l). After that, this term disappeared entirely. Lithuania never used this specific term at any point, however as aforementioned, “humanitarian” wording was developed as well through the contact of Germany. It can be speculated that Germany perhaps was trying to set their own understanding of the crisis as humanitarian one. It was also a response to the specific humanitarian issue of a large number of people stranded at the border during cold winter. Once that situation ended, the term lost its purpose. Its emergence and disappearance tracks precisely with the physical peak of the crisis.

On 10 November 2021, after a meeting with the President of the European Council Charles Michel, Prime Minister Morawiecki used “instrumentalise migrants for political purposes” (Chancellery of the Prime Minister Republic of Poland, 2021h). The specific phrase “instrumentalise migrants for political purposes” mirrors almost exactly the language the European Council had used in its October 2021 summit conclusions. This strongly suggests that Poland was in this instance downloading the European Union institutional language into its own communications. It was using the European Union’s formal terminology in a communication explicitly directed at that level of leadership. Through that understanding it can be stated that Poland did not develop this specific instrumentalisation framing

independently. This is one of the two clear instances of instrumentalisation language in Polish discourse as this framing did not recur.

President Duda's "The Independence Day" speech on the 11th of November 2021 framed the crisis as "a hybrid attack, masterminded by Alexander Lukashenko's KGB" (The official website of the President of the Republic of Poland, 2021c). It introduces a framing that named Belarusian intelligence services as the orchestrators and puts the blame once again on the Belarusian leader. Duda also described the crisis as "brutal abuse of migrants from the Middle East to destabilise the situation in Poland and in the European Union". That framing reinforces the destabilisation framing that had been present in Polish discourse since August and recalls in some level to the humanitarian language.

A recurring formulation of "the largest attempt to destabilise the European Union in 30 years" or equivalent variations is uniquely Polish. This appeared in concentrated form during this period. This framing appeared on the 3rd of December 2021 when Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki talked to the Prime Minister of Norway Jonas Gahr Støre and on the 13th of December 2021 when Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki attended meeting of Visegrad Group government heads and with President of France" (Chancellery of the Prime Minister Republic of Poland, 2021j; Chancellery of the Prime Minister Republic of Poland, 2021m). This formulation frames the crisis through a historical lens of European political stability that Lithuania never employed. It positions Belarus's actions not merely as a hybrid attack but as the most serious threat to European political order since 1991. This wording however does not stay longer than until mid-December and does not get adopted by Lithuania or the European Union.

From December 2021 onward, Polish discourse entered a phase of gradual institutionalization and stabilization. The terms "hybrid attack", "hybrid war" and "destabilisation" continued to appear routinely, while the more experimental formulations, such as "human shields", "pawns in a political game" and "blackmail" had disappeared. In "New Year's Message from President of the Republic of Poland Andrzej Duda" on the 31st of December 2021, President Duda described "a hybrid attack directed by the regime of Alexander Lukashenko" (The official website of the President of the Republic of Poland, 2021d). This use of the Belarus border crisis framing in a New Year's address is similar to Lithuania's pattern of deploying hybrid attack language in routine diplomatic communication to the nation, suggesting the

framing had reached a similar level of institutionalization in both countries by the end of 2021.

On the 19th of January 2022, when Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki met with Prime Minister of Latvia Arturs Krišjānis Kariņš, Morawiecki used “Alexander Lukashenko’s regime has been intensifying hybrid warfare activities against the European Union by organising illegal migration”, which is maintaining the “hybrid warfare” framing while explicitly naming migration as the mechanism (Chancellery of the Prime Minister Republic of Poland, 2022a). By the 10th of February 2022, when Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki had a meeting with the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland Boris Johnson, the Belarus border crisis had been reduced to “a tool of aggression” (Chancellery of the Prime Minister Republic of Poland, 2022b). It is a brief, almost minimal reference in a communication that is already dominated by the Ukrainian war. The Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24th of February 2022 effectively ended Polish official discourse about the Belarus border crisis as a primary concern, shifting attention entirely to the new and more immediate security emergency.

The final entry in the Polish dataset, a statement by the Polish President Andrzej Duda on the 29th of April 2022 offers a retrospective framing of the Belarus border crisis as “the hybrid attack in 2021 when Lukashenko’s Moscow-controlled regime flew in Middle East migrants to Belarus and then forced them to storm Poland’s eastern border” (The official website of the President of the Republic of Poland, 2022). The use of past tense and the explicit attribution to Moscow’s control represents a discursive closure and a reframing of the crisis within the broader context of Russian aggression. A contextual shift driven by the Ukraine war that reflects Poland’s new crisis.

4.2.1. Summary of Polish discourse

The analysis of Polish official discourse reveals a framing that was both parallel to and distinctly different from Lithuanian discourse. Firstly, Poland’s hybrid warfare framing emerged later than Lithuania’s simply due to the fact that the EU-Belarus border crisis emerged later in Poland than in Lithuania. The first Polish “hybrid” wording appears in August 2021, six weeks after Lithuania’s equivalent moment in early July 2021, most likely due to the same reasoning. However, this sequencing is consistent with a cross-loading

dynamic in which Lithuania developed the framing first and Poland adopted and adapted it, partly through direct bilateral coordination.

Secondly, Poland never developed “weaponized migration” as a fixed term. While Lithuania started to use this wording from 25th of June 2021 onward, Poland consistently used more varied language, such as “hybrid war”, “hybrid warfare”, “hybrid activities”, “human shields”, “destabilisation” without settling on a single dominant wording. This suggests that the specific terminology diffused unevenly between the two countries even as the broader securitization logic was shared and that Poland did not find a reason to settle on one dominant wording.

Thirdly, “destabilisation” is Poland’s signature term and appears consistently throughout the dataset in a way it never does in Lithuanian discourse. This reflects a different emphasis in the threat construction. Poland frames the crisis primarily as an attack on the political and territorial stability of the European Union and NATO, while Lithuania frames it more consistently as a hybrid attack against state sovereignty.

Fourthly, “human shields” is uniquely Polish and tracks precisely with the physical peak of the crisis in November 2021. Its appearance and disappearance confirm that it was a situational rhetorical response to a specific moment rather than a deliberate framing strategy.

Fifthly, Poland’s only clear use of “instrumentalise migrants” appears after a meeting with the President of the European Council and mirrors their institutional language, strongly suggesting that Poland downloaded the wording from the European Union level rather than developing this understanding independently or from cross-loading with Lithuania. Poland never adopted “instrumentalisation” as a stable term, in contrast to Lithuania, which used it from September 2021 onward.

Lastly, Polish discourse about the EU-Belarus border crisis effectively ended in February 2022 with the Ukraine invasion, whereas Lithuanian discourse continued through 2023. This divergence reflects the different ways in which the two countries were affected by subsequent events. Poland became the primary transit country for Ukrainian refugees, which displaced the EU-Belarus border crisis entirely from official communications, while Lithuania continued to face residual migration pressure and maintained the framing accordingly.

4.3. Analysis of the Emergence of the Framing of the “Migration as a Weapon” in the European Union

This section traces the development of the European Union level framing chronologically, drawing on official communications from the President of the European Council Charles Michel and the President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen across the period from 2021 to 2023. The aim of this analysis is to identify how the framing emerged, evolved and diffused within the European Union political discourse during the EU-Belarus border crisis. This enables this thesis to trace how the “weaponised/instrumentalised migration” framing developed within the European Union political discourse over time. The analysis is organized chronologically and thematically.

The important finding in the European Union dataset concerns the timing of the first appearance of the European Union level framing. The “European Council conclusions on COVID-19 and migration, 24 June 2021” contain the phrase “to instrumentalise migrants for political purpose” (European Council, 2021b). This is the first appearance of “instrumentalisation” language in the entire dataset across all three units of observation. This appeared on the 24th of June 2021, which is one day before Lithuania’s Prime Minister used “weaponised” for the first time at the European People’s Party summit on the 25th of June 2021 (Government of The Republic of Lithuania, 2021b). The day before that on the 23rd of June 2021, the EU-Belarus border crisis was referred to by the European Council President Charles Michel simply as “the situation” (European Council, 2021a). This finding shows that the European Union was not a passive receiver of Lithuanian and Polish framing. Instead, it had already developed its own vocabulary for the phenomenon before Lithuania’s first securitizing move. However, the European Council’s 24th of June wording “to instrumentalise migrants for political purpose” is focusing on the political side of the matter, rather than the securitised one. The European Union was framing the phenomenon as political manipulation.

Ten days later, on the 5th of July 2021, President Charles Michel used the wording of “instrumentalise irregular and illegal migration” during his visit to Lithuania (European Council, 2021c). This is a visit that the Lithuanian dataset shows coincided with key escalation moments in Lithuanian official discourse. The day after Michel’s visit, Lithuania’s Prime Minister first used “hybrid” wording on the 6th of July 2021 (Government of The Republic of Lithuania, 2021f). Whether Michel’s visit and his securitized use of

“instrumentalisation” language directly influenced the Lithuanian escalation to further securitization or whether the escalation was already underway independently cannot be established. While the terminology is not inherently similar, they carry both securitization intent. On the 7th of July 2021 President Michel described in the European Parliament plenary session the EU-Belarus border crisis as “attempts by certain third countries to use or instrumentalise illegal migration to exert political pressure on the EU” (European Council, 2021d). This framing therefore continued the securitized “instrumentalisation” discourse narrative. However “hybrid” language, which was becoming to be in use for Lithuania, was still entirely absent from the European Union level communications at this point, while the aforementioned securitization intent was strongly present. This statement also showcases that the European Union had settled on the “instrumentalisation” wording from the beginning, however the origins of the terminology are not possible to trace within this research.

This important moment in the European Union level discursive trajectory came on the 15th of September 2021, when European Commission President von der Leyen delivered the State of the Union address to the European Parliament. In this speech, von der Leyen described the Belarus border situation as "a hybrid attack to destabilise Europe". (European Commission, 2021a) This is the first time a senior European Union official in this database used the specific terminology of "hybrid attack" in relation to the border crisis. This is analytically important. Lithuania's President had first used “hybrid attack” on the 10th of July 2021, which is long before von der Leyen's State of the Union (Office of the President of the Republic of Lithuania, 2021h). Lithuania's Government had been using “hybrid” vocabulary since 6th of July (Government of The Republic of Lithuania, 2021f). Poland had adopted hybrid attack language from 23rd of August onward in a joint statement with Lithuania (The official website of the President of the Republic of Poland, 2021a). The joint Baltic-Polish statement on 23rd of August had formalized “hybrid attack” in a multilateral document. By the time von der Leyen used the terms on 15th of September, the terms had been in consistent use in either Lithuanian and Polish official discourse for at least a month. This showcases the uploading effect from the member states in which wording used by Lithuania and Poland find their way into the official European Union context.

The State of the Union speech also included the formulation “the regime in Minsk has instrumentalised human beings”. This is combining the “instrumentalisation” wording the European Union had been using since June with the “humanitarian” framing which became

later in November 2021 relevant in Lithuanian and Polish discourse through interactions with German officials.

In a statement by President von der Leyen on the 8th of November 2021, the EU-Belarus crisis was described as “the instrumentalisation of migrants for political purposes by Belarus” and as “a cynical instrumentalisation of migrants” (European Commission, 2021b). This presents the continuation of the securitization narrative.

On the 9th of November 2021, in a statement by President Charles Michel at the Berlin Conference of 2021, Michel described “a brutal, hybrid attack on our EU borders” (European Council, 2021e). This shows the adopting hybrid attack language for the first time in a President Charles Michel speech, most likely influenced by a member states’ uploading of the wording.

On the 10th of November 2021, in a statement by President Charles Michel after his meeting with the Prime Minister of Poland, Mateusz Morawiecki, Michel used “weaponising migrants’ distress in a cynical and shocking way” (European Council, 2021f). This continued the humanitarian, but also securitized language to describe the EU-Belarus border crisis.

On the 10th of November 2021, President von der Leyen also made a statement following her meeting with President of the United States Joe Biden. This statement combined used the wording of “this hybrid attack by instrumentalising migrants at the EU-Belarus border”. (European Commission, 2021c). On the 23rd of November 2021, President von der Leyen made a speech at the European Parliament Plenary where the EU-Belarus border crisis was framed as “a particularly cruel form of hybrid threat” and “a state-sponsored instrumentalisation of people for political ends” (European Commission, 2021d). On the 28th of November 2021, von der Leyen and NATO Secretary-General Stoltenberg made a joint visit to Lithuania and Latvia, where the crisis was referred to as “a deliberate, cynical and dangerous hybrid attack” and “the instrumentalisation of human beings for political purposes” (European Commission, 2021e). By this point, both terms of “hybrid attack” and “instrumentalisation” had been fully combined into the working language at the European Union level as the main narrative and used in many different communications.

From 2022 onward, both “hybrid attack” and “instrumentalisation” remained active in the European Union level discourse, now deployed as settled concepts rather than actively constructed framings. The adoption of the EU Strategic Compass in March 2022, which named instrumentalised migration as a category of hybrid threat in an European Union

security doctrine document, represents the fullest institutionalization of the framing at the supranational level.

In a speech by President von der Leyen at the European Parliament Plenary on the 1st of February 2023, the crisis was referenced as “the instrumentalisation of migrants by Belarus” (European Commission, 2023a). This was used as a standing example of how the European Union had learned to respond to hybrid threats. It is now that the crisis is serving as a reference case for future European Union security policy. On the 13th of September 2023, in the State of the Union Address by President von der Leyen, the hybrid attack language appeared as a past reference of “the hybrid attack that Belarus launched against us” (European Commission, 2023b). By this point, the European Union had fully absorbed and institutionalized the terminology and was actively using it as a template for understanding future migration pressures.

4.3.1. Summary of EU-level discourse

The analysis of the European Union level official discourse reveals a pattern that is neither pure downloading nor pure uploading, but both as terminology is given back and forth between national and supranational levels.

Firstly, the European Union was not a passive receiver of Lithuanian and Polish framing. The European Council conclusions of 24th of June 2021 used “instrumentalise migrants for political purpose” one day before Lithuania’s first statement using similar wording. This establishes that the European Union level framing of the phenomenon could have influenced development of national-level framing and therefore being downloaded by the member state.

Secondly, the European Union uploaded the “hybrid attack” wording from Lithuania as the term appears in Von der Leyen’s State of the Union on 15th of September 2021, ten weeks after Lithuania had first used it, showcasing uploading from a member state.

The overall findings of this analysis therefore suggest that the diffusion of the “weaponised/instrumentalised migration” framing can be explained through multiple interacting diffusion mechanisms. The analysis shows a dynamic process in which Lithuanian discourse played the leading role in developing and uploading the “hybrid attack” framing to the European Union level, while the European Union institutions simultaneously developed and later reinforced the “instrumentalisation” terminology that was subsequently downloaded and reproduced within member state discourse. At the same time, direct bilateral and

multilateral interaction between Lithuania and Poland demonstrates the importance of cross-loading in consolidating a shared regional security framing before its broader institutionalization at the European Union level.

4.4. The Diffusion of the Emergence of the Framing of the “Migration as a Weapon” across Lithuania, Poland and the European Union

The previous chapters analysed separately the emergence and evolution of the “weaponised/instrumentalised migration” framing within Lithuanian, Polish and European Union level discourse. This sub-chapter brings these findings together in order to trace chronologically how the framing developed, spread and became institutionalized across different levels of governance during the EU-Belarus border crisis. By mapping the first appearances, repetition and stabilization of key formulations across Lithuania, Poland and the European Union, it becomes possible to identify the sequence and direction of discursive diffusion and to assess the relative importance of downloading, uploading and cross-loading mechanisms throughout different phases of the crisis.

17 June 2021 — Lithuania — factual/non-securitized wording of “illegal migrants crossing the Lithuanian-Belarus border.”

18 June 2021 — Lithuania — first appearance of “weapon” wording as migrants are described as “a weapon and a means of pressure against the EU.”

23–24 June 2021 — Lithuania — predominant wording becomes “means of pressure” and “migration pressure” caused by Belarusian regime.

24 June 2021 — European Union — first appearance of instrumentalisation language in the entire dataset as “to instrumentalise migrants for political purpose.”

25 June 2021 — Lithuania — first appearance of weaponised migration as “illegal migration is weaponised by the Belarusian regime.”

29 June 2021 — Lithuania — blackmail micro-cluster begins.

30 June 2021 — Lithuania — “weaponised illegal migration” becomes routine governmental wording.

1 July 2021 — Lithuania — “regime-weaponised migration” becomes stabilized formulation.

2 July 2021 — Lithuania — extraordinary situation declared.

5 July 2021 — European Union — Michel uses “instrumentalise irregular and illegal migration.”

5 July 2021 — Lithuania — President uses softer wording of “tool of political manipulation.”

6 July 2021 — Lithuania — first appearance of hybrid wording of “tool of hybrid aggression.”

6 July 2021 — Lithuania / The European Union — trilateral meeting between Nausėda, Zelenskyy and Michel in Vilnius.

7 July 2021 — European Union — “use or instrumentalise illegal migration to exert political pressure.”

8 July 2021 — Lithuania — first appearance and the beginning of “hybrid war” and “weaponised migration.” wording

10 July 2021 — Lithuania — first appearance of “hybrid attack” in the entire dataset.

2 August 2021 — Lithuania — framing expands from Lithuania to “hybrid attack against the entire European Union.”

2 August 2021 — Lithuania — Belarus framed as retaliating against the European Union support for Belarusian opposition.

3 August 2021 — Lithuania / European Union — Michel and Nausėda jointly accept framing of the crisis as a “hybrid attack” against the European Union as whole.

3 August 2021 — Lithuania — hybrid attack becomes institutionally consolidated.

6 August 2021 — Poland / Lithuania — first Polish use of “hybrid” and “migration as a weapon” wording in a joint bilateral statement.

9 August 2021 — Lithuania / Poland — “geopolitical weapon” micro-cluster appears.

21 August 2021 — Poland — first independent Polish use of “hybrid” and “destabilisation” wording.

23 August 2021 — Lithuania / Poland — first multilateral formalization of “hybrid attack” wording.

23 August 2021 — Lithuania — decision to build physical border barrier.

23 August 2021 — Poland — first presidential use of “hybrid attack”.

24 August 2021 — Poland — first independent domestic governmental use of “hybrid attack”.

1 September 2021 — Lithuania — “hybrid attack” wording appears in routine diplomatic communication.

2 September 2021 — Poland — state of emergency declared at Belarus border.

3 September 2021 — Poland — “instrumental game” micro-cluster appears.

9 September 2021 — Lithuania — migration framed as a “hybrid weapon” against Lithuania, Latvia, Poland and EU.

15 September 2021 — European Union — first EU-level use of “hybrid attack”

15 September 2021 — European Union — “instrumentalised human beings” wording combines instrumentalisation and humanitarian framing.

17 September 2021 — Lithuania — first Lithuanian use of “instrumentalising irregular migration flows”.

20 September 2021 — Poland — “blackmail” micro-cluster begins.

21 September 2021 — Lithuania / Poland — coordinated UNGA speeches using “hybrid attack” language.

21 September 2021 — Poland — “pawns in a political game” micro-cluster appears.

21 September 2021 — Poland — first Polish use of “instrumental treatment of migrants”.

22 September 2021 — Lithuania — second Lithuanian use of “instrumentalizing migration”.

22 October 2021 — European Union — “instrumentalisation of migration” becomes consolidated.

Early November 2021 — Poland — peak physical border crisis at Kuźnica crossing.

8 November 2021 — European Union — “cynical instrumentalisation of migrants”:

9 November 2021 — Poland — “human shields” micro-cluster begins.

9 November 2021 — European Union — Michel adopts “hybrid attack” wording.

10 November 2021 — European Union — first European Union use of weaponising migrants’ distress.

10 November 2021 — European Union — first combined formulation of “hybrid attack by instrumentalising migrants.”

10 November 2021 — Poland — “instrumentalise migrants for political purposes” mirrors the European Union wording.

11 November 2021 — Poland — “hybrid attack masterminded by Lukashenko’s KGB”.

17 November 2021 — Lithuania — “hybrid aggression” micro-cluster reappears briefly.

19 November 2021 — Lithuania — the only “humanitarian” wording in discourse.

23 November 2021 — European Union — “state-sponsored instrumentalisation of people.”

23 November 2021 — European Union — “blackmail” appears once at the European Union level.

25 November 2021 — Poland — second “human shields” appearance.

28 November 2021 — European Union — consolidated wording of “hybrid attack” and “instrumentalisation of human beings”.

28 November 2021 — Lithuania — second and final “blackmail” appearance.

1 December 2021 — Poland — “largest attempt to destabilise the European Union in 30 years.”

6 December 2021 — Poland — second and final “blackmail” appearance.

8 December 2021 — Lithuania — first stable noun form as “the instrumentalisation of migration.”

8 December 2021 — European Union — “hybrid attack by weaponising migrants.”

10 December 2021 — Poland — third and final “human shields” appearance.

14 December 2021 — European Union — Proposal for Regulation on instrumentalisation of migration published.

16 December 2021 — European Union — “hybrid attack” and “instrumentalisation” become settled formulations.

31 December 2021 — Poland — “hybrid attack” as fully routinised in the New Year presidential speech.

11 January 2022 — Lithuania — “instrumentalisation of migration” fully consolidated.

19 January 2022 — Lithuania — routine combined usage of “hybrid attack” and “instrumentalised migration.”

19 January 2022 — Poland — final substantive Polish Belarus-crisis framing of “hybrid warfare activities.”

10 February 2022 — Poland — crisis reduced to brief “tool of aggression” wording.

24 February 2022 — Russia invades Ukraine — Polish Belarus-border discourse effectively ends.

21 March 2022 — European Union — EU Strategic Compass adopts “instrumentalised migration” as official hybrid threat category.

29 August 2022 — Lithuania — completion of physical border barrier framed as response to “hybrid attack.”

16 September 2022 — Lithuania / Poland — retrospective closure wording as “have repelled a hybrid attack through instrumentalised migration.”

1 February 2023 — European Union — Belarus crisis referenced as a model case of the European Union response to hybrid threats.

10 February 2023 — European Union — first simultaneous combination of “hybrid attack”, “weaponisation” and migration wording.

26 April 2023 — Lithuania — Belarus crisis integrated into broader Russian hybrid aggression framework.

14 June 2023 — Lithuania — “instrumentalisation” consolidated in EU-directed presidential communication.

13 September 2023 — European Union — “the hybrid attack that Belarus launched against us” used as historical reference.

The chronological reconstruction of the emergence and diffusion of the “weaponised/instrumentalised migration” framing demonstrates that the development of the security discourse was shaped by multiple interacting diffusion mechanisms. The European Union level first introduced the “instrumentalisation” terminology, which was subsequently downloaded and reproduced within Lithuanian and Polish discourse. At the same time, Lithuania played a leading role in developing the “hybrid attack” framing, which was later uploaded to the European Union level and adopted more broadly within European discourse.

Poland subsequently reproduced both formulations through bilateral interaction with Lithuania and through engagement with European Union discourse. The timeline therefore suggests that while downloading was particularly important in the diffusion of the “instrumentalisation” terminology, uploading and cross-loading mechanisms also contributed significantly to the broader securitization of the EU-Belarus border crisis.

CONCLUSION

This thesis set out to understand how the framing of the EU-Belarus border crisis as “weaponised/instrumentalised migration” diffused across Lithuanian, Polish and the European Union level political discourse between 2021 and 2023. The research question was deliberately open about the direction and mechanism of this diffusion. Whether it operated through uploading from the national to the supranational level, downloading from the European Union to the national level or cross-loading directly between Lithuania and Poland. The empirical analysis, drawing on discourse tracing of official communications from the offices of the President and Government of Lithuania and Poland and from the European Council and European Commission, traced a diffusion process in which different elements of the security framing emerged through different mechanisms. The European Union institutions were the first actors to develop the “instrumentalisation” terminology, which was later downloaded into Lithuanian and Polish discourse. At the same time, Lithuania played an important role in developing the “hybrid attack” framing, which was subsequently uploaded to the European Union level and reproduced more broadly within European discourse.

The Government of Lithuania was the first actor in the entire dataset to use weaponized migration language, with “weaponised” appearing in communications from the Prime Minister at the European People’s Party summit on 25th of June 2021. This was before equivalent language appeared in Polish or the European Union level communications. However, since “weaponised” was not the main wording used eventually within this EU-Belarus crisis, this wording was not necessarily uploaded or cross-loaded to any entity. Lithuania introduced the “hybrid attack” framing by early August 2021, spread it across all levels of executive communication and from the very first instance projected it toward the European Union level and international audiences. The uploading effect was therefore present in this wording.

The analysis of Polish official discourse revealed a parallel, but distinct trajectory where oftentimes Poland used their own distinctive framing, not used by others. However, Poland adopted “hybrid” vocabulary from August 2021, which was approximately six weeks after Lithuania’s first usage of the “hybrid” wording, and from there on consistently used “hybrid war” and “hybrid warfare” as its dominant terms rather than settling on “hybrid attack” as Lithuania did, therefore Lithuania had successfully cross-loaded their narrative to the Polish

discourse. Poland never developed “weaponized migration” as a fixed terminology. Poland's only clear use of “instrumentalise migrants”, which was in November 2021, appeared immediately after a meeting with the President of the European Council and mirrored the European Union institutional language, suggesting downloading from the European Union level rather than independent development or any cross-loading efforts. Polish discourse about the Belarus border crisis effectively ended in February 2022 with the Ukraine invasion, whereas Lithuanian discourse continued through 2023.

The analysis of the European Union level official discourse revealed a multidirectional diffusion process. The European Council conclusions of 24th of June 2021 used “instrumentalise migrants for political purpose”, which was one day before Lithuania's first use of “weaponised”. This establishes that the European Union level was the first actor in the dataset to develop the “instrumentalisation” terminology, which was subsequently reproduced within Lithuanian and Polish discourse. However, the European Union did not initially use “hybrid attack” wording. This terminology instead emerged and consolidated first within Lithuanian discourse before appearing at the European Union level later in 2021. The European Union adopted “hybrid attack” language in Von der Leyen's State of the Union on 15th of September 2021, ten weeks after Lithuania had first used it and therefore displaying an uploading success by a member state.

Overall, this suggests a diffusion pattern in which security framings spread through continuous interaction between national and supranational levels of governance rather than through a purely one-directional process. The European Union institutions played the leading role in developing and consolidating the “instrumentalisation” terminology, while Lithuania played the leading role in developing and uploading the “hybrid attack” framing to the European Union level. At the same time, intensive bilateral and multilateral coordination between Lithuania and Poland contributed to the cross-loading of the broader hybrid threat framing across the region before its institutionalization at the European Union level.

In the light of these findings, the research question “How did the framing of the EU-Belarus border crisis as “weaponized migration” diffuse across Lithuanian, Polish and EU-level political discourse between 2021 and 2023?” can be answered by arguing that different diffusion mechanisms became dominant at different phases of the crisis. In the first phase, which was June to August 2021, the dominant pattern was parallel development between Lithuania and the European Union level combined with cross-loading between Lithuania and Poland. Lithuania and the European Union developed related but distinct vocabularies

simultaneously. The European Union developed the “instrumentalisation” wording, while Lithuania used the framing of “weaponised migration” and “hybrid attack”. However, it can be argued that Lithuania downloaded the European Union’s securitized framing of the crisis.

In the second phase, which was from September to November 2021, the dominant pattern became uploading. The European Union adopted “hybrid attack” wording in Von der Leyen's State of the Union on 15 September ten weeks after Lithuania. Unlike the European Union’s earlier isolated references to “instrumentalisation”, the “hybrid attack” framing was subsequently reproduced more consistently at the supranational level. This adoption is consistent with member states successfully uploading their security framing to the European Union level and with the European Union subsequently legitimizing and amplifying it.

In the third phase, which is from December 2021 onward, the dominant pattern became downloading. Lithuania used “instrumentalisation” specifically in the European Union directed contexts while maintaining “hybrid attack” in bilateral and domestic contexts. Poland also used in communication with the European Union this specific wording. This suggests that while Lithuania successfully uploaded the broader “hybrid” framing, the European Union later shaped the standardization of the terminology through the consolidation of “instrumentalisation” and “hybrid attack” language within official European Union discourse and as a result Poland downloaded both of these wordings. However, it can be argued that Poland cross-loaded the “hybrid” wording through bi- and multi-lateral interactions with Lithuania.

With these findings, this thesis makes two contributions to the existing literature. Firstly, it provides the first systematic empirical account of how the weaponized migration framing diffused across levels of governance during the Belarus border crisis, establishing a detailed chronology of discursive emergence, consolidation and institutionalization across Lithuanian, Polish and the European Union level official communications. This fills a gap identified in the existing literature, which has examined the phenomenon and its legal consequences but not the discursive process through which it was constructed and institutionalized.

Secondly, it contributes to the understanding of how the European Union member states can shape European-level security discourse. Lithuania’s success in uploading a security framing of “hybrid attack” to the European Union level within weeks of first articulating it domestically demonstrates that smaller eastern member states can act as trendsetters in the European Union security politics when they face direct territorial threats.

Thirdly, the findings contribute more broadly to the literature on securitization and the diffusion of security discourse by demonstrating that security framings do not spread through simple one-directional processes. Instead, the EU-Belarus border crisis shows that securitized framings can evolve through continuous interaction between national and supranational levels, with different political actors contributing different elements of the final discourse at different stages of the process. The findings therefore suggest that macro-level security constructions within the European Union can emerge through the interaction, adaptation and institutionalization of national-level securitizing moves rather than solely through top-down processes.

Several limitations of this study should be acknowledged. Firstly, the exclusive focus on official executive-level communications means that the analysis captures only the formal layer of political discourse and cannot account for how the framing circulated in media coverage, public debate or expert commentary. This matters because securitization processes are not produced exclusively by governments and institutions, but can also be reinforced, contested or transformed through wider societal and media discourse. As a result, this thesis is able to trace the institutional diffusion of the framing, but not the broader social reception or public contestation of it.

Secondly, the absence of Polish official communications in English after February 2022 limits the comparability of the Polish and Lithuanian datasets across the full period. The analysis relies on publicly available English-language communications, which may not fully capture the nuances of communications produced in Lithuanian or Polish for domestic audiences.

Future research might extend this analysis in several directions. Firstly, a comparative study including Latvia, which faced the same crisis as Lithuania and Poland but has not been examined here, would allow for a more complete picture of the cross-loading dynamics among the directly affected member states. Secondly, a study of audience reception on how weaponized migration framing was received by other European Union member states would fall into the macro-securitization analysis.

The EU-Belarus border crisis was an important moment in the development of the European security language. What began as a Lithuanian Prime Minister's description of migrants as "weaponised" at a European political party summit on 25th of June 2021 had, within eighteen months, become embedded in the European Union security policy, formalized in legislative

proposals and routinely deployed by the most senior European Union institutional leaders as the standard vocabulary for understanding a new category of hybrid threat. Tracing how this happened, which actors drove it, in which direction it travelled, and through what mechanisms it consolidated is what this thesis has tried to do.

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