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# **Forced Migration as a Weapon: The evolution of securitization discourse and narratives in the European Union.**

CEERES Master's Thesis

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# Abstract

Given the prevalence of the use of forced migration as a weapon/tool in the hands of non-democratic states against liberal democracies, and the consequent humanitarian and political implications this phenomenon has. This thesis aims to dissect and critically examine the evolution of threat framing within the European Union (EU), to shed light on how the use of threat frames in political discourse comes in hand with the securitization process, and to highlight the explanations for the divergence of the EU from its role as a democratic normative power and how it responds discursively in the face of such threats.

Through comparative case studies of Poland (2021–2022) and Finland (2022–2024), I analyze how forced migration was framed by Political actors. Using diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational frames, this thesis demonstrates how each state constructed narratives to justify pushbacks at the borders and changes in legislation, even when such actions conflicted with EU and international legal norms.

The findings reveal that securitization and threat framing transformed forced migration from a humanitarian issue into a security imperative. That in turn leads to the mainstreaming of militarized border governance. Moreover, the framing of the threat explains the EU's divergent response to similar tactics, reflecting differences in threat framing, geopolitical interdependence, and normative flexibility.

**Keywords:** weaponized migration, securitization, threat framing, hybrid attacks, migration, security.

## Streszczenie

Wobec coraz częstszego wykorzystywania przymusowej migracji jako narzędzia lub broni przez reżimy niedemokratyczne wobec demokracji liberalnych, a także wynikających stąd implikacji humanitarnych i politycznych, niniejsza praca ma na celu krytyczną analizę ewolucji ram zagrożenia (threat framing) w Unii Europejskiej. Badanie ma na celu pokazanie, jak użycie tych ram w dyskursie politycznym koreluje z procesem sekularyzacji oraz wyjaśnienie, dlaczego Unia coraz częściej oddala się od roli demokratycznej siły o charakterze normatywnym w odpowiedzi na takie zagrożenia.

W oparciu o analizę porównawczą dwóch przypadków: Polski (2021–2022) oraz Finlandii (2022–2024), niniejsza praca bada, jak aktorzy polityczni konstruowali dyskurs wobec przymusowych migracji. Wykorzystując trzy ramy analityczne – diagnostyczną, prognostyczną i motywacyjną – wykazano, jak oba państwa uzasadniały zawracanie migrantów na granicach (pushbacks) i zmiany legislacyjne, nawet w sytuacjach, gdy działania te były sprzeczne z prawem unijnym i międzynarodowym.

Wyniki badania wskazują, że sekularyzacja i ramy zagrożenia przekształciły przymusową migrację z problemu humanitarnego w imperatyw bezpieczeństwa, co z kolei prowadzi do normalizacji militarzacji granic. Co więcej, sposób, w jaki skonstruowano ramę zagrożenia, tłumaczy zróżnicowaną reakcję UE na podobne taktyki – odzwierciedla to różnice w diagnozie zagrożenia, geopolitycznej współzależności oraz stopniu dopuszczalności odstępstw od normatywnych standardów.

**Słowa kluczowe:** upolityczniona migracja, sekurytyzacja, ramy zagrożenia, ataki hybrydowe, migracja, bezpieczeństwo.

## **Acknowledgement**

*For all those forced into motion, stripped of safety, and turned into pawns by the cruelty of power - may you be seen as human again.*

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## **Abbreviations**

CEAS: Common European Asylum System

CEM: Coercive Engineered Migration

ECtHR: European Court of Human Rights

EU: European Union

FRONTEX: the European Border and Coast Guard Agency

MENA: Middle East and North Africa

NATO: North Atlantic Treaty Organization

NGO: Non-Governmental Organization

PM: Prime Minister

PiS: Law and Justice Party (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość)

# I. Introduction

Often referred to as a “hybrid threat” by politicians and media sources (Ursula von der Leyen, 2021) across the European Union (EU), the use of migrants as a tool or a weapon for the purpose of disrupting, coercing, or punishing a state has been ongoing since the advent of the 1951 Refugee Convention where more than seventy cases have been recorded with at least one occurring each year (Greenhill, 2010). Historically, migration weaponization has played diverse roles from Cuba’s Mariel exodus in 1980, and Muammar Gaddafi’s threats to “flood” Europe in 2011. To more recently, Türkiye, Russia, and Belarus having used similar methods - sending migrants toward EU borders to exert diplomatic and economic leverage. In the wake of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and recent NATO expansion, Europe witnessed a resurgence of this tactic. Belarus orchestrated migrant crossings into Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia in 2021; Russia backed similar movements across the shared border with Finland in 2023–2024. These events prompted the European Commission to respond with emergency legal frameworks, border-surveillance packages, and technical support reinforcing the perception of migration weaponization as a modern hybrid threat.

Moreover, the EU has shown extreme contradictions in terms of reacting to extreme measures taken by the affected Member States in the form of pushbacks, border militarization, and changes in legislation. These contradictions are noticeable due to the fact that they are against the standard rule-of-law and human rights approach that the EU projects within its sphere as a normative power.

While the number of contributions to understanding this phenomenon has been soaring recently, some key areas are yet to be tapped in. Specifically, while existing studies focus on the strategic logic and legal ramifications of migration weaponization, there is a lack of in-depth comparative analysis of how states in different geopolitical positions construct such threats through their political discourse, particularly in the EU context. Poland’s securitizing turn in 2021–2022 has been previously documented to some extent, yet comparatively little is known about how Nordic states, such as Finland, frame similar phenomena in response to Russian-induced migration. This omission leaves a gap in understanding how contextually diverse state actors operationalize frameworks of securitization and threat narrative construction when faced with similar hybrid threats. Additionally, few studies address the threat framing process within discursive

environments such as the EU when it comes to facing such hybrid threats since they are relatively a newly securitized issue.

The aim of this thesis is to address this gap by providing a detailed comparative analysis of how Poland and Finland construct, justify, and institutionalize the securitization of migration weaponization, specifically tracing three analytical functions of threat framing, **diagnostic** (how the threat is defined), **prognostic** (what responses are proposed), and **motivational** (why the response is justified) within government discourse, and evaluating the interrelation between these frames, their resonance with the audiences, and EU-level normative dynamics. By focusing on two distinctly situated EU member states one with NATO ties (Poland) and the other newly aligned with NATO (Finland) the study probes whether and how differing contexts and framing could position and influence threat representation and policy response.

Positioned within the fields of Security Studies and Migration Studies, this thesis draws upon securitization theory (Buzan, Wæver, & de Wilde, 1998), spiralling securitization (Bello, 2022) critical discourse analysis, and threat framing theory (Rychnovská, 2014) to dissect how state actors narrate and legitimize bold departure from normative migration policy frameworks. By decoding language, institutional statements, and legal instruments, this study seeks to make two distinct scholarly contributions: first, a richer understanding of framing dynamics in hybrid-instrumentalized migration crises, and second, a refinement of comparative securitization tools applicable in multilayered security environments.

I follow a theoretical puzzle with the typology of it being conceptual omission. This goes in line with Day and Koivu's classification of research puzzles (Day & Koivu, 2019) since several authors have tackled the phenomena of the use of migrants as a tool for hybrid warfare, however, there is scarce mentioning of how the securitization discourse and threat framing within the EU, and specifically the Commission and Member states involved (namely Poland and more recently Finland) has unfolds in face of such hybrid threats. Furthermore, since the EU is expected to uphold its values and act according to its own responsibilities in a consistent manner and along the conventional wisdom which include upholding the EU treaties and law, as will be discussed this does not seem to be the case when it comes to certain situations. There are also traits of an empirical divergence puzzle at hand with the presented case studies since analysing the evolution and discourse of the EU will seek to explain why there has been a general acceptance of the pushback

policies implemented rather than the conventional coerced deal making as observed in another instances of instrumentalized migration on direct EU borders in the case of Türkiye.

This thesis is guided by two central research questions that address both the discursive and strategic dimensions of the EU's response to weaponized migration. First, it asks: *How does the framing of forced migration as a security issue influence both the discourse and policy responses to threats in the EU political arena?* This question explores how securitization processes shape political narratives, institutional practices, and the perceived legitimacy of extraordinary measures in migration governance. Second, the study examines: *What explains the EU's divergent response towards weaponized migration, specifically, the 2016 cooperation deal with Türkiye and the more confrontational stance adopted against Belarus and Russia in 2021–2024?* And in a similar vein *Why the EU showed contradictions to its normative role of upholding rule of law in face of illegal pushbacks towards migrants?* This comparative inquiry seeks to uncover the underlying political, normative, and strategic logics that drive differential treatment of similar coercive tactics, shedding light on the interplay between external threats, internal coherence, and the EU's evolving role as a geopolitical actor. Together, these questions aim to deepen the understanding of how security narratives and strategic considerations converge in shaping migration and foreign policy decisions.

The selection of Poland and Finland as comparative case studies offers a unique opportunity to examine how different EU member states interpret and respond to the phenomenon of weaponized migration. Both countries have recently faced targeted migration pressures from neighbouring authoritarian regimes - Belarus in the case of Poland (2021) and Russia in the case of Finland (2023–24) - yet their geographical positions, political cultures, media environments, and historical security doctrines diverge significantly. Poland, situated on the EU's eastern frontier and governed during the crisis by a right-wing populist party, adopted a highly securitized and politically charged discourse, often framing migrants as existential threats. Finland, by contrast, responded to similar pressures with a more restrained, technocratic approach rooted in legalism and institutional trust. Analysing these contrasting responses contributes to academic literature by highlighting the heterogeneity of securitization processes within the EU, challenging assumptions of policy uniformity under the EU's Common European Asylum System (CEAS) and demonstrating how national narratives and institutional cultures shape the operationalization of hybrid threat

frameworks. These cases also serve as a litmus test for the EU's capacity to maintain normative cohesion in the face of evolving security challenges at its external borders.

On the other hand, the purpose of comparing and highlighting the evolving EU narrative on migration from the 2015 migration crisis and the EU-Türkiye deal to the 2021 Polish-Belarusian border crisis aims to shed light on the divergence in the EU's response to instances of weaponized migration utilized by two EU bordering states governed by non-democratic regimes using migrants from similar regions as a tool to achieve political, economic, and diplomatic gains.

This thesis will first start by offering a deep look into the previous works done on the subject of weaponized migration and the securitization of migration within the EU institutions and member states, the latter will include literature on the use of framing to understand instances and works tackling the humanitarian and security issues. Second, the theoretical framework will be presented, offering an explanation of the traditional theory of securitization since its inception at the hands of the Copenhagen school scholars, to the more contemporary criticism highlighting shortcomings and offshoots of the theory in the form of the spiralling securitization theory which will be applied in the analysis part. Third, will be the methodology and research design of the thesis that will include the sources and documents that will be coded and examined which will be followed by the fourth part in the form of a detailed analysis of the three frames mentioned in the threat framing theory and an explanation on how the frames resonate and how the spiralling securitization theory is applied to both Poland and Finland. The fifth part will include a discussion of the findings, answering the key research questions and sub questions, and drawing a comparison between each case. Lastly, the conclusion will discuss the key findings, a summary of the findings, and a brief explanation of the answers to the research questions.

## II. Literature Review

The use of forced movement of migrants as a weapon to achieve political goals, concessions, and nefarious aims is not a novel phenomenon in the world (Greenhill, 2022). Present research and scholarly efforts to try to further understand the motives and causes of this phenomenon usually tend to focus on one of the three aspects of it; the first being the reasons behind the use of migrants as a strategy by actors; by underlying the factors that contribute to the explanation of it through process tracing, the second being centred around the legal aspect of the issue at hand and shedding more light on the legality and adherence of the measures taken to counter the threat by the victim state/s with conventional laws and treaties, and the third mainly focusing on the humanitarian aspect of the use of migrants as a weapon and the human consequences of such acts. Nonetheless, some scholars do tackle the discourse of politicians, media, and decision makers surrounding the conflict through a narrow lens.

I aim to fill the gap in the literature surrounding this ongoing and constantly evolving phenomenon by explaining the circumstances and evolving narratives surrounding the use of migrants as weapons with a specific focus on the EU and two Member States on the Eastern borders of the EU and NATO, that were affected by it; Poland and Finland. Furthermore, I will draw a comparison between the EU's response towards the attacking state during the 2015 migration crisis and the 2016 EU-Türkiye deal, and the 2021 events on the Polish Belarusian border crisis by employing threat framing theory, critical discourse analysis, and the securitization theory.

The aim of this chapter is to go through the previous works tackling the issue of “weaponized migration” and the use of forced movement of people as a tool or a weapon in a hybrid warfare by states and non-state actors. Moreover, the review of the present literature will shed light on previous attempts of authors coupling Copenhagen school's securitization theory and discourse analysis to explain weaponized migration. Furthermore, this chapter presents an explanation of the theoretical framework that is used throughout this work. In that conceptualization process, I will shed light on the gap in the literature that this thesis aims to fill.

## Migration as a weapon

When dealing with the topic of weaponized migration, it is essential to note Kelly Greenhill's work as she coined the term and is considered the leading researcher in that area and the most significant contributor to the literature on it with her book titled "Weapons of Mass Migration" Forced Displacement, Coercion, and Foreign Policy. Greenhill's contribution was essential in establishing the concept and in highlighting the fact that weaponized migration, specifically Coercive Engineered Migration (CEM) has a common occurrence globally with an average of one instance per year since the 1951 Refugee Convention (Greenhill, 2010). The use of migrants as a weapon has been classified into four main types of engineered migration: dispossessive, exportive, militarized, and coercive. For the purpose of this thesis the concept of coercive engineered migration is the one that will be adopted due to its applicability in the context of the case studies discussed. Greenhill defined it as "*the coercive variant, in which (real or threatened) outflows are used to induce (or prevent) changes in political behavior – that is, to compel or deter – and/or to extract economic side-payments from a target state or states.*" (Greenhill, 2008).

While Kelly Greenhill's concept of "coercive engineered migration" has significantly shaped scholarly understanding of forced migration as a strategic tool, the metaphor she employs - "weapons of mass migration" - has not gone without critique. Some scholars argue that linking refugees to weapons, particularly those of mass destruction, risks reinforcing dehumanizing narratives and fuelling securitized policy responses (Marder, 2018). Such framing may inadvertently legitimize restrictive measures against migrants by casting them as threats rather than individuals in need of protection. Although Greenhill's theoretical contribution remains widely influential, the metaphor's broader discursive consequences, especially its adoption by far-right actors highlights the need for critical reflection on the language used in securitization discourse.

Greenhill further distinguishes two pathways: capacity swamping and political agitating (Greenhill, 2010). The former aims to overwhelm the material ability of a state to host, process, or integrate large numbers of migrants. This is more common in developing states but can succeed in Europe if inflows are sudden and large enough to strain resources. The latter seeks to exploit "*heterogeneity within liberal democracies*" by inflaming divisions between pro- and anti-migrant

camps. Because Western states are often polarized on migration, coercers can amplify domestic conflict, making concession to external demands seem less costly than prolonged internal strife.

This helps explain why weaponised migration attempts succeed more often against democracies: leaders must navigate competing pressures from mobilised domestic groups, human rights norms, and electoral incentives. By contrast, coercion may fail if governments manage to reframe migrant groups as victims deserving protection, or if societies rally in unity against the coercer. It may also collapse when outflows spiral beyond the coercer's control, as seen when Gadhafi overplayed his hand in 2011. In the Polish and Finnish contexts, this framework sheds light on both the potency and the limits of Belarusian and Russian strategies. Their threats succeeded in pushing migration onto the EU's political agenda and spurring extraordinary, militarised responses, but they failed to achieve deeper concessions such as sanctions relief. This underlines a central paradox: weaponised migration often succeeds in reshaping discourse and crisis governance yet may fall short of securing the challenger's ultimate strategic aims.

Furthermore, the use of migrants as a weapon against liberal democracies will see an increase in trend (Petty, 2022) (Başer, 2022), Similar to what was seen with Russia using migrants as a geopolitical tool to promote national interest and disrupt regional balance (Kaczmarek, 2024) this is mainly due to the relative ease in applying this strategy instead of conventional means of kinetic confrontation. Moreover, it should be noted that the use of migrants as a weapon is not solely exclusive to states as it can be utilized by non-state actors although it is not the focus of this thesis.

When it comes to international law, the debate on where to position this kind of attack is wide and ongoing. While it does not fall under the umbrella of armed conflicts, media and policymakers often refer to tactics employed by Belarus and Russia as “hybrid warfare,” Łubiński stresses the legal distinction between hybrid war and hybrid threats. Hybrid warfare typically implies kinetic or military engagement, whereas the Belarus case lacks overt armed violence. Instead, it fits more precisely within the conceptual category of a hybrid threat “*non-military coercion exploiting legal ambiguity and societal vulnerabilities*” (Łubiński, 2022). Similarly, Kazmierczak and Laskowski reach the same conclusion while relying on NATO's definition of a hybrid threat being “*Hybrid threats combine military and non-military as well as covert and overt means, including disinformation, cyberattacks, economic pressure, deployment of irregular armed groups and use of regular forces. Hybrid methods are used to blur the lines between war and peace and attempt*

*to sow doubt in the minds of target populations. They aim to destabilize and undermine societies”* (NATO, 2024). This categorization avoids conflating acts of war with sophisticated forms of sub-threshold aggression. Nonetheless, the acts of Belarus and Russia are still viewed as a hybrid war by others, and it is still contested (Glinka, Miarka, Sokała, & Matusz, 2024) and for the purpose of this thesis, this form of state and non-state aggression will be referred to as a hybrid threat.

### **Securitization of Migration in the EU: From Humanitarianism to Threat Narrative**

Migration was historically addressed through a humanitarian framework, particularly in the post-World War II era, when international instruments such as the 1951 Refugee Convention established legal obligations to protect those fleeing conflict and persecution (Betts, 2010). Within this normative approach, asylum seekers and migrants were primarily perceived as vulnerable individuals entitled to protection, care, and support. The EU, in particular, positioned itself as a normative power, often highlighting its commitment to human rights and international law in its external and internal migration policies (Lavenex, 2001). However, this humanitarian framing began to weaken in the post-Cold War period, especially after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 (Bockel, 2021), which catalysed a discursive shift wherein migration increasingly became entangled with questions of internal security, terrorism, and societal risk (Huysmans, 2006)

This discursive transformation led to what scholars have identified as the securitization of migration which is a process where migrants are increasingly constructed as potential threats to national sovereignty, cultural identity, and public order (Bourbeau, 2011). Migrants, particularly from non-European and Muslim-majority countries, were no longer simply seen as people in need, but rather as agents of instability, framed through media and political rhetoric as burdens on welfare systems, carriers of crime, or even as vectors of terrorism (Ibrahim, 2005). This securitized discourse has enabled states to implement exceptional measures such as pushbacks, offshore detention, and fortified borders. Actions that would typically be deemed incompatible with liberal democratic values. In the EU context, this shift has fundamentally altered migration governance, allowing political actors to justify increasingly exclusionary and deterrent-based policies in the name of national security and societal preservation (Stępka & Mazurkiewicz, 2024).

A significant body of scholarship agrees that migration and asylum have undergone successful securitization within the European Union. Karyotis, Paterson, and Judge provide a framework for

understanding when securitization succeeds and apply it to the case of the EU (Karytois, Paterson, & Judge, 2025). Researchers have largely pursued two complementary lines of inquiry to explore this phenomenon. One primary approach has concentrated on the mechanisms of securitization itself, investigating the roles played by various actors and the procedural dynamics through which asylum seekers and migrants have been framed as security threats across Europe. A consensus was reached on the fact that migrants are often securitized within the EU and framed as one or more of the following four pillars’ “socio-economic, ‘securitarian’, identitarian, and political” (Ceyhan & Tsoukala, 2002). The second approach highlights how the use of such strategies of institutionalized securitization eventually lead to negative social consequences in the form of targeted hate among national communities and argues that the image of migrants in the EU has led to shying away from a standard humanitarian approach towards a more “threat” oriented frame (McDonald, 2015) (Huysmans, 1995).

The securitization of migrants within the EU has been on the rise due to several factors, these include but are not limited to the 2015 migration crisis, both Abdou and Kovář examine how the framing of migrants at times of crisis leads to further polarization and division (Abdou, 2022) (Kovář, 2022), Covid-19 pandemic, the rise of far-right and populist figures within domestic and continental politics, and it also falls in line with multiple speculations that the Russian government has been covertly supporting a rise in right wing populist movements throughout the EU with the aim of further polarizing societies and governments internally (Szakacs & Bognar, 2021). This strategy has been working to a certain extent as evidenced in the rising anti-migration rhetoric that was a tool aimed at destabilizing the EU. Nonetheless, this issue of migration is not novel, as ever since the establishment of the EU, migration (legal and illegal) has often been portrayed as a challenge and a “societal danger” (Husysmans, 2000) (Ceyhan & Tsoukala, *The Securitization of Migration in Western Societies: Ambivalent Discourses and Policies*, 2002). Recent scholarship has also examined the role of EU agencies in reinforcing the securitization of migration at the Union’s external borders. Léonard (2020), for example, analyses the evolving role of Frontex (the European Border and Coast Guard Agency) by applying a modified version of the Copenhagen School’s securitization framework that shifts attention from speech acts to security practices (Leonard & Kaunert, 2020).

Liszkowska's work on the EU-Belarus border crisis briefly highlights how securitization of EU borders policy was a result of perceiving migrants as a threat in public and political discourse (Liszkowska, 2024). Similarly, Graban's study examines how Poland engaged in the securitization of asylum seekers and migrants predominantly from the Middle East and Asia (often framed as "oriental") with a particular focus on the events surrounding the Poland-Belarus border (Graban, 2023). It highlights how Belarus, as an external actor, strategically manipulated migratory flows to provoke and intensify Poland's securitized response. In Poland's case, the government reinforced a security-oriented narrative by enacting pushback operations at the border before formally declaring a state of emergency or introducing new legal frameworks. Instead, such practices were executed through existing border enforcement mechanisms, effectively normalizing extraordinary measures. These actions were subsequently legitimized by embedding them in a broader public discourse steeped in racialized and Islamophobic portrayals of migrants, which contributed to a perceptible shift in public opinion towards xenophobic and exclusionary attitudes. Moreover, this dynamic created exploitable political tensions, enabling Belarusian authorities to capitalize on the securitized environment. By channelling migrant flows toward the Polish border, Belarus heightened internal divisions within Poland and exacerbated political fragmentation within the European Union, revealing the susceptibility of liberal democratic states to external manipulation through migration as a pressure tactic. Building on this perspective, recent work on the Belarus–Poland border crisis highlights how state-orchestrated migration operates as a geopolitical tool, reflecting broader EU–Russia dynamics rather than a simple bilateral dispute (Erdoğan Z. ve Karakoç Dora. Z., 2022).

Another example of migrant securitization rhetoric on EU borders is evident in the Greek government's framing of cross-border movement from Türkiye as a national security threat, a narrative frequently used since 2015 to justify actions that conflict with EU and international asylum law. This securitized approach intensified during the 2020 border standoff with Türkiye, when Greek authorities adopted increasingly hardline measures, including systematic pushbacks and informal returns. These practices have not only undermined the rights of asylum seekers under the Common European Asylum System but also exposed the limitations of EU accountability mechanisms, particularly concerning the role of Frontex in rights violations at the southeastern frontier (Cortinovis, 2021).

When it comes to the divergent response from the EU, Grześkowiak shows how the crisis in 2021 on the Polish-Belarus border has also shown the selectiveness of the Commission in taking actions against violations of EU law (Grześkowiak, 2022). The Commission has opted to turn a blind eye on the violations of the Common European Asylum System and the pushback rhetoric that has been exercised as a solution to the humanitarian crisis induced by the EU-neighbouring dictatorship in Belarus. This does not take the blame from the acting member states as well since Poland and Lithuania themselves had legal shortcomings in form of violating international law by employing pushback measures to counter the threat (Klauta, 2025). This was however justified with the notion that states will eventually abide to their national interests and will set their international obligations as a secondary concern (Hassinen, 2024).

The securitization of migration in the EU is not only advanced by political elites and media discourses but is also sustained by legal institutions, particularly the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR). As Bockel shows in the case of the use of migrants by Morocco against Spain and hence the EU, combining securitization theory with critical legal theory he explores how the ECtHR has been influenced by evolving migration politics. Using the *N.D. & N.T. v. Spain* case, the study highlights how legal institutions can act as functional actors in the securitization process, occasionally issuing contradictory rulings under political pressure. It also links the rise of right-wing populism to the normalization of pushbacks at the EU's external borders (Bockel, 2021). In essence, the ECtHR has acted as a “*functional actor*” within the securitization process by providing legal legitimacy to practices such as pushbacks, even when these contradict fundamental principles of non-refoulement and human rights law. By shifting responsibility from state authorities to migrants themselves, the Court has played a subtle but critical role in normalizing extraordinary measures at Europe's external borders. This dynamic reveals how securitization can evolve not only through speech acts but also through legal rulings that reinforce state security agendas (Bockel, 2021).

Many have also highlighted how actions taken by Poland and Lithuania were illegal and contradicting to fundamental laws (Bharti, Pathak, & Mathur, 2023). Moreover, Demirkol and Numadi aimed to tackle the issue from a humanitarian aspect by shedding light on the discrepancies when it came to the treatment of refugees and migrants based on their origin and

also trying to provide an empirical analysis of the securitization discourse (Demirkol, 2022) (Numadi, 2023).

## **Theoretical Framework**

### **Securitization theory**

The securitization theory's roots and development trace back to the Copenhagen School of Security Studies. Devised mainly by Barry Buzan, Jaap de Wilde and Ole Weaver, the theory in essence calls for the broadening of the security agenda approach using securitization as a tool and an analytical framework for understanding (Buzan, Wæver, & Wilde, 1998). According to the traditional definition of securitization "*it (securitization) is a more extreme version of politicization*" and securitized holds the "*meaning that the issue is presented as an existential threat, requiring emergency measures and justifying actions outside the normal bounds of political procedure*" (ibid). In essence "*Securitization theory addresses the following main questions: What makes something a security issue? What kind of responses does this call for? What are the specific consequences of agreeing that something is a threat?*" (Balzacq, Leonard, & Ruzicka, 2016). Buzan and Wæver's theory of securitization emphasizes the central role of language in constructing security threats. Rather than viewing security as a fixed condition, they argue that it is brought into being through specific linguistic actions, known as "speech acts". As Wæver explains, when a speaker labels something as a security concern, the act of stating it constitutes the securitization itself (Wæver, 1995). This performative dimension means that when an actor declares a matter to be one of security, they effectively transfer it into an exceptional realm where urgent and often extraordinary measures become justified (ibid). Accordingly, the Copenhagen School maintains that such a declaration elevates an issue to a level beyond routine political debate, granting the speaker the legitimacy to respond with actions that might otherwise be impermissible.

At the heart of securitization theory lies the idea that security policies and the perception of threats are not inherently objective but are instead produced through social processes, particularly through language. Drawing on linguistic theory, the concept of speech acts suggests that language is not merely descriptive but also performative as it has the capacity to shape and alter reality. Within this theoretical framework, referring to something as a "security" issue does more than describe it;

it actively transforms the way it is perceived and treated in society (Balzacq, Léonard & Ruzicka, 2016). This understanding allows scholars to explore how security threats are constructed through communication, enabling the empirical study of the securitization process across different political and social contexts. Moreover, Buzan, de Wilde, and Wæver distinguish between different units of security analysis; being actors “*who securitize issues by declaring something as existentially threatened*” which in the scope of this thesis seen in the rhetoric of the EU and Member States claiming that the societal cohesion, their nations, and their borders are under direct threat (Każmierczak & Laskowski, 2024), which leads to the second unit being the referent objects as they are claimed to be threatened by illegal migration and coercive engineered migration. Another key distinction that is noted in the original understanding of the securitization theory is that threats are generally subjective and is open to being interpreted differently and negotiated by the securitizing actors. According to Wæver (1995), securitization occurs when an issue is moved from “*the realm of normal politics into the realm of emergency politics, legitimizing exceptional practices outside the bounds of democratic accountability*”. Crucially, for a securitization move to succeed, it must be accepted by a relevant audience. This emphasis on intersubjectivity, where both speaker and audience co-construct security marks a key departure from realist paradigms (Weaver, 1995).

Nonetheless, securitization as a concept and theory have been criticized since its inception. Balzacq (2005) critiques the Copenhagen School’s focus on speech acts and instead promotes a more sociological and contextual approach, emphasizing power relations, institutional settings, and audience reception. Securitization, in this sense, is not merely a discursive performance but a strategic practice embedded in broader political and social structures. Securitization according to Balzacq is defined as the following “*securitization is a pragmatic act, i.e. a sustained argumentative practice aimed at convincing a target audience to accept, based on what it knows about the world, the claim that a specific development is threatening enough to deserve an immediate policy to curb it.*” (Balzacq T. , 2009). However, the idea of defining the audience and that acceptance comes after the securitizing act has also been heavily debated among security scholars. The critique of the securitization theory has led to an emergence of a variant of the original theory labelled as ‘spiralling securitization’. This concept offers a more in depth

understanding of how securitization functions when it comes to migration and shy away from the traditional linear view often presented and contests that securitization is a spiralling phenomenon.

### **Spiralling securitization**

Spiralling securitization was coined by Bello in his work titled “The spiralling of the securitisation of migration in the EU: from the management of a ‘crisis’ to a governance of human mobility?”. In essence, spiralling securitization entails that securitization is a ‘spiralling phenomenon’, shaped by the interaction of multiple actors, policy choices, narratives, and institutional practices, all of which are often grounded in biased conceptions of migration. When such prejudiced actions contribute to framing migration as a security threat, they intensify the pace of securitization to the point where human mobility is increasingly perceived not as a normal social process, but as a crisis requiring control. As a result, these interrelated elements function as catalysts in reinforcing and accelerating the dynamics that solidify the migration-security nexus (Bello, 2022). Moreover, as securitization intensifies, it is primarily the discourse of prejudice of which security is merely one dimension that transforms migration into a matter of national security. This transformation does not solely result from governmental actions and rhetoric but also emerges through the practices and narratives propagated by non-governmental actors. The spiralling of securitization is also based on the idea that nation building is grounded in the fact that in order for the elite or the government to unify societies and people from different classes needs a common cause which in many cases turns into the notion of fighting an external threat in unity (Wimmer, 2002).

While traditional securitization theory, as developed by the Copenhagen School, offers a valuable framework for analysing how political actors use speech acts to elevate migration into the realm of existential threats, its emphasis on linearity and elite-driven discourse limits its explanatory power in complex, multi-actor contexts such as the EU’s response to weaponized migration. In contrast, the concept of *spiralling securitization* presents a more dynamic and multilayered analytical lens that better captures the recursive and self-reinforcing nature of security discourse and practice over time. Spiralling securitization theory conceptualizes securitization not as a one-off act initiated solely by state elites, but as a cyclical process involving an interplay of various actors (state and non-state) whose discourses, practices, and policies mutually reinforce the migration-security nexus. This is particularly relevant to the cases of Poland and Finland, where

responses to migration have not been limited to initial speech acts, but have evolved in reaction to geopolitical pressures (e.g. Belarus' instrumentalization of migrants), public sentiment, media narratives, EU policy frameworks, and the actions of neighbouring states. In these contexts, securitization is not merely spoken into existence; it is continuously produced, amplified, and justified through prejudiced cognitions, security practices (e.g. pushbacks, emergency border measures), and shifting legal and normative standards. As Bello (2022) argues, this creates a spiralling progression in which securitization feeds on itself, rendering migration increasingly inseparable from crisis narratives.

Therefore, employing the spiralling securitization framework enables a deeper understanding of how the discourse around migration transforms over time and becomes entrenched in institutional behaviour and societal attitudes. It also allows for the exploration of how securitization is co-constructed and contested by multiple actors, including EU institutions, national governments, border agencies, civil society, and even authoritarian regimes using migration as a tool of “hybrid warfare” or a pressuring “hybrid threat”. This makes it especially suitable for this thesis, which investigates not only how migration is framed as a security threat, but also how this framing evolves and is manipulated in response to external pressures.

### **Threat framing theory**

Threat framing theory emerged at the intersection of framing theory, security studies, and crisis. Framing theory (from cognitive and communication research). It analyses how actors *select* and emphasize certain aspects of reality to construct meaning. As Entman (1993) puts it, framing involves “*selecting some aspects of a perceived reality and making them more salient...in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition*” (Entman, 1993). Van Dijk similarly defines frames as “*conceptual structures or sets of beliefs that organize political thought, policies and discourse*” (Rychnovska, 2014). In security studies, the Copenhagen School (Buzan, Wæver et al.) built on this by treating securitization itself as a speech-act: a political leader or institution (*securitizing actor*) declares an issue an existential threat, thereby legitimating emergency measures. In other words, “*by saying the words, something is done*” (Buzan, Wæver, & Wilde, 1998). Threat framing theory builds on these ideas to focus explicitly on “*how objects or people are perceived, labeled and communicated as threats*” (Polko, 2025).

In sum, threat framing theory synthesizes framing scholarship (how meanings are made) with securitization theory (how issues become “security” matters). It has developed through interdisciplinary research on crises, security, and political communication, drawing on constructivist and rationalist perspectives. Constructivist studies highlight how some threat frames become normalized by culture or ideology, while rationalist accounts emphasize deliberate, strategic framing by actors to achieve goals like agenda-setting or legitimizing. Researchers have found, for example, that *antagonistic* threat frames (depicting adversarial, hostile Others) tend to invoke a security/military logic more than *structural* frames (highlighting system-wide vulnerabilities) (Polko, 2025). Likewise, once threat frames are institutionalized (embedded in party platforms or laws), they tend to persist, especially if allied with policy “monopolies” (ibid).

### **Threat Framing in Migration and Security Discourse**

Threat framing theory has been widely applied to migration and security. Scholars show that political actors often frame migrants and asylum seekers as threats to public safety, cultural identity, or social order. For instance, populist and right-wing parties in Europe regularly cast immigrants as linked to terrorism, crime, or economic burden. One study of Polish discourse finds that Law and Justice (PiS) described Muslim migrants as “*bad people with bad intentions...posed a physical threat...through acts of terrorism and crimes,*” and even framed migrants as a danger to economic security (Polko, 2025). In that case, PiS declared migration from MENA (Middle East and North Africa) countries an “*existential threat*” to Poland, justifying “extraordinary measures” at the border (Polko, 2025). Similarly, in broader EU debates, mass migration has been labelled a “hybrid attack” or “weaponized” by neighbouring regimes, and migrants are often portrayed as vectors of terror or instability (Gifra, 2024). For example, during the 2015–16 “refugee crisis,” key European leaders and media shifted language from humanitarian terms to security terms – talking of “*unprecedented flows of illegal migration*” and associating migrants indirectly with terrorism (EUAA, 2025).

These examples illustrate how threat framing is used in practice: political actors deploy security-loaded language to depict migration flows as existential threats. Academically, this aligns with studies showing that when leaders couple “migration” with words like “invasion,” “security,” or “terror,” public opinion and policy responses shift dramatically (Gifra, 2024). Threat framing theory provides the tools to analyse these patterns by identifying the frames (terrorist threat,

cultural threat, economic threat, etc.), the actors who propagate them (parties, politicians, ministers, media), and the audiences that accept or resist them. By unpacking the narrative elements (enemies, values, solutions) of each frame, researchers can trace how migration is constructed as a security problem.

In sum, employing threat framing theory (explained further in Chapter III) alongside spiralling securitization offers a comprehensive approach: the former illuminates how migration is rhetorically cast as a danger, and the latter situates that rhetoric in a dynamic, multi-level process. Together, they allow this thesis to capture both the content and the tempo of securitizing discourse in Poland, Finland, and the EU. This combination is especially useful for analysing “weaponized migration,” where framing choices are contested by national and supranational actors. By examining who frames migration as what kind of threat, and how those frames cascade or contest across actors, which can reveal the interplay of narratives that has driven Europe’s current security politics.

### III. Methodology

This thesis will rely mainly on qualitative tools of analysis and interpretive research design grounded in securitization and threat framing theories. It treats political communication as discourse - that is, as language and narrative used by actors to construct meaning - and applies critical discourse and frame analysis to examine how engineered migration is presented as a threat and a security issue.

In practice, the analysis will focus on identifying when and how forced migration and the threat of coercive engineered migration is framed in terms of danger or emergency. An adoption of the notion of spiralling securitization will also be used to capture how threat narratives may be amplified over time by multiple actors. This will be in the form of qualitative discourse analysis of EU leaders' statements and also Polish and Finnish representative's discourse. Additionally, textual analysis of existing literature on the topic and EU reports and publications will be examined and relied on. This study will focus on communication and discourse between the affected member states and the EU with a light overview of the over-researched domestic audience approach, this goes in line with Rychnovska's analytical framework as the EU institutions themselves are considered as "discursively-oriented" settings.

To answer the first question, *How does the framing of forced migration as a security issue influence both the discourse and policy responses to threats in the EU political arena?* this research adopts a comparative case study design, analysing two EU member states -Poland and Finland- those experienced attempts by neighbouring non-EU states (Belarus and Russia, respectively) to instrumentalize migration flows as a form of geopolitical pressure. The study limits its scope to political communications made by these governments and EU official, specifically in moments when weaponized migration was framed as a security issue. The central analytical focus is on the discourse produced by state actors: Prime Ministers, Ministries of Interior and Foreign Affairs, and high-level parliamentary debates. The study does not treat policy outcomes alone but examines the performative language through which forced migration was cast as a threat to national and European security. By analysing these framings tactics, the research seeks to understand how securitization narratives evolved and how they may have influenced EU responses.

The empirical material consists of official political communications from Poland and Finland between 2021 and 2024. The Polish corpus includes:

- Former Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki's statements on social media platforms (Facebook & X) (The official X account of the Chancellery of the Prime Minister of Poland.
- Statements by the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs.
- Public statements by the then President and Prime Minister
- Parliamentary debates (Sejm) from August to December 2021 on the state of emergency and migration policy.<sup>1</sup>
- Ministry of Interior press releases and briefings referencing Frontex, the crisis on the borders, the EU, or hybrid threats.

The Finnish corpus will include equivalent materials from 2023 to 2024, such as:

- Prime Minister Petteri Orpo's statements to the EU regarding Russian border activity.
- Interior Ministry communications on emergency asylum measures.
- Eduskunta (Finnish Parliament) debate records concerning border closures.
- Statements from the Finnish Border Guards (Finnish: Rajavartiolaitos)
- Government proposals referencing EU law or seeking alignment with EU security narratives.

Only official, public, and verifiable texts will be used. Documents were sourced from government websites, EU institutional portals, and trusted archives and news outlets. Drawing from Rychnovska's work on securitization and threat framing, I plan to apply their developed framework of studying securitization which they described as the framework that *"highlights discursive struggles over the interpretation of security and their embeddedness in the local system of meaning."* (Rychnovska, 2014). The framework utilizes both securitization and threat framing theory, *"framing theory deals with the questions of how collective meaning is created through discursive interactions and how it is affected by shared assumptions"* (Ibid.). Rychnovska used Benford and Snow's categorization of frames in her work on the framing of terrorism in the

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<sup>1</sup> Found in the 9<sup>th</sup> term of the Sejm archive <https://www.sejm.gov.pl/Sejm9.nsf/biuletyny.xsp>

security council “they distinguish among three types of frames: diagnostic (defining and explaining a certain situation and ascribing responsibility or blame), prognostic (providing solutions to the diagnosed problem), and motivational frames (calling for an action to change the situation) (Snow–Benford, 1988: 199–202)” This led to the development of a binary analytical framework to dissect threat construction by examining the interpretation of the threat and the “situatedness of this process”.

This model enables a systematic interpretation of how issues are framed as threats, what solutions are proposed, and how urgency is constructed. The framework also pays close attention to the broader institutional and political context, including which frames dominate, which are contested, and how power operates in the production and acceptance of threat narratives.

**Figure 1: Framework for situated discourse analysis of securitization**

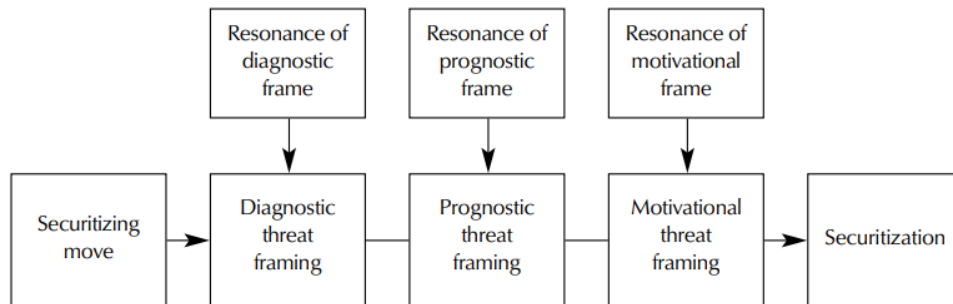


Figure 1 Framework for situated discourse analysis of securitization. Developed by (Rychnovska, 2014)

Following the model above, this thesis applies qualitative discourse analysis to official political texts - parliamentary speeches, government press statements, and migration-related policy documents - produced by the Polish and Finnish governments between 2021 and 2024. The texts are coded using MAXQDA<sup>2</sup>, categorizing excerpts based on the frame type and actor, and analysing how threat narratives develop over time. This allows a grounded comparison of how weaponized migration is constructed as a security threat in two different national contexts, and how these constructions shape each government’s positioning within the EU migration debate.

As to the second and third questions laid out in this thesis, *What explains the EU’s divergent response towards weaponized migration - specifically, the 2016 cooperation deal with Türkiye and*

<sup>2</sup> MAXQDA Analytics Pro Version 24.7.0 was used

*the more confrontational stance adopted against Belarus and Russia in 2021–2022? And in a similar vein Why the EU showed contradictions to its normative role of upholding rule of law in face of illegal pushbacks towards migrants?* Using threat framing analysis will show how the EU’s response is not shaped by solely objective facts or legal considerations, but by the dominant threat narratives constructed by member states. Moreover, using the model above and with the emphasis on power and frame dominance, I aim to shed light on how security-based threat frames overpowered legal-normative frames in both national and EU discourse. In that sense this thesis does not prove causality in a traditional sense, instead, it shows that how migration is framed, influences how it is governed.

## **Ethical considerations and limitations**

The research uses only public documents and does not involve human participants. No sensitive or private data is collected. Care was taken to quote materials in context, and all translations from Polish or Finnish will aim to preserve meaning without editorial distortion. Reflexivity will be practiced remaining aware of interpretive bias during coding and analysis. And the research will adhere to academic standards of transparency, integrity, and citation.

This thesis was subject to some limitations, first with a focus on exclusively on governmental discourse it excludes broader media, civil society, and public opinion which are often both securitizing actors and audiences during the securitization process, second the study is limited to official publications, reports, and statements which naturally omits discussions and debates that are not publicly available or meetings behind closed doors due to the sensitivity of the topic from a national and regional security perspective. Lastly, while the study draws inferences about the influence of national threat frames on EU-level responses, it does not empirically assess decision-making within EU institutions themselves, which could be explored in further research.

When it comes to the limitation of the language used in public discourse and coded documents, translation from the original language (Polish, Finnish, Russian) to English is done using Immersive Translate’s browser extension which utilizes Google translate and Large Language Models<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> DeepL is embedded within Immersive Translate’s software

## **IV. Analysis**

This chapter examines how the securitization of forced migration has unfolded in two key EU member states: Poland and Finland. By focusing on the Belarus–Poland border crisis of 2021–2022 and the Finnish–Russian border tensions of 2022–2024, the analysis traces how political actors framed the phenomenon of “weaponized migration” and how these framings shaped both discourse and policy responses. The chapter draws on the three analytical frames identified in the theoretical framework -diagnostic frame, prognostic frame, and motivational frame- to unpack the different ways securitization narratives were constructed and legitimised. Before analysing the frames themselves, a brief background of each case is provided to situate the political and security context.

### **Framing in the case of the Poland-Belarus border crisis.**

#### **Background**

The 2020 presidential elections in Belarus, widely perceived as fraudulent, and the subsequent violent suppression of civil unrest by the Minsk authorities, significantly deteriorated relations between Belarus and the EU and neighbouring countries such as Poland and the Baltic states. The EU openly condemned President Lukashenko’s actions, expressing firm support for the Belarusian opposition and advocating for democratic reforms within the country (Council of the European Union, 2024). A critical turning point occurred in May, 2021, when Belarusian authorities forced a Ryanair flight travelling from Athens to Vilnius to land in Minsk, citing a bomb threat. Upon landing, dissident journalist and opposition figure Roman Protasevich was detained (Fraszka, 2021).

In response, Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki labelled the incident as an act of state terrorism and urged the European Council to impose swift sanctions on the Belarusian regime (Glinka, Miarka, Sokała, & Matusz, 2024). In response to the European Union’s imposition of stringent economic sanctions on Belarus, the Lukashenko government initiated retaliatory measures, notably facilitating irregular migration primarily from war torn countries such as Iraq, Syria, and Afghanistan (Greenhill, 2022) across the borders shared with Poland, Latvia, and

Lithuania. These actions were widely understood within the EU as a form of hybrid warfare. The onset of this crisis can be traced back to June 2021, shortly after the sanctions were enacted. At that time, President Aleksandr Lukashenko openly declared that Belarus would no longer act as a barrier to the movement of drugs and migrants into the European Union. His statement, “We stopped drugs and migrants - now you will eat and catch them yourselves,” (Лукашенко, 2021) reflected a deliberate shift in Belarus’s border control strategy and signalled an intent to externalize the consequences of the EU’s punitive measures.

In response to these actions taken by Belarus, and in contradiction with UN treaties and EU legislation, the affected countries employed strict border measures at the crossing points and started exercising aggressive pushback policies by sending the attempting migrants back to the Belarussian side and denying them entry. This in turn has led to tensions within the EU and within the societies of Poland, Latvia, and Lithuania as some viewed these pushback measures as necessary to deter a threat to their sovereignty and as a way to stop a totalitarian regime’s attempt at destabilization while others viewed it as a bleak violation of human rights and a dismissal of obligations to guarantee and provide humanitarian protection for those in need of it. All in all, while the actual aims of Belarus were not explicitly communicated, the goal of creating internal conflicts and division within the EU has definitely succeeded to some extent due to their response to the manufactured crisis.

In the case of Poland, it is important to note that the securitization of migrants domestically by political actors has been ongoing since the 2015 migration crisis. In 2015, a majority of Poles (76%) supported the right of persecuted foreigners to settle in Poland. However, by late 2015 and 2016, public attitudes shifted significantly, with growing negativity towards refugees from Muslim countries. Isolationist views and support for the use of force against refugees became more prevalent (Konopka, 2019). This was due to the PiS party leveraging the European migration crisis during the 2015 parliamentary elections. The party used fear-based rhetoric to gain support, contributing to the shift in public sentiment against immigration and used migration as a central theme in its electoral strategy, framing refugees as a threat to Polish culture and identity, which helped mobilize fear-based support during the campaign (Yermakova, 2019).

## Framing the threat

The 2021–2022 Poland–Belarus border crisis offers a clear case of weaponized migration framed as an existential security threat in Polish governmental discourse. Applying Rychnovská’s (2014) threat framing framework, this analysis identifies the **diagnostic** (identifying the problem and attributing blame), **prognostic** (proposing solutions or policies to address the threat), and **motivational** (providing rationale and urging action) all frames employed by Polish political actors, illustrating how migration was constructed as a hybrid security threat requiring exceptional measures, and how these frames positioned the EU as both a necessary partner and a constrained actor within this securitization process. Moreover, within the process of frame identification and the analysis of the discourse, I aim to highlight that the securitization processes were not linear as the traditional understanding but instead is recursive as the threat narratives escalate when different actors amplify or respond to initial securitizing moves.

Poland’s securitized discourse was not confined to rhetoric but manifested in practices that systematically denied migrants their legal rights. As Kaluta documents, border guards routinely engaged in violent pushbacks across the Belarusian frontier, confiscating belongings, destroying phones, and physically assaulting individuals who pleaded for asylum. Migrants were left stranded in the Białowieża Forest under extreme conditions, often without food, water, or medical assistance. These actions blurred the line between state security measures and outright violations of international humanitarian law. In this sense, securitization speech acts were reinforced and legitimized through physical practices, embedding the narrative of migrants as “threats” into the daily operation of border governance (Klauta, 2025).

### The Diagnostic frame

The diagnostic frame centralizes the interpretation of migration as a deliberate “hybrid attack” orchestrated by the Belarusian regime. This narrative is consistently and emphatically constructed in Polish governmental discourse, redefining migration from a humanitarian concern into a security threat. Poland portrayed the arrival of migrants at the Belarusian border as a deliberate act of hybrid attacks orchestrated by the Belarusian regime with implicit Russian support. In a joint statement from the Presidents of Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland given in Ukraine regarding the actions of Belarus, they jointly stated that: *“This is not a migrant crisis but a politically*

*orchestrated hybrid operation by Alyaksandr Lukashenka's regime to divert attention from the regime's growing human and civil rights abuses.*" (Presidents of Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland, 2021). The same sentiment was also observed in a joint statement of the Prime Ministers of Poland and the Baltic states (Chancellery of the Prime Minister of the Republic of Poland , 2021)

In a similar vein. Former Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki, in a public statement on the 9<sup>th</sup> of November 2021, labelled the situation a "hybrid attack" not just against Poland, but against the entire European Union Later on,

*"Sealing the polish border is our national interest. But today the stability and security of the entire EU is at stake. This hybrid attack of Lukashenko's regime is aimed at all of us. We will not be intimidated and will defend peace in Europe with our partners from NATO and EU."*

(Morawiecki, Post on X, 2021)

Morawiecki warned that Poland was facing "*a new type of war*" at its border, alleging that people from the Middle East were being used as "*human shields*" by Belarus (Morawiecki, 2021). In this narrative, the migrants massed at the frontier were not innocents but pawns in a geopolitical game coerced or guided by Belarusian security forces to breach EU territory (Mateusz Morawiecki, 2021), and on X the Prime Minister (PM) also referred to the threat as a "hybrid war" (Chancellery of the Prime Minister of Poland, 2021). Migrants were constructed as instruments of state aggression rather than as individuals with humanitarian claims, effectively depersonalizing them while amplifying the threat narrative. Similarly, when addressing the Sejm the State Secretary in the President's Chancellery of the Republic of Poland Paweł Soloch stated: "*We are facing a migration crisis. Based on our assessments and conviction, the current situation has unfortunately a Very high potential for escalation in an unfavourable direction.*"<sup>4</sup> (Soloch, 2021). Similarly, the then President of Poland Andrzej Duda, speaking at the Warsaw Security Forum, stated: "*We're experiencing hybrid aggression in the form of attempts by the Belarusian services to push migrants into EU territory ... We're defending Nato and EU borders with full determination.*" (Duda, 2021) The framing clearly identified Belarus (and implicitly, Russia) as the actors behind the crisis,

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<sup>4</sup> Translated from: Mamy do czynienia z kryzysem migracyjnym. Z naszych ocen wynika i mamy takie przekonanie, że obecna sytuacja ma niestety bardzo duży potencjał do eskalacji w niekorzystnym kierunku. Jest to związane z informacjami, które odnoszą się do rozbudowy przez białoruskie struktury państwowe szlaków przerzutu migrantów przede wszystkim z państw Bliskiego Wschodu

distinguishing it from spontaneous migration. At the same conference, Duda added that intelligence confirmed *“people with terrorist links are among those trying to cross the border,”* thereby justifying a national security framing. Government discourse consistently described migrants as “tools” or “instruments” orchestrated by an authoritarian regime. Morawiecki and others referred to migrants as "weapons," not individuals in need.

Moreover, the Prime Minister drew a direct comparison between the events on the Polish-Belarusian borders with that of the 2015 migration crisis. *“on our eastern border we are dealing not only with violence, not only with the direct use of force against a sovereign Polish state – on our eastern border we are dealing with a staged spectacle. A spectacle aimed at violating Poland's borders, bringing chaos to Poland and the European Union. Exactly the same thing that was also carried out from a different direction several years ago, in 2015 and 2016.”*<sup>5</sup> (Morawiecki, Sprawozdanie Stenograficzne z 41. posiedzenia Sejmu Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej, 2021).

In characterizing the crisis as a security threat, Polish actors also cast suspicions on the migrants themselves, associating them with criminality, extremism, and disease. The Minister of Interior, Mariusz Kamiński, claimed that evidence of Islamist extremism had been found on some migrants' phones, reinforcing the notion that potential terrorists were attempting to infiltrate Poland (akw, 2021) Although extreme, these narratives of contamination and jihadist infiltration helped solidify an image of the incoming migrants as a menacing “other”. Scholarly observers note that since 2015 Poland has consistently securitized migration, with public discourse conflating refugees and irregular migrants with terrorists or other risks to national integrity (Nattrass, 2021). In the Belarus border crisis, this trend continued: Polish authorities portrayed the thousands of Iraqis, Syrians, Afghans and others at the border as instruments of foreign aggression and potential threats to Polish culture and safety (Zorko, Mikac, & Yoder, 2023). This diagnostic framing laid the groundwork for treating the situation as a state of emergency, demanding exceptional counter-measures.

Furthermore, diagnostic framing extended beyond the national context by emphasizing the threat to EU unity. For example, EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen - echoing Polish

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<sup>5</sup> Translated from: “na wschodniej granicy mamy do czynienia nie tylko z przemocą, nie tylko z bezpośrednim użyciem przemocy wobec suwerenne- go państwa polskiego – na wschodniej granicy mamy do czynienia z wyreżyserowanym spektaklem. Spektaklem, którego celem jest naruszenie granicy Polski, wprowadzenie chaosu w Polsce, w Unii Europejskiej. Dokładnie to samo, co z innego kierunku realizowane było również kilka lat temu, w roku 2015 i 2016”

assertions - described the situation as “*a hybrid attack. Not a migration crisis*” (Ursula von der Leyen, 2021), echoing EU-level discourse, European Council President Michel, speaking at a 10 November 2021 press conference in Warsaw, stated: “*We are facing a hybrid attack and we must demonstrate solidarity, unity and strength in defence of our fundamental principles*” (Michel, 2021)

The opponent in this framing was multi-layered: directly, the Belarusian state and Lukashenko; indirectly, Russia as a destabilizing force on Europe’s eastern flank. The referent objects were Poland’s sovereignty, territorial integrity, and, crucially, the security of the EU as a political community. This framing resonated strongly with existing EU narratives regarding hybrid threats, enabling Poland to align its securitization with broader geopolitical concerns within the Union.

### **The Prognostic Frame**

When it comes to the prognostic framing, one of the earliest policy moves was the state of emergency declared on 2 September 2021 by President Duda, acting on government recommendations (Zajchowska, 2021). The measure applied to 183 localities along the Belarus border, restricting movement, assembly, NGO presence, and journalistic activity (Prezydenta Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej, 2021) – this, according to the Presidential spokesperson was essentially to manage an atypical security threat and stop the instrumentalization of migrants by Lukashenko’s regime (Chancellery of the Prime Minister, Republic of Poland, 2021).

In the Sejm plenary on 6 September 2021, Prime Minister Morawiecki justified these measures as essential for national defence, linking them back to the threat narrative. He argued that such legal measures were “proportionate to the aggression we face,” reinforcing the securitizing logic that exceptional threats require exceptional legal responses, a framing consistent with Buzan, Wæver & de Wilde’s (1998) analysis of securitization. On 14 October 2021, the Polish parliament passed amendments effectively legalizing pushbacks. These allowed border officials to deny asylum seekers entry without court review and to return them immediately to Belarus (Grzeškowiak, 2022). Minister Jarosław Kaczyński justified the move by referencing similar measures in Greece, saying: “Experience on Greek borders shows such fencing is the only effective method.” (ECRE, 2021) The framing fused an appeal to effectiveness and legality, portraying pushbacks as reasonable, lawful, and justified by the nature of the threat.

As to the effect on the ground, immediately after the announcement of the state of emergency, thousands of soldiers and police were deployed to back up the Border Guard. By November 2021, over 10,000 troops were stationed at the border, reflecting an unprecedented militarization of an EU external border in peacetime. This massive security surge was accompanied by concerted physical fortification: units hastily erected barbed-wire fences, high razor-wire coils, and temporary barricades along the 416 km Belarus frontier (Zorko, Mikac, & Yoder, 2023). Soon after, Poland's parliament fast-tracked a special law to construct a permanent border barrier. Interior Minister Kamiński unveiled plans for a 180 km-long, 5.5-meter-high steel border wall, equipped with motion sensors and cameras, a project he hailed as a “*strategic security undertaking*” for the nation (Fraszka, 2021). Budgeted at 1.6 billion złotych (375 million Euros) and completed in mid-2022, this wall stands as the tangible centrepiece of Poland's prognostic frame and a symbol of “Fortress Europe” mentality where territorial defence takes primacy over refugee protection.

### **The Motivational Frame**

Lastly, Poland's securitized response to the Belarus border crisis was anchored in a motivational frame emphasizing moral duty, sovereignty, and European solidarity. This framing presented restrictive migration measures not only as pragmatic responses, but also as ethical duties necessary for the defence of both Polish and European values.

Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki's impassioned remarks on 9 November 2021 exemplify this frame. He posted on X and publicly stated, “*This hybrid attack... is aimed at all of us... we will defend peace in Europe*”. By positioning the crisis as an existential assault on European peace, Morawiecki transformed Poland's securitized response into a noble defence of shared values and stability. This appeal elevated the national response into a moral endeavour, no longer a policy choice but a civilizational duty.

Polish leaders consistently argued that their country “*had no choice*” but to take extraordinary measures because the very safety of the nation and Europe was at stake. In public addresses and media statements, officials emphasized a duty to protect Polish citizens and EU's external frontier. President Duda, for instance, implored Poles to understand the continuing necessity of the emergency: “*As we can see, this problem on the border is still there and we still need to do everything we can to prevent it*”, he declared, deeming the extension of the state of emergency

“justified” despite civil liberty concerns (Reuters, 2021). This rhetoric portrays the government’s hardline response as a patriotic imperative, an act of defending the homeland. The motivation offered is essentially one of self-defence and crisis management: extraordinary times demand extraordinary measures.

By framing the situation as warlike, Polish authorities also stoked a sense of urgency and fear that helped garner public support. Indeed, at the height of the crisis in late 2021, opinion polls showed a majority of Poles were worried the border standoff might escalate into an armed conflict (ibid). Such public anxiety, fuelled by officials’ warnings of lurking Russian aggression and terrorist infiltration (Nattrass, 2021), likely bolstered acceptance of the government’s extreme policies. In securitization terms, the audience (Polish society) was successfully convinced that the asserted threat was existential, thus justifying the suspension of “normal” rules at the border.

On the international stage, Poland’s motivational framing cast the country as a responsible “frontline defender” of Europe requiring solidarity and support. And with Polish politicians and leaders repeatedly underscoring that Poland was protecting the EU as a whole from Lukashenko’s hybrid assault the result was actually in Poland’s favour when came to EU and international support. Prime Minister Morawiecki and the foreign ministry urged their NATO and EU partners to stand firm with Poland, Latvia, and Lithuania and not to negotiate with Belarus over the heads of these frontline countries. Morawiecki notably called for “concrete steps” by NATO under Article 4, arguing that mere words of concern were insufficient and that the “*entire alliance*” needed to commit to resolving the crisis (Plucinska & Semczuk, 2021). By invoking NATO’s collective security clause -typically reserved for traditional military threats- Polish officials signalled to domestic and foreign audiences alike that they viewed the migrant influx as a threat to territorial integrity and political independence in line with an armed attack. This helped generate Western sympathy: EU leaders condemned Lukashenko’s “inhumane” instrumentalization of migrants and declared full solidarity with Poland and the Baltic states facing the “hybrid attack”.

The EU Commission president in a public statement called “on Member States to finally approve the extended sanctions regime on the Belarusian authorities responsible for this hybrid attack.” As a form of deterrence against the actions of Belarus (Ursula von der Leyen, 2021). Such support gave further legitimacy to Poland’s securitized approach. Furthermore, Poland leveraged the crisis to push long-sought policy goals, for example, Morawiecki argued that the EU should collectively

finance border walls on its external frontiers. This rhetorical move reframed the controversial wall project as a pan-European security investment rather than a unilateral Polish scheme. It exemplifies how the motivational frame was used not only to justify actions already taken, but also to normalize militarized border governance as a desirable European norm.

Finally, the government's motivational framing deliberately downplayed or dismissed humanitarian criticisms, instead rallying nationalist sentiment and political support at home. Officials consistently referred to the migrants in impersonal, dehumanized terms (as "illegal entrants", "tools" of Belarus, or even potential terrorists) (Nattrass, 2021), thereby marginalizing their rights or suffering in the public discourse. The ban on independent media in the border zone further allowed the state narrative to dominate, depicting Polish officers as heroic guardians repelling hostile incursions.

Within Poland, the ruling PiS party benefited from this hardline posture, which resonated with its conservative base. It is also noted that government discourse stoked prejudice against immigrants for political gain, reviving tropes of cultural and security threats echoing the 2015 crisis to shore up support. The moral justification offered was that national survival and order took precedence over abstract ideals or legal norms.

In sum, the motivational frame presented Poland's response as both necessary and valorous. A reluctant but praiseworthy defence of country and continent. This framing helped immunize the government against internal and external criticism, portraying opponents of the hardline measures as naïve at best or undermining national security at worst. By securing broad domestic approval and a measure of understanding from allies, the Polish leadership cemented its securitized approach as not only legitimate but commendable under the extraordinary circumstances.

The Polish response to the Belarus-engineered migration crisis also exemplifies what Zorko, Mikac, and Yoder (2023) describe as "hard border militarization." Beyond the deployment of thousands of troops and the erection of permanent barriers, Poland's rejection of Frontex support highlighted its preference for unilateral crisis management, even at the expense of EU solidarity. This militarised approach reflects a broader mainstreaming of security logics within the Schengen regime, where border governance increasingly relies on military resources, surveillance technologies, and the language of hybrid threats (Zorko, Mikac, & Yoder, 2023). The portrayal of

migrants as tools of Belarusian aggression not only securitized mobility but normalized military responses in spaces previously governed through civilian law enforcement.

In conclusion, through Rychnovská's tripartite framing lens it can be seen how Poland turned a migration incident into a matter of high security politics. The diagnostic frame cast the Belarus-engineered migrant flow as an existential danger -a hybrid warfare threat- thus legitimating emergency thinking. The prognostic frame then advanced militarized solutions (states of emergency, fences and walls, armed deployments, pushbacks) as the appropriate response, exemplifying the wider EU trend of border securitization and militarization. Finally, the motivational frame provided the persuasive glue, invoking national survival, European solidarity, and defensive necessity to mobilize support for measures that transgressed ordinary legal and ethical boundaries. Poland's handling of the Belarus border crisis thus illustrates how a securitizing actor can successfully construct a migration crisis as a security emergency, mainstreaming extraordinary practices that have lasting implications for Schengen governance and the norms of asylum in Europe. The Polish case stands as a vivid contemporary example of threat framing in action.

## **Framing in the case of the Finnish-Russian border threat**

### **Background**

The case of Finland draws many similarities between it and the Polish case. After Finland officially joined the NATO alliance in April of 2023, relations with Russia deteriorated drastically especially given Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. In the following months, Russia has orchestrated a similar hybrid attack to that of Belarus (though on a much smaller scale), which entailed the forced movement of migrants to the shared border with Finland in an attempt to further create divisions within the EU, NATO, Finnish society and internal politics

Notably, this is not considered the first instance of instrumentalized migration being utilized by Russia as it has been done before through Belarus against Latvia and against Estonia as well which ended in the closing of both border crossings citing security risks (Lavikainen, 2023). Finnish officials accused Russia of orchestrating a "hybrid operation" (Ministry of Interior, 2023), deliberately directing migrants primarily from Syria, Iraq, Somalia, and Yemen toward its

1,340 km eastern border. Interior Minister Mari Rantanen and Prime Minister Petteri Orpo explicitly described these flows as organized pressure by Russia, framing them as incidents of “hybrid warfare” that aimed to test Finland’s political resilience (Hofverberg, 2023). By the start of 2024, Finland had positioned itself as a model of hybrid-threat resilience within NATO and the EU framework. The government characterized migrant flows as part of Russia’s multi-domain aggression strategy aimed at destabilizing Western democracies, a narrative crafted to justify extraordinary policy responses and align Finland’s measures with Allied security imperatives (Gönczi, 2024).

Even though the situation in Finland was similar to some extent to that of Poland and the Baltic states, the Finnish government opted to act promptly in the face of aggression and utilized legislative and physical means to mitigate the threat of a crisis on its borders.

### **Framing the threat**

Finland’s response to the recent migration pressures on its eastern border has been framed explicitly as a security threat orchestrated by Russia, often termed “*weaponized migration*” or “*instrumentalization of migration*”. In the period 2022–2024, Finnish government officials consistently portrayed irregular migrant flows at the Finland-Russia border as part of a “*hybrid influence*” or “*hybrid warfare*” operation directed by Russia. On 14 November 2023, Prime Minister Petteri Orpo stated in reference to the attempted border crossing from the Russian side: “*This is organised activity that affects our national security.*” (Orpo, 2023). Interior Minister Mari Rantanen expanded on this narrative, stating that “*The Government is prepared to take even stronger measures, if necessary,*” (Ministry of Interior, 2023) in reference to the Finnish decision to close the Eastern borders with Russia. These declarations framed the crisis as a coordinated attack on Finland’s sovereignty and stability. In the 13 March 2024 parliamentary debate, PM Orpo cautioned against this being “*a hybrid attack on our border ... against the whole of Europe*” (Petteri Orpo, 2024), expanding the imperative from national to continental. Across these platform, Prime Minister’s office, ministries, and Parliament Finland consistently identified Russia as the opponent, hybrid warfare as the nature of the threat, and its own sovereignty and EU unity as the referent.

This framing aligns with securitization theory and threat framing frameworks in academic literature. In particular, Dagmar Rychnovská's framework of diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational threat frames is a useful lens to dissect how Finnish authorities defined the problem, proposed solutions, and mobilized support. This analysis examines official communications from the Prime Minister's statements and Ministry of Interior press releases to parliamentary measures and press conferences to elucidate Finland's threat framing. It also evaluates the resonance of these frames, i.e. how well they aligned with domestic and international audiences' beliefs and facilitated policy action. The findings are placed in context of broader European concerns about "weaponized" migration, noting parallels with Poland's experience in 2021-2022,

### **The Diagnostic Frame**

In the Finnish government's diagnostic framing, the surge of asylum seekers arriving via Russia was explicitly defined as a deliberate security threat rather than a spontaneous migration event. Prime Minister Petteri Orpo asserted that the situation was "*a systematic and organized action by the Russian authorities*" (Orpo, 2023). Finnish intelligence indicated that Russian border officials were facilitating third-country migrants' travel to Finnish crossing points, leading Orpo to conclude: "*This is Russia's influence operation and we do not accept it.*". Interior Minister Mari Rantanen likewise stated, "*Finland is the target of a Russian hybrid operation. This is a matter of national security.*" (Bryant, 2023). Such language clearly identifies the agent of the threat (Russian authorities) and the nature of the threat (a hybrid attack using migrants as "tools" or ammunition). In framing theory terms, the government's diagnostic frame defined the situation as an intentional, hostile pressure campaign orchestrated by a foreign power, rather than a humanitarian crisis, leading to responsibility and blame being squarely placed on Russia.

Finnish officials consistently linked the migration influx to Russia's geopolitical aggression. Foreign Minister Elina Valtonen told media there is "*no doubt that Russia is instrumentalizing migrants*" as part of its "*hybrid warfare*" against Finland in retaliation for Finland's NATO membership (which was prompted by Russia's invasion of Ukraine) (Gera, 2023). President Sauli Niinistö reminded the public that Russia had used similar tactics before: in 2015–2016, amid tensions over NATO exercises, Russian authorities permitted about 7,000 asylum seekers to cross into northern Finland and Norway (Lavikainen, 2023). Those events served as a precedent or "*prior threat image*" that reinforced the credibility of the current threat frame. Niinistö warned

that Finland should “*prepare for a certain malice from Russia*” - a warning borne out by 2023’s events, which he said “*constantly remind us every day that Finland joined NATO*” (Gera, 2023). By evoking this historical context, Finnish leaders anchored their diagnosis in familiar security narratives, enhancing its resonance. As Rychnovská notes, diagnostic frames often draw on culturally salient narratives and past experiences to increase their salience and credibility (Rychnovska, 2014). Here, the narrative of “*hybrid warfare via migration*” resonated strongly because it echoed both the Belarus-directed migrant crisis in Poland/Baltics in 2021 and Finland’s own Arctic “bicycle migrant”<sup>6</sup> episode in 2023.

Furthermore, the framing emphasized the severity and abnormality of the situation. Orpo described the influx as a “*serious disruption of border security*” (Gera, 2023). The Ministry of the Interior declared that the migrant arrivals from Russia “*pose a serious threat to national security and public order*” (Ministry of the Interior, 2023). By portraying a relatively modest number of asylum seekers (several hundred in a few weeks according to Frontex migratory map data) (Frontex, 2025) as a grave security disruption, Finnish authorities rhetorically elevated the issue from ordinary immigration management to the realm of national emergency. This is characteristic of securitizing “*speech acts*” in the Copenhagen School sense, presenting migration as an existential threat that justifies extraordinary measures. The diagnostic frame also stressed the manipulated nature of the migration: Orpo noted Finland had intelligence that migrants were not acting on their own but were “*helped to the border*” by Russian officials. “*This is an organised activity, not a genuine emergency,*” he said (Bryant, 2023), implicitly distinguishing these flows from genuine refugee crises. The government even suggested organized crime elements were involved, stating that “*foreign authorities and other actors have played a role...The Russian authorities are allowing this to happen, ... The situation also involves international crime.*”<sup>7</sup> (Government Communications Department, 2023). Such attributions underscore that the problem was intentional hostile

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<sup>6</sup> Migrants used bicycles to circumvent Russian and Finnish border regulations when crossing into Finland from Russia. These makeshift vehicles offered a practical solution in a context where foot passage was forbidden and motorists were unavailable. In turn, Finland responded by legally banning bicycle crossings to control this emerging method of border entry.

Raja source: Sallan kansainväliselle rajanylityspaikalle saapui tänään 20.11.2023 hetki ennen rajanylityspaikan sulkemista 35 henkilöä. Henkilöt saapuivat Venäjältä polkupyörillä ja potkulautoilla. (<https://raja.fi/-/sallan-rajanylityspaikalle-saapui-35-turvapaikanhakijaa>)

<sup>7</sup> Translated from: Rajavartiolaitoksen ja muiden viranomaisten tekemien havaintojen ja saamien tietojen perusteella on selvää, että vieraan valtion viranomaisilla sekä muilla toimijoilla on osuus rajan ylittäneiden henkilöiden Suomeen saapumisen edesauttamisessa.

influence, not just chaotic migration. In sum, Finland's diagnostic framing constructed an image of orchestrated "weaponized migration", a hybrid threat that blurred civilian migration with covert aggression, thereby setting the stage for securitized policy responses.

### **The Prognostic Frame**

Having defined the situation as a hybrid threat, Finnish officials advanced a prognostic frame that centered on robust security measures and legal innovations to counter the "weaponized" migration. In line with Rychnovská's definition, the prognostic frame provides the *solution* to the diagnosed problem. Finland's solutions were extraordinary in scope, reflecting the severity of the threat as framed. Key among them was border closure and control. As migrant numbers crept up in late 2023, the government first shut down 4 of the 8 official border crossings with Russia on November 18, 2023 (Hofverberg, 2023). When this partial closure failed to halt the inflow, Prime Minister Orpo announced the *closure of all remaining crossings* (except one in the far north) effective November 24, 2023. "*The government has today decided to close more border posts. Only Raja-Jooseppi station will remain open,*" Orpo told a press conference. By the end of that month, even Raja-Jooseppi -the last open post- was temporarily closed, meaning "*the entire 1,340 km border... will be closed until 13 December*" (Orpo, 2023). During this period, asylum seekers would be directed to apply at airports or seaports instead. These unprecedented closures were justified by citing Finnish law and EU norms: officials invoked a 2022 amendment to the Border Guard Act that explicitly permits concentrating asylum applications at specific crossings or shutting crossings "*when necessary to avert a serious threat to public order or national security,*" including situations where "*an exceptionally large number of arrivals [occur] in a short period*" or there is "*reasonable suspicion that the entry is due to the influence of a foreign state.*" (Government proposal HE 94 /2022 vp, 2022). This law, passed in July 2022 with broad parliamentary support, had been drafted precisely in anticipation of such hybrid influence scenarios. Indeed, Justice Minister Anna-Maja Henriksson noted at the time, "*The security situation in Finland and Europe has changed fundamentally... the risk of a different kind of hybrid influence has increased,*" welcoming the new legal provisions for border closures and other exceptional measures (Rogers, 2022). In essence, Finland had a ready-made legal toolkit for weaponized migration, which it wasted no time in employing in 2023.

Another pillar of the prognostic frame was border fortification. Finnish officials argued that physical barriers were needed to handle a potential mass influx orchestrated by Russia. As early as May 2022, the Ministry of the Interior's press release on the Border Guard Act amendments noted that "*building barriers, such as fences, [would] make it possible to better prepare for various threats endangering border security.*" (Ministry of the Interior, 2022) The law empowered the Border Guard to construct roads and fences in border zones. By July 2022, Parliament had approved plans to fast-track construction of a border fence along parts of the 1,300 km frontier (Finnish Border Guard, 2022). This decision was explicitly linked to the expectation of migrant pressure: Finland foresaw the possibility that Russia might instrumentalize migration for coercive purposes and, in response, amended its legislation in July 2022 to facilitate the expedited development of a fortified barrier along its eastern frontier. Construction of a pilot fence began in early 2023, and a 200-km section of tall steel fencing topped with barbed wire is planned. Although progress was slow (only a few kilometers completed by late 2023), the symbolic message was clear: Finland was actively reinforcing its border in response to the threat of instrumentalized migration. The use of military conscripts to erect temporary barbed-wire obstacles at crossing points in November 2023 further demonstrated this full commitment approach.

In tandem with national measures, Finland's prognostic framing included international cooperation as a solution. The government sought support from the EU's border agency, Frontex, and quickly received reinforcements. Frontex deployed dozens of officers and equipment to Finland's eastern border in late 2023 at Finland's request. This was portrayed as part of a collective solution to a hybrid threat affecting the EU as a whole. By highlighting the European dimension, Finnish leaders helped justify engaging the EU's solidarity and resources. Neighbouring states also responded in kind: for example, Poland's President Andrzej Duda explicitly labelled Russia's actions against Finland as a "*hybrid attack*" akin to what Poland faced on its Belarus border, pledging Polish support and experience-sharing (Chomiuk, 2023). This international echo of Finland's framing reinforced the idea that the *solution* required united front and perhaps even collective securitization of the issue at the EU/NATO level.

Finally, the prognostic frame was notable for how it balanced harsh measures with legal justifications. The Finnish government was mindful of international law and domestic legal constraints even as it took exceptional steps. Officials maintained that at least one crossing for

asylum would remain open to uphold the right to seek asylum, and only moved to a full temporary closure when convinced it met legal criteria. Prime Minister Orpo stated that legal reviews found the border closure “*proportionate and justified*” under the circumstances (Bryant, 2023). Indeed, Finland’s Chancellor of Justice had earlier warned that completely sealing the border indefinitely would violate asylum seekers’ rights, which led the government to limit the duration and scope of closures (Hofverberg, 2023). Thus, the prognostic framing presented Finland’s response as *firm but rules-based* to some extent, enacting new laws and invoking emergency provisions in a way that could withstand legal scrutiny. This careful legal framing distinguished Finland’s approach from more ad-hoc or extrajudicial responses and was likely intended to bolster both domestic and international acceptance of the measures.

In summary, the prognostic frame put forward by the Finnish government to combat the weaponized migration threat involved a mix of security-hardening policies: closing border crossing points, concentrating asylum processing at controlled locations, building fences and barriers, mobilizing border guards and even the military, and coordinating with EU partners. All these were couched as necessary “*to prevent a serious threat posed by ... instrumentalization of migration.*” (Ministry of the Interior, 2022) The underlying message was that extraordinary threats require extraordinary countermeasures - a hallmark of securitization. As one analysis by the former Finnish ambassador to Russia noted, “*Finland sees the weaponization of migration as a form of hybrid warfare and has introduced legislation to combat it*”, even enabling the turning back of refugees under strict conditions (Nyberg, 2024). This captures how thoroughly the official policy response was driven by the threat frame.

### **The Motivational Frame**

To gain public and political support for these tough measures, Finnish leaders employed a motivational frame that stressed urgency, unity, and resolve. The motivational frame in Rychnovská’s model calls for action and seeks to rally audiences behind the proposed solution. In Finland’s case, officials consistently emphasized that the nation *must act decisively* to defend its sovereignty and security in the face of Russia’s hybrid aggression. This sense of urgency was palpable in statements from the Prime Minister. “*The situation is worsening on the eastern border;*” Petteri Orpo warned as closures were being expanded (Lehto, 2023). He characterized the migrant influx as a “*serious disruption of border security*” requiring an immediate response

(Gera, 2023). By describing the scenario in crisis terms, the government legitimized the swift implementation of emergency measures (like deploying soldiers to the border and suspending normal cross-border traffic). The vocabulary of urgency - e.g. calling the situation “*exceptional*”, a “*serious threat*”, or even an “*attack*” – was aimed at convincing both the public and Finland’s parliament that standard immigration procedures or wait-and-see approaches would be woefully insufficient.

Appeals to national security and even survival were central to this motivational framing. Minister Rantanen’s blunt statement that “*This is a matter of national security*” (Ministry of Interior, 2023) sent a clear signal that protecting Finland’s integrity was at stake. Similarly, Orpo’s declaration “*we do not accept this kind of action*” cast the issue as one of standing firm against coercion. Such language invokes a moral high ground and a determination not to yield to hostile pressure. The framing also hinted at Finland’s broader values and identity: as a sovereign nation and new NATO member, Finland would not be cowed by what Orpo called “*Russia’s influence operation*”. This was underscored by references to the war in Ukraine and Finland’s NATO accession – framing the migrant issue as part of a larger struggle between Finland (as part of the West) and an aggressive Russia. The government’s narrative implied that fortifying the border and controlling entries was part of Finland “*defending its people and European principles*” against hybrid warfare, thus appealing to patriotism and international solidarity at once.

Another aspect of the motivational frame was solidarity and preparedness. Finnish authorities framed their actions as not only protecting Finland but also contributing to European security. Orpo noted the attempt was to influence both Finland and the EU, implicitly calling for united backing. The government frequently drew parallels to the challenges faced by Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia on the EU’s eastern flank, creating a sense of shared purpose.

Motivational framing often involves not just threatening *severity* but also *righteousness and capability*. The Finnish government asserted its capability to handle the situation while calling for vigilance. Orpo assured that authorities “*have the situation under control*” even as he acknowledged the disruption. This balance between alarm and assurance was important to maintain public order and confidence. The Border Guard and police were visibly reinforced at checkpoints, and images of new fences and rapid responses were publicized, sending the message that Finland is proactive and prepared.

In essence, the motivational frame told a story of a nation under covert attack but unified, justified, and ready to respond. By framing the closures and strict border policies as regrettable but essential actions for the greater good of security, Finnish leaders sought to ensure public acceptance of measures that under normal conditions would be controversial (such as denying entry to asylum seekers in Arctic winter conditions). This framing seems to have largely succeeded, aided by Finland's high trust in government and the palpable fear of Russian aggression following the Ukraine war.

## **The Resonance of the Frames**

Rychnovská (2014) emphasises that the power of threat framing lies not merely in the articulation of threats but in the resonance such framings achieve within domestic and international audiences, institutional environments, and normative contexts. Resonance, in this sense, functions as the legitimising engine that transforms claims about security into actionable policies, ensuring that securitizing actors can implement extraordinary measures without triggering resistance. This section assesses how the diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational frames advanced by Poland and Finland during the respective Belarus and Russia hybrid migration attacks resonated within their political, institutional, and societal contexts, enabling the effective securitisation of migration as a hybrid threat.

### **Poland: Resonance through Established Securitisation Patterns**

Poland's diagnostic framing of the Belarusian border crisis as a hybrid attack orchestrated by the Lukashenko regime found strong resonance within domestic political discourse, largely due to Poland's prior securitisation patterns and historical distrust of its Eastern neighbours. The language of "hybrid war" and "state terrorism" invoked by Prime Minister Morawiecki and President Duda seamlessly aligned with the Polish public's heightened security sensitivities, particularly in the post-Crimea geopolitical environment. The resonance was amplified by a media (often right wing) ecosystem that reinforced the narrative of a hostile external actor threatening national sovereignty.

The prognostic frame, which included illegal pushbacks, emergency measures, and the construction of border barriers, resonated within an institutional context marked by centralised

executive power and broad support from the ruling PiS party, while EU-level contestation remained muted due to the hybrid framing aligning migration management with broader EU security concerns. Poland leveraged the motivational frame emphasising the moral duty to defend Europe and civilisation to deepen resonance, ensuring societal and institutional support while marginalising human rights critiques. This framing coherence enabled Poland to transform exceptional measures into accepted policy under the umbrella of a collective European defence narrative.

## **Finland: Resonance through Strategic Alignment with EU-NATO Security Paradigms**

In Finland, the diagnostic framing of migration from Russia as a hybrid operation engineered by Russia also achieved significant resonance, but through Finland's tradition of resilience discourse and its geopolitical position as a recently acceded NATO member. PM Orpo's statements identifying the migrant influx as "*systematic and organised action by the Russian authorities*" found fertile ground in a society conditioned to view Russia as a persistent security threat. The "hybrid threat" narrative aligned seamlessly with Finland's national preparedness culture and security doctrines, enhancing resonance among policymakers and the public.

Finland's prognostic framing, operationalised through border closures, pushback legislation, and the construction of border barriers, resonated strongly within institutional frameworks, justified by national security laws amended in the wake of NATO accession and hybrid threat prioritisation. The motivational frame, rooted in sovereign defence and European solidarity, further enhanced resonance, allowing Finland to frame its actions not as a rejection of humanitarian obligations but as contributions to the collective security of the EU and NATO. The active support from Frontex and funding from the European Commission confirmed that Finland's securitisation moves aligned with EU strategic priorities, minimising legal contestation while maximising legitimacy.

## **Comparative Resonance Patterns**

Applying Rychnovská's framework reveals that both cases exemplify how frames gain power when they resonate across multiple levels: societal belief systems, institutional structures, and external normative orders. In Poland, resonance was driven by historical threat perceptions, a

securitised migration discourse, and a political environment open to exceptionalism under nationalist narratives. In Finland, resonance was secured through alignment with EU-NATO security frameworks, public trust in state institutions, and deeply embedded societal understandings of Russian hybrid threats.

In both contexts, the diagnostic frame (hybrid aggression), prognostic frame (exceptional defensive measures), and motivational frame (moral duty and collective defence) did not merely coexist but actively reinforced one another, producing a spiral of resonance (Rychnovská, 2014) where each framing layer reinforced public, institutional, and external support for exceptional measures. This spiral was crucial in transforming what could have remained contested political claims into broadly accepted policies, demonstrating the centrality of resonance for the effectiveness of threat framing in hybrid migration crises.

## V. Interpretation of Findings

This chapter draws together the findings of the empirical analysis and situates them within the broader theoretical and scholarly debates outlined earlier. While the previous chapters provided a detailed examination of how Poland and Finland framed and responded to weaponised migration, the discussion now turns to answering the research questions, comparing both cases, unpacking their similarities and differences, and reflecting on the broader implications for EU migration governance and foreign policy.

### **Security Framing and Securitization Dynamics in Poland and Finland**

The purpose of the following section is to answer the research questions that this thesis aims to shed light on and tackle. When it comes to the first question; *How does the framing of forced migration as a security issue influence both the discourse and policy responses to threats in the EU political arena?* The aim was to explore how securitization processes shape political narratives, institutional practices, and the perceived legitimacy of extraordinary measures in migration governance.

Both the Poland-Belarus border crisis (2021) and the more recent Finland-Russia border concerns (2022–23) were narrated by political leaders primarily as security threats orchestrated by hostile neighbouring states, rather than as humanitarian events (with little effect from domestic opposition). In both cases, migrants were mainly framed not as individuals fleeing conflict or seeking asylum, but as instruments or “weapons” wielded by Belarus and Russia against Europe. This dominant *diagnostic framing* (identifying the cause of the problem as an intentional hybrid attack by an aggressor state) was remarkably similar in Poland and Finland. Nonetheless, in the case of Poland there was the added threat perception that the migrants themselves were a threat to national security due to the nature of where they came from.

Each country’s discourse converged on portraying the situation as an attack on national sovereignty and EU borders, which demanded an extraordinary response. By defining the crisis in this way, Polish and Finnish leaders build the foundation for securitizing moves: state of emergency declarations, militarized border deployments, accelerated border infrastructure, and legal changes

to enable pushbacks or suspend normal asylum processing. Importantly, both states' actors avoided focusing on the migrants themselves as genuine asylum seekers, which legitimized exceptional measures (even ones of questionable legality) under the premise of "defending Europe" from an aggressor. In sum, the same securitization mechanism was at work in both cases: a hostile-state threat frame created a rationale for bypassing ordinary norms in favour of "emergency" border security actions.

### **Divergence in the Construction of the Migrant Figure**

In the Polish case, the migrants themselves were frequently portrayed as direct threats. Political figures and right-wing media often dehumanized them, emphasising their cultural incompatibility, falsely linking them to terrorism (Nattrass, 2021), and perceiving them as an economic burden. This framing intensified societal fear and hostility, presenting the migrant as a dangerous "other" that needed to be deterred. As a result, the securitization discourse did not only legitimise harsh border enforcement but also dehumanised those caught up in Belarus's coercive strategy. The resonance of this frame was strong, particularly in a domestic context where migration scepticism was already high since the 2015 crisis (Konopka, 2019), allowing the government to justify both the physical fortification of the border and widespread pushbacks, despite their illegality under EU and international law.

By contrast, in the Finnish case, political discourse largely avoided demonising the migrants themselves. Instead, the emphasis rested on Russia's deliberate act of aggression. The government framed the phenomenon as an orchestrated hybrid attack by Russia, a continuation of broader geopolitical tensions following the war in Ukraine and Finland's NATO accession. Migrants were described more as instruments or pawns rather than existential threats in their own right. This difference meant that securitization was channelled into portraying Russia as the enemy, while the individuals at the border were discussed in more neutral and even passive terms.

### **Implications for Policy Responses**

This divergence in how migrants are framed helps explain why Poland legitimised practices that openly contravened human rights standards, including systematic pushbacks and militarisation of the border zone with little international oversight which even led to a recent adoption of a bill that allows border police to use firearms against migrants attempting to cross the border (Amnesty

International, 2024). By framing migrants as the immediate danger, authorities could normalise extraordinary practices under the guise of protecting “national survival.” Finland, however, justified its closure of the eastern border and suspension of asylum processing on the grounds of Russian state aggression. Although this too contravened EU asylum law, the justification relied on the logic of state security rather than individualised migrant threat. Thus, Finland’s securitization discourse -while restrictive in practice- preserved a rhetorical distance from the racialised, demonising narratives marked in Poland.

The contrast illustrates how the target of securitization -whether the migrant body itself or the hostile state orchestrating movement- shapes both public perception and the legitimacy of extraordinary policy measures. Poland’s approach entrenched societal hostility towards migrants and allowed for long-term normalisation of pushbacks. Finland’s discourse, while equally securitising, leaves more space for migrants to be seen as victims of geopolitical manoeuvring rather than as threats themselves. In theoretical terms, this supports Rychnovská’s argument that the resonance of security frames depends on their compatibility with broader master frames: in Poland, this was the “migrant as danger” frame rooted in domestic politics, while in Finland it was the “Russia as aggressor” frame resonating with a wider geopolitical security narrative.

### **A common diagnostic frame**

Across both cases, political and media discourse united around the language of “*hybrid warfare*” and “*instrumentalization of migration*.” Polish officials, explicitly labelled it a “hybrid attack” orchestrated by the Lukashenko regime. This diagnostic frame identified the source of the threat as Belarus (and behind it, allegedly Russia), accusing them of cynically using human beings as tools to destabilize the EU. In a similar vein, Finnish authorities and experts, anticipating that Russia might attempt a similar tactic on Finland’s eastern border, adopted the same terminology, speaking of “*instrumentalized migration*” and “*hybrid influence*” thereby likewise defining the situation as one of state-aggression rather than a typical migration issue.

According to securitization theory, such framing is a strategic practice: labelling something as a security threat (e.g. calling irregular migration a “dangerous hybrid attack”) constitutes it as an existential issue and elevates it above normal politics. In both Poland and Finland, by saying the word “attack” and invoking sovereignty, leaders effectively performed a speech act of securitization (Wæver 1995) that transformed a migration event into a security emergency.

It is also important to note that even though the actions of both Russia and Belarus were in fact a form of a hybrid threat, when it comes to similar cases in the recent history of the EU, not every action taken by neighbouring EU countries that is similar in nature (i.e. threatening or actually sending an influx of migrants to EU borders in exchange for economic and political concessions, or a retaliation against sanctions or political actions) was described in such a way by domestic and EU actors. This will be further discussed in this chapter.

Notably, migrants were depicted as passive “ammunition” rather than people with agency or rights. Polish President Andrzej Duda and Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki, for example, emphasized that Belarus was deliberately engineering the influx as part of a “hybrid war” against Poland and the EU. The migrants themselves were mostly spoken of in abstract or collective terms (even dehumanized as a faceless mass), if not outright described as potential security risks or infiltrators. Similarly, Finnish officials in 2022 discussed the possibility of Russia “sending refugees as a weapon” in retaliation to Finland’s NATO ambitions, again spotlighting the intentions of the hostile state rather than the plight of any people on the move. This represents a conscious framing choice: by attributing blame squarely to a state adversary, the discourse shaped public perception to see an attack on the nation/Europe rather than a refugee crisis. According to the threat-framing framework of Rychnovská (2014), this is a classic diagnostic frame: it defines what the threat is and who is responsible. Here, the threat was “Belarusian/Russian hybrid warfare” and the responsible party was Belarus/Russia (often personalized to the Lukashenko or Putin regime).

This shared diagnostic frame carried implicit answers to the questions of “security for whom?” and “threat to what?”: the referent object was national security and European border integrity, not the migrants’ security. In securitization terms, the referent object was the state/EU, portrayed as under attack. Consequently, the moral and practical focus shifted away from humanitarian obligations (toward the migrants) to emergency defence of the polity. Both Poland and Finland consistently stressed the need to “protect our border” and “defend Europe”, implying that leniency or normal asylum processing would play into the enemy’s hands. By framing the scenario as one of geopolitical conflict rather than migration, these actors set the stage for extraordinary measures with strong public support.

## How Securitization Evolved

After defining the crisis as a hostile security threat (diagnosis), Polish and Finnish actors moved to propose and implement exceptional counter-measures. This corresponds to the *prognostic framing* in Rychnovská's adaptation of framing theory: having identified the problem ("hybrid attack"), leaders then promoted specific solutions focused on security instruments. In Poland, the government swiftly declared a state of emergency in the border regions in fall 2021, barring journalists and aid organizations from the immediate border zone. Heavily armed border guards and army units were deployed to repel incursions. The construction of a permanent border fence along the Belarus frontier was expedited. New legislation was passed to *legalize pushbacks* and to suspend the right to seek asylum for those entering irregularly, mandating that they be turned back to Belarus or kept in temporary camps (Forti, 2023).

Furthermore, recent scholarship emphasises that the Schengen system is undergoing a structural transformation where militarisation is no longer exceptional but routine (Stępką & Mazurkiewicz, 2024). The proliferation of border walls and fences across the EU from 0 in the early 2000s to 19 by 2022, spanning over 2,000 km illustrates how physical and symbolic fortifications have become the "new normal" of European border governance. In this context, Poland's crisis management at the Belarusian border was not an anomaly but part of an ongoing Schengen-wide shift toward militarised crisis response. The introduction of intra-Schengen controls on the Polish-German and Polish-Lithuanian borders further underscores how militarisation is being mainstreamed within the EU, eroding the founding ideal of free movement.

Each of these steps was presented as a necessary "shield" against the enemy's hybrid warfare. Finland, facing only small numbers of "test" entries but fearing worse, likewise undertook legal and logistical preparations: it amended its Border Guard Act to enable closing entire border crossing points in an emergency (essentially *suspending normal asylum intake* at those points), and initiated plans to build its own barbed-wire fence on the most vulnerable stretches of the long Finnish-Russian border. Finnish leaders framed these pre-emptive measures as prudent national security precautions in light of Russia's known tactics and the war in Ukraine, again, extraordinary steps justified by an extraordinary threat.

The motivational frame used to justify these measures was strikingly similar in both cases: leaders appealed to defence of sovereignty, public safety, and European solidarity. For example, Polish

officials argued that protecting Poland's frontier was essential to protect the entire EU from a hostile incursion, often referencing historical fears ("we must not let Europe be blackmailed by Minsk/Moscow again"). This call-to-action/motivational frame provided the moral warrant: it cast the governments' harsh responses as not only necessary but right and as a matter of patriotism and continental unity.

In Finland, the motivational rhetoric cantered on national resilience and not falling behind on dealing with threats especially after Russia's aggression in Ukraine and given that the situation on the Polish border had already happened. Finnish Interior Ministry statements stressed that defending the border against hybrid threats was defending the Finnish people and the EU's values of order and stability. Across both cases, the protective rhetoric deliberately linked the security measures to higher ethical values thereby enhancing public acceptance. This reflects what securitization scholars call "audience resonance." A securitizing move only succeeds if the relevant audience (the public, other political actors, EU partners) accepts the claim of existential threat and the need for drastic action.

In Poland and Finland, the resonance of the hybrid war narrative was high: domestic publics, already wary of Russia and supportive of strong borders, largely agreed that unusual measures were justified. The European Union institutions, too, showed notable sympathy, as evidenced by official EU statements echoing the "hybrid attack" frame and offering solidarity.

Crucially, this sequence -from threat construction to emergency action- illustrates the logic of securitization as theorized by the Copenhagen School, since by labelling migration as an existential security threat, political actors created a permission structure for "extraordinary measures" that would be unacceptable under normal politics. In securitization terms, the Polish and Finnish governments effectively said if the issue was not addressed immediately as a hybrid attack, Finnish sovereignty and national security will be at risk, thus justifying measures that would not be normally taken such as border closure and militarization. Once this framing took hold, options that violate usual norms (e.g. denying entry to asylum seekers, deploying troops internally) became not only thinkable but broadly supported. A clear indicator of this shift is that domestic opposition and EU criticism remained relatively muted during the crises. While some NGOs and European Parliament members protested the humanitarian violations at the Poland-Belarus border, their voices were drowned out by the dominant security narrative. Overall,

both cases demonstrate how securitizing migration through a state-threat lens leads to a spiral of reinforced security responses: initial framing sparks tougher measures, which in turn further entrench the discourse of “us vs. them” and make the security frame more entrenched for future issues.

Additionally, recent scholarship has stressed that securitization should not be understood as a binary phenomenon that either “succeeds” or “fails,” but rather as a multidimensional process unfolding along a continuum of discursive and practical effects. Karyotis, Paterson and Judge (2025) propose that success can be assessed across three dimensions: the dominance of security-oriented discourse and measures, the implications for the physical and ontological security of both referent objects and referent subjects, and the consequences for (de)securitizing agents. This framework helps explain why the Polish and Finnish cases cannot be reduced to instances of straightforward securitization. In Poland, for example, securitizing speech acts clearly resonated, yet the violent pushback practices they legitimized simultaneously undermined the physical security of migrants and eroded the normative credibility of the state, placing outcomes in the realm of “conflicted success.” In Finland, by contrast, legislative reforms and pre-emptive border measures achieved broad political support, but their preventive nature reveals a “latent securitization” where discourse has outpaced the actual implementation of extraordinary measures. Applying this lens underscores that securitization is not a fixed endpoint but an iterative process whose “success” must be judged relationally, by examining both its immediate policy effects and its wider social and normative consequences.

## **Explanations for Divergence in Response to the Threat**

Having established the common securitization pattern, this section will be addressing key similarities and differences between the cases of Poland and Finland, what accounts for them and how they both affected the response from the EU and will likely impact similar situations in the future.

When it comes to the parallels, both governments endorsed the use of migrants as a weapon narrative and prioritized security of the state over humanitarian concerns which goes in line with the securitization rhetoric that was embraced.

The Polish and Finnish responses also demonstrate that securitization is rarely static or confined to a single episode. Instead, it follows a spiralling logic in which discursive framings, legal measures, and security practices continuously reinforce one another. As Bello (2022) argues, once migration is articulated as a threat, it triggers further rounds of securitization by legitimizing restrictive measures that themselves strengthen perceptions of danger. Poland exemplifies an upward spiral: political rhetoric that framed migrants as “weapons” was followed by aggressive pushbacks and, eventually, legislation authorizing the use of firearms at the border. Each step normalized and accelerated the next. Finland, though more restrained, still displayed the spiral dynamic; anticipatory measures such as barrier construction and legal reforms pre-emptively reinforced the notion that migration flows are inherently security risks. In both cases, the spiralling process shrank the political space for humanitarian approaches and entrenched security as the default lens through which mobility was understood.

Furthermore, the role of the aggressor/attacking state was central. Belarus in facilitating migrant flows to Poland, and Russia perceived as capable of threatening Finland, which in turn anchored the framing on an external enemy. This commonality can be explained by the geopolitical and historical context of both states since both Poland and Finland share a history of tense relations with Russia/Soviet Union with Finland being treated by Russia as part of its “natural sphere of influence” (Kaczmarek, 2020) for decades, and in 2021–2024 both were on the frontlines of a broader confrontation between the EU and Russia. Thus, their political cultures were primed to interpret sudden migrant arrivals not as random events but as “hybrid operations” by a strategic foe, fitting into a larger threat narrative. The literature on threat perception supports this since when an issue can be linked to a known adversary or historical rivalry, securitizing frames find more fertile ground.

Nonetheless, key notable differences in how the threat was managed and unfolded were observed in both cases. First, the scale and immediacy of the threat. Poland’s crisis in 2021 was acute, thousands of migrants were physically at the border in a short time frame, with violent clashes at times. Finland’s situation, by contrast, was largely anticipatory, since there were reports of only a few hundred asylum seekers coming via Russia in 2022, and no chaotic mass on the border. This meant Poland’s securitization was reactive under duress, whereas Finland’s was more proactive and hypothetical to some extent. The Polish government operated under real-time

pressure, declaring emergency measures as migrants camped in the border zone, whereas Finnish authorities had the opportunity to conduct legislative debates about possible future contingencies, and to garner international support. This difference in context explains why Poland's discourse was more heated and combative (with daily talk of an "ongoing attack"), while Finland's, though still framed as security-first, remained somewhat more measured and bureaucratic (focused on readiness and laws).

Second, the domestic political context in Poland in 2021 was governed by PiS, a right-populist party known for its hardline stance on immigration and frequent conflicts with EU institutions. Securitizing migration fitted neatly into its broader narrative of defending Poland's sovereignty against both Eastern aggression and what it saw as Western (EU) liberalism. Finland in 2022–23, on the other hand, had a centrist/centre-left government for much of that period (with a strong legalist tradition), and then a centre-right coalition including a nationalist party after 2023. Finnish discourse on border security was bipartisan, but the government generally balanced its language by affirming commitment to international law even as it tightened. Thus, one could argue Poland's handling was more overtly militarized and unilateral, whereas Finland showed a greater willingness to work within EU frameworks. These nuances are of degree, however; fundamentally both countries shifted policy in a restrictive direction.

## **How Securitization Leads to Erosion of Normative Constraints**

One of the most consequential aspects of these cases is how securitization discourse opened the door to practices that challenge legal and ethical norms, notably the *illegal pushbacks* of migrants. In a normal situation, pushing back asylum seekers at the border (preventing them from applying for protection) and using the army internally would be seen as extreme and likely unlawful. Yet, in both Poland and Finland's contexts, such measures were not only implemented (or planned) but also justified to domestic and EU audiences as necessary and legitimate. This section discusses how framing the crisis as "*defence against an aggression*" allowed states to override usual constraints and examines the implications for rule of law and European values.

The Polish and Finnish responses to "weaponized migration" also reflect broader EU patterns that Huysmans identified two decades earlier (Huysmans, 2000). By privileging the free movement of EU citizens while tightening controls on third-country nationals, the Union institutionalized a

hierarchy of belonging that indirectly sustains exclusionary practices. This structural tendency reinforces national securitization moves, such as Poland's pushback laws or Finland's barrier legislation, by embedding them in a European discourse where migration is consistently rendered a matter of internal security and societal protection. The result is a paradox in which the EU simultaneously presents itself as a normative power upholding human rights while its migration regime legitimizes the treatment of asylum seekers as potential risks rather than as rights-bearing individuals.

### **Migrants as “Threats” Rather than Persons**

As mentioned earlier, by emphasizing instrumentalization over the people instrumentalized, Polish and Finnish authorities effectively de-personalized the migrants involved. Officials spoke about “weaponized migration” or a “hybrid operation” in abstract terms, seldom acknowledging the individual stories of those migrants stuck at the border (many of whom were refugees from Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan, etc.). This dehumanizing aspect of the security frame has direct consequences: it becomes easier to justify actions that would otherwise seem inhumane. As one analysis of the situation in Poland and the Baltics pointed out, that when people on the move are cast as a security threat, it “legitimises the disregard for their rights” (Forti, 2023). Indeed, at the Polish-Belarus border, the Polish government's stance was that anyone crossing irregularly at that juncture was part of the attack and thus could be treated as an intruder rather than as an asylum seeker. Interior Minister Mariusz Kamiński explicitly stated that Poland would not allow itself to be “overrun” by Lukashenko's trickle of migrants, implying a kind of defensive siege mentality. The political consequences of this threat-based framing are visible in a series of laws and policies that prioritize force and deterrence over protection. One of the clearest examples came in July 2024, when parliament approved legislation allowing soldiers, border guards, and police officers to use firearms “preventively” or in self-defense against anyone trying to cross the border irregularly. The law sparked strong criticism inside and outside Poland, with rights groups warning that it could normalize violence against asylum seekers and put Poland in breach of international refugee law (Panara, 2024). As a result, Polish border guards, following new orders, pushed back people immediately into Belarus, sometimes forcing them into the forest and refusing to acknowledge their asylum requests (Forti, 2023).

Finland's case did not reach the same flashpoints, but similar principles were at play in planning for worst-case scenarios. Finnish officials discussed the possibility of suspending normal asylum intake if Russia were to send large numbers of migrants; essentially, Finland contemplated passing emergency laws that would allow it to turn away people at the border en masse, something normally forbidden by both EU law and the 1951 Refugee Convention. This was justified by invoking an article of the EU's Schengen Borders Code that was being revised to include allowances for instrumentalization cases. In late 2021, the European Commission in fact proposed an emergency regulation (eventually adopted as a temporary measure) to let Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia derogate from certain asylum procedures in response to Belarus, a move criticized by the UN Refugee Agency for undermining asylum rights. That proposal introduced the notion that when a neighbouring state is "actively encouraging or facilitating irregular migration" (the EU's definition of instrumentalization), the usual rules can be loosened. Finland, observing this trend, updated its own laws in 2022 to mirror these flexibilities, ensuring it could declare an emergency and centralize asylum applications to one checkpoint or pause them if needed for "national security." In doing so, Finland explicitly cited European solidarity and the need to not be vulnerable to hybrid threats as justification – indicating that securitization at the EU level provided political cover for national legal changes.

What explains the tolerance for such rule-of-law contradictions at the European level? Part of the answer lies in the resonance of the security frame among EU audiences. By late 2021, as noted, EU leaders themselves were adopting the language of "*hybrid attack*". The High Representative of the EU, Josep Borrell, warned that we are seeing war not by bombs but by tricks like migrant flows, blurring the line between war and peace (Borrell, 2021). Ursula von der Leyen called out Belarus's "hostile instrumentalization" and vowed solidarity with Poland and the Baltics (Ursula von der Leyen, 2021). Such statements at the EU level signalled that Brussels was politically aligned with the securitizing actors. Consequently, when Poland engaged in pushbacks or Latvia passed an emergency asylum law, the European Commission's response was muted.

Normally, the Commission might launch an infringement procedure if a member state violates EU asylum law or fundamental rights. In these cases, no immediate infringement actions were taken on pushbacks (a stark contrast to past criticisms Poland faced on rule-of-law issues unrelated to migration). Which shows that maintaining a united front against Belarus/Russia was prioritized

over strict legal accountability. EU officials did occasionally voice that “fundamental values will continue to guide our actions... regarding the protection of migrants’ human rights” (Council of the European Union, 2021), but in practice the emphasis was on *supporting the member states under pressure*. The Commission also swiftly released funding for border management to these states, including financing for border infrastructure (though formally it avoided funding the actual wall construction).

In essence, securitization discourse created a political environment where *exceptional measures were normalized*. The ethical tension -that Europe was betraying its commitment to human rights at the borders- was largely disregarded in face of the compelling narrative of “saving Europe from attack.” This reflects what theorists of securitization mean by “*the logic of exceptionality*”: once an issue is securitized, actions framed as urgent defences do not face the usual scrutiny.

These findings echo those of other scholars who warn that Europe’s response to these “instrumentalization” incidents risks undermining the very norms it purports to defend. Nonetheless, a precedent has been set: by tolerating pushbacks in 2021, the EU signalled that when faced with a hostile-induced migration, border states can act outside the usual legal framework.

The spiral of securitization can thus be seen in a normative light: once one state breaks a norm due to “security reasons,” others follow suit, and gradually the exception becomes standard practice. What began as Poland’s controversial pushback policy, initially criticized by some in Europe, has morphed into an accepted part of the EU’s toolkit for certain scenarios (now euphemistically termed “appropriate measures in case of instrumentalization”). This raises profound questions about the future of EU asylum law and the balance between security and rights. The Poland and Finland cases unfortunately suggest that when faced with even a relatively small-scale threat framed as a geopolitical attack, the EU collective will face actions that flout its own values, as long as those actions promise to restore a sense of control.

### **Militarization of Border Governance**

The Finnish response to the sudden influx of asylum seekers at the Russian border demonstrates similar dynamics of militarisation as those seen in Poland, albeit articulated through a different political culture. Finnish officials explicitly framed the phenomenon as a *hybrid threat*, situating migration within the broader security environment shaped by Russia’s aggressive posture in

Eastern Europe. This framing legitimised the adoption of extraordinary measures, including the deployment of the Finnish Border Guard and cooperation with the Defence Forces to fortify border crossings. The closure of multiple checkpoints and the introduction of emergency legislation echoed the Polish government's securitisation playbook, signalling how military and security logics are becoming mainstreamed in European border governance.

While Finland historically maintained a cautious and humanitarian orientation in migration policy, the 2023–2024 border crisis accelerated its shift toward a militarised paradigm. The decision to suspend asylum reception at certain crossing points and to reinforce borders with physical barriers reflects the same “Fortress Europe” logic identified in the Polish-Belarusian context. Moreover, the Finnish case illustrates the spillover of militarisation into intra-Schengen relations: debates on temporary controls at the Finnish-Swedish and Finnish-Norwegian borders mirror Poland's reintroduction of controls with Germany and Lithuania. This trend suggests that militarised border crisis management is not confined to the EU's external frontiers but is becoming institutionalised within Schengen itself.

Taken together, the Polish and Finnish cases show how weaponised migration, when framed as an existential or hybrid threat, produces convergent outcomes across diverse national contexts: the normalisation of military tools, emergency legislation, and intra-Schengen restrictions. This convergence underlines the broader European trajectory towards the mainstreaming of militarisation in migration governance, a development that challenges the founding principles of free movement and civilian-led border management.

### **Alternative Explanations**

It is important to acknowledge other factors and potential alternative explanations for the outcomes observed, beyond discourse and framing. For instance, one might argue that simply the volume of migrants or the *logistical challenge* largely determines the harshness of a response. Poland and its neighbours were dealing with unprecedented irregular entries in areas that previously saw virtually none; their administrative capacity to process asylum claims was overwhelmed, which could justify emergency measures on practical grounds. There is truth to capacity issues, but this alone does not explain the *narrative shift* capacity strain could have been met with an emergency

humanitarian response similar to the case of Ukrainian refugees (surge tents, EU asylum support teams) rather than military deployment.

Another factor is domestic politics and ideology. As noted, Poland's government had ideological incentives to securitize (anti-immigrant, nationalist platform), and even without Belarus's scheme might have clamped down on any irregular entry. Conversely, unlike Poland (which had several confrontations with the EU regarding rule-of-law violations) Finland historically prided itself on rule-of-law. This could probably mean that Finnish officials calculated that demonstrating resolve (through law changes and border defence plans) would mean they never actually have to do pushbacks. This suggests a rationalist interpretation: securitization as strategic signalling to Minsk/Moscow. That is a valid complementary explanation for why states securitize: not only to gain domestic support, but to influence the behaviour of the threatening state. In Poland's case, showing it would not budge may have helped convince Belarus that the ploy wouldn't succeed in extracting concessions. However, this still operates via the securitization logic (had Poland not convinced EU partners it was a serious security issue, Belarus might have succeeded in causing division).

Finally, one cannot ignore the role of EU institutions and law evolution. Some changes might have occurred even without the intense rhetoric, for example, the Commission was already looking to reform asylum rules since 2020 under the New Pact on Migration, and the crises simply accelerated some policies like stricter border surveillance. Yet, the framing of these reforms (explicitly mentioning "instrumentalization by third countries") shows that the discourse did shape the content of policy. It's also possible that fear of migrant influxes among European publics – after the political fallout of 2015 – meant that any leader would now respond firmly to avoid domestic backlash. Public opinion indeed shifted post-2015 in many countries to favour more restrictive migration policies. Nonetheless, public opinion itself is greatly influenced by how political elites talk about an issue. In the cases discussed, elites mostly aggressively framed the situation as war-like, which almost certainly hardened public attitudes further, creating a feedback loop.

Viewed through Greenhill's framework, the Belarusian use of migrants against Poland leaned heavily on *capacity swamping*. The sudden and concentrated flows at the border in 2021 were designed to physically overwhelm border infrastructures and emergency reception systems. This was particularly potent because Poland simultaneously closed access for humanitarian actors and

journalists, amplifying the perception of a chaotic, unmanageable crisis. By contrast, the Finnish case illustrates *political agitating*: Russia’s orchestration of asylum-seeker flows at northern border posts was not about sheer numbers but about exploiting Finland’s domestic debates over migration, asylum obligations, and security policy. By framing the inflows as part of “hybrid warfare,” Finnish leaders themselves reinforced the political dilemma, caught between international commitments to protect asylum seekers and domestic demands for stronger border controls. Both cases thus demonstrate Greenhill’s insight that coercive engineered migration often succeeds not because of the objective scale of inflows, but because of how they interact with existing vulnerabilities, whether infrastructural capacity, as in Poland, or political polarization, as in Finland (Greenhill, 2022).

In summary, while factors like numbers, capacity, politics, and public attitudes all matter, the framing lens helps connect these pieces. It shows how material factors were interpreted through a security narrative, and how political motives found expression in a frame that then guided policy. The discourse of hybrid threats provided a common narrative that aligned national interests with EU-wide action, allowed politicians to rally support, and perhaps even served as a deterrent signal externally. Alternative explanations without reference to discourse would struggle to explain, for example, why the same EU that in 2015 warned against “securitizing migration” (calling for humanitarian responsibility) by 2021 was effectively promoting the establishment of strict borders. The intervening variable based on the analysis and what was discussed above was the ascendance of a new threat frame.

## **Divergence in the EU’s normative role**

When it comes to the role of the EU as a normative power and as the guardian of the treaties. A significant divergence is observed in terms of reactions towards the use of forced migration. This section will help answer the second and third research questions that are: *What explains the EU’s divergent response towards weaponized migration?* And in a similar vein *Why the EU showed contradictions to its normative role of upholding rule of law in face of illegal pushbacks towards migrants?*

Namely the 2015–2016 migrant crisis and the EU-Türkiye cooperation on the one hand. And on the other hand, the EU’s reaction to Belarus (and the similar potential threat from Russia) in 2021–

22 was much more confrontational and security-driven than its reaction to the large refugee influx via Türkiye in 2015–16, which was handled through diplomacy and burden-sharing (the EU-Türkiye Statement of 2016) rather than declaring Türkiye an enemy. Understanding why requires looking at how threat framing and geopolitical relationships differed.

### **Adversary framing vs. partner framing**

In 2015, Türkiye was framed by EU leaders as a necessary partner in managing migration. The discourse acknowledged a humanitarian refugee crisis from the Syrian war, and Türkiye's role was seen as a gatekeeper who could help stem the flow in exchange for EU support. In stark contrast, Belarus in 2021 was framed unequivocally as a hostile perpetrator of a hybrid attack, coupled by the deteriorating human rights situation in the country and the elections meddling. Thus, rather than seeking cooperation, the EU moved to punish Belarus (with sanctions) and to fortify against it. Russia, the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and later on the full-scale invasion of Ukraine and adversarial stance, likewise was not a partner to engage on migration but a potential threat to deter. This difference in framing (a cooperative problem-solving frame in 2016 vs. a conflict/war frame in 2021) fundamentally shaped the responses. A partner frame opened the door to a *bargain* (the EU-Türkiye deal exchanging financial aid and political concessions for Türkiye's help in stopping migrants), whereas an adversary frame demanded a *defensive stance* (offering no negotiations with Belarus, only sanctions and border reinforcement). In essence, when migrants were coming via a country considered a partner (or at least not an open adversary), the EU response emphasized management and humanitarian rhetoric; when migrants were sent by a foe, the response switched to containment and militarized rhetoric.

### **Strategic interdependence and available tools**

In the case of Türkiye, the EU had leverage and incentives to offer funding for refugee care, prospects of visa liberalization, etc. Both sides had reasons to cooperate. Conversely, in the Belarus/Russia case, there was no appetite for engagement with the hostile regimes. The only tools available were coercive or protective: sanctions on Belarus, diplomatic pressure on origin countries to not facilitate migrants' travel, and physical barriers. In essence, the EU's toolkit differed. It could not ease the pressure from Lukashenko's regime which would have also led to a precedent in showing vulnerability towards these tactics, instead it opted to make Belarus's tactic fail by sheer defence. This helps explain why Poland and its neighbours got political backing from

the EU to take a hard line, whereas Greece and others in 2015 were encouraged to negotiate and find accommodation with Türkiye. Thus, the context of mutual interdependence (EU-Türkiye) versus zero-sum hostility (EU-Belarus/Russia) is key in understanding both cases.

The similarities between Poland's and Finland's securitized responses stem from the fact that both were dealing with (actual or potential) migration deliberately induced by hostile neighbours, activating a security paradigm. The differences both between Poland and Finland and between these cases and the 2015 episode can be explained by the specific threat frames (enemy vs partner), the strategic context, and the actors driving the narrative. When facing an "enemy-engineered" migration, the reflex was confrontation and fortification; when dealing with a partner or a more ambiguous situation, there was space for negotiation and sharing responsibility. These findings underscore a broader point which shows how threat construction is a powerful causal force. By altering how a situation is understood (crime vs war, migration management vs hybrid conflict), states managed to utilize different/unconventional policy options and constrain others. In the cases of Poland and Finland, the construction of Belarus/Russia as aggressors directly enabled hard security measures and largely ruled out compassionate or migrant-centric approaches.

In essence, reflecting on the broader implications, this study highlights a delicate dilemma for the EU. On one hand, member states must be able to respond to new types of coercion and protect their citizens; on the other hand, if Europe compromises too much on its values each time, its credibility and moral authority wane. The Poland and Finland cases are a warning that Europe's "security first" approach to migration can spiral, normalizing practices that were once unthinkable. Moving forward, a balance must be struck whereby *genuine security threats* are addressed without wholly sacrificing the rights of vulnerable people caught in the geopolitical crossfire. The discussion here, grounded in the empirical analysis and theoretical framework, aims to shed light on how that balance was lost in these episodes, and to inform future debates on ensuring that Europe's responses to hybrid threats do not themselves undermine the very principles of law and humanity that underpin European unity.

## VI. Conclusion

This thesis aimed to provide a better understanding of the phenomena that entails migrants or vulnerable populations being used as a tool or a weapon by states against other states that are mostly democratic in nature. Moreover, this thesis sheds light on the methods in which the EU and two of its member states that faced such threats of forced migration -Poland and Finland- have framed, contested, and responded to episodes of forced migration when leveraged as instruments of geopolitical coercion.

Centered on two research questions (1) how securitized framing influences discourse and policy within the EU, and (2) what explains the EU's varying responses to weaponized migration from Türkiye (2016) as compared to Belarus and Russia (2021–24) - the analysis anchored itself in the theoretical frameworks of securitization (Buzan & Wæver; Rychnovská), spiralling securitization (Bello, 2020), and Kelly Greenhill's concept of coercive engineered migration.

In both case studies, Poland and Finland, forced migration was portrayed as a humanitarian issue in a secondary manner, but rather was mainly framed as a security threat originated by an aggressor state, Belarus in Poland's case, and Russia in Finland's. This diagnostic frame established the basis for exceptional responses. Poland framed migrants as vectors of threat, enabling widespread pushbacks, border militarization, and emergency legislation. In contrast, Finland focused on Russian aggression rather than demonizing migrants, gearing its legal and securitizing responses toward external defense rather than domestic fear.

Through prognostic framing, both countries justified emergency measures: Poland swiftly deployed troops, enacted pushback-friendly laws, and erected physical barriers at its border. Finland amended its Border Guard Act to allow closure of entry points and began constructing border defenses. Motivational framing in both cases invoked preservation of sovereignty, European integrity, or national resilience which was aligned with securitizing narratives that legitimized extraordinary measures and subdued humanitarian or legal counter-narratives. This framing process reflects Rychnovská's securitization and the use of threat frames theory. In both cases, resonance was high within national and EU-level discourses, facilitating actions that bypassed normal legal norms.

The EU's response to Türkiye in 2016 contrasted sharply with its confrontational stance toward Belarus/Russia in 2021–22, and Greenhill's framework helps explain this divergence. In 2016, the EU faced a partner state that was weaponizing migration but had strong interdependencies with the EU - politically and economically. The result was a bargained response: the EU–Türkiye 2016 Statement, exchange mechanisms, and policy externalization. In contrast, Belarus and Russia were cast as aggressors; their behavior was not met with incentives but with deterrence instead it was met with sanctions, border hardening, and rule revisions. The difference lies in how the adversary was framed (partner vs. threat), which influenced which policy tools were available and politically viable. This dynamic underscores Greenhill's idea of coercive engineered migration, when states use migration deliberately for coercion, democracies may choose collaboration or confrontation depending on who the manipulator is and what bargaining power exists.

Despite the EU's foundational commitment to asylum rights and human protection, securitization allowed for widespread legal exceptions, often at the apparent expense of humanitarian norms. In Poland, pushbacks directly violated non-refoulement obligations. Finland's legal changes permitted border closures that risked denying access to asylum.

This outcome highlights the tension (or even contradiction) between normative ideals and securitizing logic. When migrants are framed as a security threat, legal norms become negotiable. The spiralling of securitization, as Bello (2020) theorized, reinforces prejudices and governance logics, normalizing exceptions until they become standard parts of policy frameworks.

Looking ahead, the cases of Poland and Finland suggest that weaponized migration is not an episodic tactic but a recurring feature of hybrid confrontation in Europe. The spiral of securitization they illustrate is unlikely to be reversed without deliberate political efforts to re-centre humanitarian and legal norms. Unless the EU develops consistent standards that reject both selective solidarity and the normalization of pushbacks, authoritarian actors will continue to exploit migration as a pressure tool. More fundamentally, the securitization of migration risks becoming entrenched as the default mode of governance at Europe's borders, eroding the Union's capacity to act as a normative power. Addressing this challenge requires not only legal reforms but also a reframing of migrants as persons rather than threats, a task that remains the most urgent and most neglected dimension of EU migration governance.

This thesis contributes to both scholarly debates and practical policy by showing how discursive framing, not just material circumstances has guided the EU's response to weaponized migration. Security narratives have the power to reshape legal norms, subdue rights discourse, and institutionalize exception. Yet, they can also obscure human suffering and compromise foundational values. The EU faces and will continue to face a critical crossroads: can it respond to hybrid threats with resilience without sacrificing its identity as a normative power? The answer will shape not just its migration future, but its democratic integrity and moral credibility.

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