BACKGROUND PAPER

NATO:
ASYMMETRIC WARFARE: THE BELARUS-EU BORDER CRISIS

1. Welcome Letter

Dear Delegates,

My name is Cameron Walls, and I will be your chair for GrunnMUN 2022. I am 21 years old, and I am in my second year of International and European Law at the University of Groningen. I am originally from Scotland, but I have lived in the Netherlands for the past 10 years. Although I participated in a number of MUN conferences in high school, GrunnMUN will be my first university conference, and this will be my first time in the NATO Council. The topic we will be discussing is not simple by any means – international blocs have come to the realisation that all-out warfare is an unrealistic option and as such have begun looking for alternative forms of warfare. Unfortunately, an example of this was the use of migrants by the Belarussian government as a weapon against the EU. The goal of our debate will be to determine a way in which to curtail this development in warfare before it becomes commonplace in the modern theatre of war.

My name is Selin İman and I am one of your chairs for the NATO council in GrunnMUN 2022. I am delighted to have this opportunity and am excited to meet you all, hopefully in person. I am a 20-year-old exchange student from Istanbul, Turkey and originally study political science at the University of Lille. I will be finishing my bachelors at the University of Groningen, where I study International Relations and International Organisation. After a little hiatus, it is exciting to be back doing MUN, nonetheless as a Chair. Our topic is very interesting and something we believe that we can brainstorm to find solutions to. The refugees trapped between Belarus and Poland is not a first, as we have seen a similar event back with Turkey and Greece and these are just a few examples of the changes in modern warfare. Cameron and I will try to make our Council as fruitful and enjoyable as we can, we hope you will enjoy it!

See you soon,

Your NATO Chairs!

2. Introduction

The migrant crisis in 2015/16 was a startling wake-up call for the world, as over a million people were willing to risk their lives, travelling thousands of kilometres in the hope of seeking asylum from the war and finding a better life for themselves and their children. Since then, there has been a near constant stream of migrants and refugees travelling from Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, and other parts of the Middle East to Western Europe despite receiving a less than warm welcome. Many of these migrants, who are unable to claim asylum seeker status, have had difficulty entering the European Union and as such, camps have started to accumulate in more eastern parts of Europe as they wait for their chance to travel further. Unfortunately, due to the rise of right-wing populists, who use xenophobic rhetoric as a means to inspire nationalist pride, fewer and fewer countries are accepting these migrants, and some have begun to use them for their own political ends. Sadly, this is what happened to the migrants who tried to cross the Poland-Belarus border.

Seeing an opportunity to both rid the country of the growing migrant population, and create another migrant crisis for the EU, the Belarussian Government began funnelling thousands of migrants towards the border with Poland, all the while encouraging more and more migrants to travel to Belarus with the promise of easy entry into the EU. Autocrat Alexander Lukashenko saw this as a perfect opportunity to retaliate against the EU for the increasing number of sanctions imposed upon Belarus for human rights abuses and the violent repression of civil society.[1] In effect, he was waging an asymmetric war against the EU.

Asymmetric warfare is defined as "unconventional strategies and tactics adopted by a force when the military capabilities of belligerent powers are not simply unequal but are so significantly different that they cannot make the same sort of attacks"[2] and it is becoming more and more common in the modern era. Gone are the days of all-out war between rivalling nations, instead smaller skirmishes and proxy wars are fought with tactics that we have never seen before. In the case of the Poland-Belarus border

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[1] 'Restrictive Measures Against Belarus' (*Consilium.europa.eu*) <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/sanctions/restrictive-measures-against-belarus/> accessed 9 January 2022.

[2] Ellen Sexton, 'Asymmetrical Warfare' (*Encyclopedia Britannica*) <https://www.britannica.com/topic/asymmetrical-warfare> accessed 9 January 2022.

crisis, the reports of Belarussian authorities transporting migrants to the border, giving them wire cutters, and breaking down barriers[3] are yet more proof of the orchestrated nature of this crisis.

Given the amount of media attention that this crisis received and the degree of panic it created amongst EU politicians and citizens alike, the likelihood of similar situations being manufactured in the future is incredibly high. Although we can be thankful that the death toll was relatively low, given the number of migrants involved and the conditions they were forced to live in, this will most likely not be the case in the future as more and more people begin desperately searching for a better life in Western Europe.

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[3] Richard Pérez-Peña, 'A Border Crisis: The Situation at The Belarus-Poland Border Is Unlike Recent Immigration Crises' (*Nytimes.com*, 2021) <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/11/17/briefing/poland-belarus-border-crisis.html> accessed 9 January 2022.
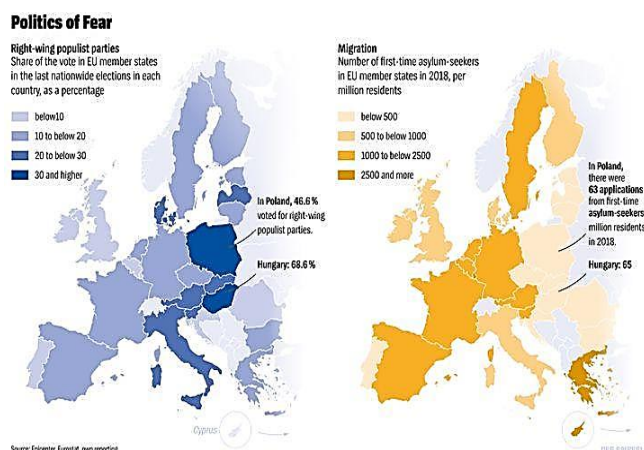
3. Problem specification

The specific problems that need to be addressed within in this debate, are how the international community (and more specifically NATO) can respond to the recent shifts towards asymmetric warfare, and how can we, as the international community, ensure that desperate migrants and refugees are not used as weapons in this new kind of warfare.

In essence, the lack of an international framework for the relocation and acceptance of economic migrants was one of the key causes of the Poland-Belarus border crisis. Unlike asylum seekers, there are few laws and conventions to protect these migrants from being used as pawns in an international power struggle. If we are to avoid similar crises from taking place in the future, a discussion must be had about the way in which we treat and deal with people migrating to Western Europe.

The role of social media as a conduit for fake news cannot be understated, especially given the degree of secrecy that surrounded this crisis. Both Poland and Lithuania barred access for journalists and human rights groups (most recently Doctors Without Borders[4]), whilst Belarus only offered limited access, meaning that social media was the only option for most people when it came to information about the situation. Because of this, migrants opened themselves up to the wealth of fake news shared on social media sites, the majority of which encouraged more and more migrants to travel to Belarus.[5]

A now common trend that rose in popularity during the 2015/16 migrant crisis is the right-wing xenophobic response to migrants which can been seen all across Western Europe and was especially prevalent in Poland's response to the migrant crisis on its border.[6] This attitude towards the migrants travelling to Europe is exacerbating an already complicated issue, by making it impossible to negotiate or debate the issue rationally. Instead, all of the focus gets shifted to the "loss of culture or national pride" that will occur if the migrants are allowed to enter the EU. In order for any sort of progress to be made, clearer heads must prevail, however this is apparently easier said than done.

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[4] Deutsche (www.dw.com), 'Medics Leave Poland-Belarus Border Without Reaching Migrants | DW | 06.01.2022' (*DW.COM*, 2021) <https://www.dw.com/en/medics-leave-poland-belarus-border-without-reaching-migrants/a-60353514> accessed 9 January 2022.

[5] 'Facebook's Role in Sustaining Lukashenko's Migration Offensive' (*Semantic-visions.com*, 2021) <https://semantic-visions.com/resource/facebooks-key-role-in-perpetuating-lukashenkos-migration-offensive> accessed 9 January 2022.

[6] '"Die Here or Go to Poland"' (*Human Rights Watch*, 2021) <https://www.hrw.org/report/2021/11/24/die-here-or-go-poland/belarus-and-polands-shared-responsibility-border-abuses> accessed 9 January 2022.

4. Questions a Resolution Must Answer

4.1. QARMA 1: Is the current definition of asymmetric warfare sufficient to describe the tactics and strategies employed?
   a) **What is the current definition?**
   b) **Does the definition cover the actions seen in conflict areas (specifically the Polish-Belarus Border Crisis)?**
   c) **Is it possible to remove any uncertainty regarding the current definition?**

Historical Background: The concept and definition of asymmetric warfare has been around for almost all of recorded history, and most likely existed before it as well. The most common form of asymmetric warfare seen is guerrilla warfare as one smaller side tries to use unorthodox and stealthy tactics in an effort to overcome a larger force. The cornerstone of guerrilla warfare is the ability to withstand the attack of the (normally) invading force, as by simply putting enough resistance and not losing the war the chance of repelling the invasion increases exponentially. Because of its success, few other forms of asymmetric warfare have been seen, especially not the use of migrants as a cultural and economic attack against an opponent.

Recent Developments: Since the advent of the nuclear bomb in WW2, and the formation of massive power blocs consisting of the most developed nations, asymmetrical warfare has become the norm, as nations cannot afford the cost of an all-out war with their enemies. Throughout the latter half of the 20th century, proxy wars were fought between enemies as a form of asymmetric warfare in an effort to achieve one's goals without the risk of one's own citizens. The use of economic migrants at the Poland-Belarus border can been seen as a form of proxy war, as the migrants are being used instead of Belarussian troops, however this is unlike any other proxy war fought.

Relevant Actors / Institutions: Because of the nature of asymmetric warfare, the UN, most developed nations, major power blocs (the EU), etc. are all relevant actors in the continued use and acceptance of asymmetric warfare although few if any of these actors have done anything to distinguish between conventional and asymmetric warfare. Due to the lack of a distinction, the current laws and regulations which govern conventional warfare also govern asymmetric warfare.

International Approaches: In recent years the UN has become wary of the use of asymmetric tactics, especially when they are used against the UN's own peacekeeping force.[7] The International Peace

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[7] 'Speakers In Security Council Sound Alarm Over Rapidly Growing 'Asymmetrical Threats' to United Nations Peace Operations | Meetings Coverage and Press Releases' (*Un.org*, 2016) <https://www.un.org/press/en/2016/sc12577.doc.htm> accessed 9 January 2022.

Institute released a report in 2016[8] which outlined the dangers of asymmetric tactics against UN peacekeeping forces, however there is little evidence to suggest that any action was taken at the international level.

4.2. QARMA 2: Can an international framework be created whereby asymmetric warfare, especially the use of migrants/refugees as weapons, is made illegal?

      a) **Which current international laws could apply?**

      b) **Which international bodies have the power to create/enforce such restrictions and regulations?**

      c) **Would this be an effective solution?**

Historical Background: Throughout history, asymmetric warfare has been distinguished from conventional warfare in almost every aspect, except for under the law. That is not because it is impossible to do so, but because we have taken it as a given that asymmetric warfare is a part of all wars. As for regulations regarding the rights of migrants, very few actually exist. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights guarantees the right to seek and enjoy asylum in article 14(1)[9] and the 1951 Convention and Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees[10] was one of the landmark documents which enshrined the rights allowed to refugees. However, in the case of the migrants in the Poland-Belarus Crisis, they are classified as economic migrants because they do not meet the legal standard to be considered refugees or asylum seekers.

Recent Developments: Recently, there has been movement towards an international framework for one aspect of asymmetrical warfare, cyber-warfare, in an effort to limit the economic damage done by cyber-attacks, however nothing is being done globally when it comes to the use of economic migrants. Following the border crisis, further sanctions were levelled at the Lukashenko regime in Belarus for the instrumentalisation of migrants by the EU. However, most actions taken by the EU have been to limit the possibility of economic migrants entering the EU, as opposed to solving the issue of their use.[11]

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[8] *UN Peace Operations in Violent and Asymmetric Threat Environments* (International Peace Institute 2022) <https://www.ipinst.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/1603_Peace-Ops-in-Asymmetric-Environments.pdf> accessed 9 January 2022.

[9] 'Universal Declaration of Human Rights | United Nations' (*United Nations*) <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights> accessed 9 January 2022.

[10] 'Convention And Protocol Relating to The Status of Refugees' (*UNHCR*) <https://www.unhcr.org/3b66c2aa10> accessed 9 January 2022.

[11] 'EU Actions to Counter State-Sponsored Instrumentalisation of Migrants at The EU External Border' (*European Commission - European Commission*, 2021) <https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/fs_21_6213> accessed 9 January 2022.

Relevant Actors / Institutions: The most relevant actors on this issue have to be the international humanitarian organisations which are fighting for the humanitarian rights of the migrants,[12] and by extension the international organisations responsible for enforcing the human rights of all people (i.e., the UN). However, no legal or political action has been brought at a global level in an effort to combat this problem.

International Approaches: There currently exists a framework to protect the human rights of the migrants, but nothing to prevent them from being weaponised. The EU has decided that the best approach is to shut its doors rather than deal with the issue, and this is something that must be addressed.

4.3. QARMA 3: Is there a means by which migrants/refugees can become more easily accepted and integrated into western Europe, in an effort to avoid similar crises in the future?

      a) **What are the prohibiting factors to the acceptance of migrants/refugees in western Europe?**

      b) **Is there any way in which to help integrate migrants/refugees into western European countries?**

Historical Background: Historically, migrants and refugees alike have faced horrendous amounts of racism and xenophobia, which have over time contributed to the less than welcoming culture which many migrants find upon arrival. In recent history, during the refugee crisis in 2015-16, there was a mixture of both support – a willingness to help and a near xenophobic rejection of the refugees seeking shelter from wars in both Syria and Afghanistan as well as Eritrea, Nigeria, and Somalia. Ultimately whilst many refugees were settled within the EU and Western Europe, this did not stop a number of countries from tightening the restrictions on both asylum seeking and non-asylum-seeking migrants.[13] Since then, there has been a rise of right-wing populism amongst the countries with the highest influx of refugees, with many right-wing leaders directly relating the loss of "culture and national identity" to said influx.

Recent Developments: Following the Poland-Belarus border crisis, the European Commission released a document outlining its approach to the instrumentalisation of migrants, and it appears as though the

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[12] Afshan Khan, 'UNICEF Deeply Concerned About Instrumentalization and Pushbacks of Children on Europe's Borders' (*Unicef.org*, 2021) <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/unicef-deeply-concerned-about-instrumentalization-and-pushbacks-children-europes> accessed 9 January 2022.

[13] '2015 In Review: How Europe Reacted to The Refugee Crisis - ICMPD' (*Icmpd.org*, 2015) <https://www.icmpd.org/blog/2015/2015-in-review-how-europe-reacted-to-the-refugee-crisis> accessed 9 January 2022.

Commission's goal is effectively to shut the border to the EU for all those who are seeking a better life.[14] Rather than seriously addressing the root causes or the perpetrators of the crisis, the common consensus is to restrict entry into the EU, and hope that it discourages countries from weaponising migrants in the future.

Relevant Actors / Institutions: When deciding the fate of migrants and how they are treated within nations, the most important actors are of course national governments, however as seen above both the EU and the UN also have large roles to play in the acceptance of migrants. Any and all organisations committed to the education of the general populace about the realities of being a refugee / migrant and the truth surrounding the loss of "culture and national identity" are relevant as well.

International Approaches: The current international approach seems to be to discourage migrants from travelling, and by doing so, making it impossible for them to be weaponised in any form of asymmetric warfare. There seems to be few if any other suggestions on the table at any level of government.

4.4. QARMA 4: What efforts could be made in order to increase rebuilding and development initiatives in the Middle East region, in order to reduce the need for economic migration?

    a) **Are there currently any programmes or initiatives in place which are aiming to achieve such a goal?**

    b) **What are the pitfalls of such programmes?**

    c) **Is this a realistic solution to the problem?**

Historical Background: The history of the Middle Eastern region is vast, however not all of it is required to understand the unstable nature of the region in the modern era. At the tail end of the 18th century, the UK became involved in the region as a colonial power, followed closely by France. Parts of the Middle East would remain under British and French control until after WW1. Following this, the region would remain under the influence of British colonialism until after WW2 when the USA took over as the leading powerbroker in the region. The systematic assassinations, rigged elections and covert ops carried out by the United States in an effort to place America-friendly politicians and leaders in control of the region, all led to the instability that we see today. Most notably the CIA's covert intervention during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan started the ball rolling on a seemingly never-ending stream of American involvements in the region. It is because of all of this that the infrastructure and economy needed to stop economic migration is nowhere to be seen in the Middle East.

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[14] 'EU Actions To Counter State-Sponsored Instrumentalisation Of Migrants At The EU External Border' (*European Commission - European Commission*, 2021) <https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/fs_21_6213> accessed 9 January 2022.

Recent Developments: The American withdrawal from Afghanistan in August last year has been identified as the catalyst for the migrant crisis on the Poland-Belarus border[15] as thousands of people fled Afghanistan to escape the Taliban's rule. Since the Taliban's removal from power in 2001,[16] many Afghans have enjoyed life without the religious fundamentalism that the group is so widely known for, and that is a life many of them wish to continue. However, given the haphazard nature of the American decision to withdraw from Afghanistan, despite it being the right decision, left many without any other option but to travel to Western Europe. There have been pleas for assistance from a number of countries across the region,[17] but the estimated cost is somewhere in the hundreds of billions of dollars.

Relevant Actors / Institutions: All of the colonial powers who have profited off of the region are relevant to the discussion of stabilisation and the building up of infrastructure and the economy. Along with them, a number of international organisations have expressed their willingness to assist in the rebuilding of the region[18].

International Approaches: The current international approach seems to be to leave the Middle East to sort out all the issues within the region. And whilst there is an argument to be made for this approach, it cannot possibly hope to succeed without significant financial investment. This sort of investment has already began to appear from international organisations, however it will need to be greatly increased if there is to be any improvement.

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[15] Richard Pérez-Peña, 'A Border Crisis: The Situation At The Belarus-Poland Border Is Unlike Recent Immigration Crises' (*Nytimes.com*, 2021) <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/11/17/briefing/poland-belarus-border-crisis.html> accessed 9 January 2022.

[16] Lindsay Maizland, 'What Is The Taliban?' (*Council on Foreign Relations*, 2021) <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/taliban-afghanistan> accessed 9 January 2022.

[17] Wesley Dockery, 'War-Torn Iraq Seeks Help From Abroad To Rebuild | DW | 13.02.2018' (*DW.COM*, 2018) <https://www.dw.com/en/war-torn-iraq-seeks-help-from-abroad-to-rebuild/a-42574769> accessed 9 January 2022.

[18] Wesley Dockery, 'War-Torn Iraq Seeks Help From Abroad To Rebuild | DW | 13.02.2018' (*DW.COM*, 2018) <https://www.dw.com/en/war-torn-iraq-seeks-help-from-abroad-to-rebuild/a-42574769> accessed 9 January 2022.

5. Sources for further research

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In the Standoff Between Belarus and Europe, Migrants Are Being Used as Human Weapons – Madeline Roache

"Nights are a particularly dangerous time for migrants stranded without shelter in the forest that lies on the border between Poland and Belarus.

Families who have made the treacherous journey from war-torn states including Afghanistan, Iraq and Yemen are forced to wrap themselves in damp sleeping bags and huddle together for warmth as temperatures plummet. Polish volunteers and activists deliver soup and clothes in the dark, avoiding using flashlights so as not to attract the attention of Polish border guards, who they say will force migrants back across the border if found…"

Council of the European Union: Restrictive measures against Belarus: https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/sanctions/restrictive-measures-against-belarus/

Latest updates on the sanctions against Belarus

"**Sanctions over continued human rights abuses and instrumentalisation of migrations**

On 2 December 2021, the Council adopted the **fifth package of sanctions** over continued **human rights abuses** and **the instrumentalisation of migrants**. In view of this situation, the Council imposed restrictive measures on an additional **17 individuals** and **11 entities**, targeting prominent members of the **judicial branch** and **propaganda outlets** that contribute to the continued repression of civil society, democratic opposition, independent media outlets and journalists, and **high-ranking political officials** and **companies** that have helped incite and organise illegal border crossing for political purposes…"

New York Times Article: https://www.nytimes.com/2021/11/17/briefing/poland-belarus-border-crisis.html

A Border Crisis – Richard Pérez-Peña

"A crowd of migrants trying to cross a border has come to seem appallingly familiar in recent years. We have seen masses of desperate people seek refuge in strange lands: Syrians escaping civil war, the Rohingya brutally driven from Myanmar, Afghans fleeing Taliban rule.

But the standoff at the border between Belarus and Poland, where thousands of migrants are camped in a freezing forest — and several have died — differs sharply. A melee erupted yesterday, the worst clash

yet, as hundreds of migrants stampeded a checkpoint and Polish troops fired water cannons and tear gas to quell them. Today, I will explain how the standoff's origins, relative scale and implications combine to set it apart…"

The Economist Article: https://www.economist.com/news/2021/11/09/what-is-happening-on-the-poland-belarus-border

What is happening on the Poland-Belarus border?

"A BIG INFLUX of migrants in 2015 sparked a political crisis within the European Union. Now a rogue regime on its border is trying to engineer another one. On November 8th at the Kuznica-Bruzhi border crossing, which straddles Poland and Belarus, several thousand migrants, mainly from the Middle East, lined up against police in riot gear behind a recently constructed razor-wire fence. A crowd of young men chanted the word "Germany" and tried to enter EU territory. Babies bawled on Belarusian state television. The scenes look a lot like 2015. Eurocrats insist that the whole thing has been staged by one man: Alexander Lukashenko, the despotic president of Belarus. What is going on…"

Human Rights Watch: https://www.hrw.org/report/2021/11/24/die-here-or-go-poland/belarus-and-polands-shared-responsibility-border-abuses

Belarus' and Poland's shared responsibility for border abuses

"Thousands of people are stuck in a desperate limbo at the border of Belarus and Poland in circumstances that violate their rights, in some cases egregiously, and put their lives at risk. Encouraged by local travel agents in the Middle East to travel to the Belarus capital, Minsk, they have come to the Belarusian/Polish border with hopes of crossing irregularly into Poland. Polish officials repel those who try to cross or push back those who initially succeed in crossing. Belarusian officials beat and detain those who return and coerce them to try to cross into Poland again, meanwhile preventing them in most cases from either traveling elsewhere in Belarus or returning to their home countries. Unable to move forward or back into either country, people are spending several days or weeks in the open on the border, without shelter or access to basic humanitarian services, including food and water, resulting in deaths, hypothermia, and other sickness and injuries. Belarus and Poland share responsibility for this human crisis…"

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