

Border walls, irregular migration, and the co-optation of the border security playbook

In January 2022, right before starting to take in Ukrainian refugees in large numbers, Poland had started another project altogether: the building of a border fence. Cutting through pristine forests and a world heritage site, it would stretch half the length of Poland's border with Belarus at a cost reportedly ten times larger than the Polish migration department's annual budget. The justification for this move was the standoff of the previous autumn with the Belarusian president, Alexander Lukashenko. In November 2021, thousands of people in need of protection from far afield were seemingly escorted towards the Polish border in what, to European leaders, was a blatant attempt at using migrants and refugees as a revenge for sanctions (see Pszczółkowska, this issue).. Lukashenko, the European Commission said, was behaving like a 'gangster'; the Slovenian presidency said he was 'playing with people's lives for political purposes', perhaps conveniently forgetting the EU's less than stellar record on migrant and refugee protection.¹ Yet no one seemed to notice the political pattern: that Lukashenko's actions were simply the latest example of how the neighbours of powerful destination states and regions have co-opted the border security playbook. If anything, they showed how such co-optation has become a systemic feature of Europe's 'fight against irregular migration'. Until European leaders – and others across the world – realise their security approach is fuelling such brinksmanship, it is likely to keep on escalating.

Globalisation may have promised a borderless world, yet the decades since the fall of the Berlin wall have rather bequeathed us an increasingly borderless border business. Since the 1990s, border security expenditure has grown sharply on both sides of the Atlantic. In the EU, still lagging the multibillion-dollar expenditure of the United States on some measures, it is indicative of the wider picture that the Union's Frontex border agency has gone from a budget of 6m euros in 2005, its first year, to more than 750m euros in 2022.² This growth of the border security industry has brought large economic rewards for law enforcement, militaries, defence corporations and other public and private security providers (Akkerman 2021; Korkmaz 2022) as well as large political 'wins' for governments and enforcement actors. Meanwhile, it has

¹ News reports in the *Guardian*, respectively Boffey and Roth on November (2021) and Tondo (2022) on the January wall-building. Border violence on the EU side is widely documented, including by journalists such as Trilling (2021) and academics such as Albahari 2016.

² Frontex key facts, <https://frontex.europa.eu/about-frontex/faq/key-facts/>. EU law-makers have refused to sign off on the 2022 budget over pushbacks and financial question marks: see <https://euobserver.com/migration/154639>.

generated huge costs for people on the move as well as for border communities, as Gabriella Sánchez details elsewhere in this issue. The stupendous growth of border security in terms of both the financial and political capital invested in it has also brought various *political* consequences, among which we find the main issue of concern to this article: the bargaining and brinksmanship among ‘partner’ or ‘transit’ states that it encourages.

Border brinksmanship

The European Union’s neighbours have escalated their usage of migration as a bargaining chip in recent years. Greenhill (2011) has identified this strategic deployment of human movement as often efficacious for weaker states on the international stage. In her model, Greenhill lays a lot of the blame for what she terms the ‘weaponisation’ of migration on the weaknesses of liberal democracies with their checks and balances. Yet as the Poland/Belarus example suggests, it is not only or even mainly liberalism that makes Belarus resort to this form of bargaining, even if the EU’s liberal tenets certainly figured in its leadership’s thinking. Rather, the central reason why so-called ‘transit’ states deploy migration in this way concerns how the ‘fight against migration’ has been formulated. Once combating migration has been made a paramount political objective, with its requisite stoking of political panic and huge expenditure of political and financial capital, ‘third-state’ actors will spot opportunities to undermine the ‘fight’ when it suits their purposes (Andersson and Keen 2019). The conditions of 2021, on the borders of a rather illiberal and fervently anti-migration EU state backed by a Union proclaiming border protection as one of its paramount objectives, made for ideal conditions to ‘weaponise’ migration, as the regime in Belarus surely knew.

In other words, the deadly drama at the Polish border, even allowing for the particular geopolitical conflict that underpinned it (and that was to blossom into the Ukraine invasion), is part of a *systemic* picture.

To cut the story of this systemic growth of border security very short, European politicians had in the 1990s laid the groundwork for treating certain kinds of human movement as a security problem to be solved with force, rather than as a labour market and protection problem, echoing the border reinforcement seen in the United States in the same decade (Andreas 2000). Well before the 2020s, this securitisation or deterrence approach had escalated to systemic proportions (see Gammeltoft-Hansen and Hoffman as well as Sánchez, this issue). To see this

development in some historical detail, let us visit the first experiment with fencing off land borders in Europe's post-Cold War years.

A few months before the Poland-Belarus standoff, in May 2021, several thousand Moroccans made their way by foot and sea into the Spanish 'autonomous city' of Ceuta on the North African coast. Like its sister enclave of Melilla further east, Ceuta is heavily fortified against migration, to an extent Poland could only dream of: tall fencing, advanced technology, and Moroccan and Spanish forces standing guard in their militarised 'fight against irregular migration', which had been ongoing since the 1990s (Ferrer Gallardo 2008). Morocco's minister of state for human rights made it clear that the breach of 2021 was, in effect, punishment for Spain allowing an independence leader from Morocco-occupied Western Sahara into the country for care. 'Morocco has the right to lean back and stretch its legs... so that Spain knows that underestimating Morocco is costly,' he wrote on social media. Madrid learned its lesson: by the following spring, the Spanish government had recognised Rabat's plan for the former Spanish colony in a reversal from its earlier stance of neutrality. The independence-seeking Polisario Front responded by breaking contacts with the Spanish government over its 'instrumentalisation of the Western Sahara question in shameful bargaining with the [Moroccan] occupier'.³

Such bargaining on the back of induced 'crisis' has played out at Ceuta and Melilla for many years, albeit usually involving migrants from West and Central Africa rather than Moroccans, and rarely reaching such geopolitical extremes. Images of migrants clambering up fences, swimming and drowning in the enclaves' coastal waters, or being pushed back into the hands of the Moroccan auxiliary forces have become routine. By spring 2022, as Spain said it was opening its door to Ukrainian refugees, footage was released showing Spanish civil guards violently beating back migrants at Melilla's fences in yet another example of the stark inequalities of treatment discussed by Gammeltoft-Hansen elsewhere in this issue.

The border fence stands as a symbol of the multi-layered battleground that unwanted, illegal(ised) migration has become. The battle, on one level, is between migrant and guard: each new measure triggers a counter-action, escalating the 'fight' further (though very unequally so). Anti-climbing mesh at the Spanish fences make migrants use hooks to climb

³ Quotes respectively from news reports via Reuters (2021) and France24 (2022).

them; radar systems push inflatable boats into more dangerous routes; and mass border expulsions fuel concerted entry attempts, just as they did in the 1990s ‘kamikaze runs’ in the United States. Yet increasingly, the more important battle is played out between the state actors on each side. ‘The fence is useless... If they [migrants] pass, it’s because [the Moroccan forces] want them to pass,’ was how Spanish civil guards, the guardians of the Ceuta barrier, explained it during fieldwork in 2010-11. Action and counter-action among instigating-state forces, third-state actors, smugglers and migrants kept escalating the ‘crisis’ further, which in turn has perversely fuelled justifications for more border security, as seen in Ceuta and Melilla over many years, and more recently at the Poland-Belarus border (see Pszczółkowska this issue). The obvious losers in this process are migrants and refugees themselves, subject to what some in Morocco and elsewhere called a ‘ping-pong game’ with deadly consequences; but they are not the only ones. Border communities have seen their lives increasingly surveilled, policed and quite literally ‘fenced in’ (Sánchez, this issue), while on a geopolitical level, the security escalation has fundamentally destabilised international relations in contexts such as Spain-Morocco or, for that matter, Italy-Libya, Greece-Turkey, or Poland’s relations with its neighbours further east.

Undiplomatic diplomacy

These perverse system dynamics, which essentially both reinforce and undermine the instigators’ ‘border security playbook’, are constantly being reinforced through a trans-statal learning process. Put simply, once one ‘partner’ or ‘transit’ state succeeds in gaining significant concessions from border brinkmanship, others will learn the lessons – all of which helps reinforce border security’s escalating quality.

Consider the example of Mauritania on the crossroads between West Africa and the Maghreb. Long a migrant *destination* in its own right, in 2005-6 the country became one of the early sites for Europe’s ‘border spectacle’ as thousands of West African migrants set off from its coasts, destination the Spanish Canary Islands. The new ‘crisis’ was in part due to the displacement of routes following reinforcements by Spain and Morocco around Ceuta and Melilla, yet border brinkmanship also came to play a key role, just as it had in Morocco. In 2005, military officers staged the latest in Mauritania’s long line of coups. Yet instead of using this militarisation of the territory for the purpose of blocking migration exits, as the Europeans would have wanted,

the junta conveniently looked the other way. The regime had found a bargaining chip in relations with Europe, whose leaders now had to recognise and engage with the coup leaders.

The Mauriticians were far from alone in tallying up early gains in the emerging border security marketplace. By the early 2000s, Libya's Colonel Gaddafi had realised that he sat on a prize possession. During the international embargo, he had established close business links with states in the Sahel and invited African workers into Libya's labour-hungry economy. As Italy and its northern neighbours anxiously began eyeing the Mediterranean, Gaddafi started seeing migrants as doubly beneficial. On the one hand, workers could still be exploited; on the other, they could be deployed strategically as a 'threat'. Soon enough, migration control pacts were being struck between Tripoli and Rome. Even so, Gaddafi escalated the threat rhetoric: amid NATO's military intervention, he warned that Europe would be 'invaded' by migrants unless NATO backed down, and his forces tried to make good on his threat by forcing African migrants to board unseaworthy vessels at gunpoint. The border game, once played on a relatively small scale by Morocco and Mauritania, was by the mid-2010s a large-stakes geopolitical one, set to grow further still as we see from developments not just in Spain and Poland but also in Turkey (the 2015 'refugee crisis' and its uses), Niger, Sudan, and elsewhere.

'Migration diplomacy' is gaining increasing academic attention (e.g. Tsourapas 2021), and rightly so. However, the term only tenuously covers the often very undiplomatic realpolitik of border brinksmanship detailed very briefly here. Further, we should note that much of this bargaining or gaming involves actors that cannot be neatly encapsulated within the state diplomatic apparatus. In the years after Gaddafi's fall in Libya, assorted militias have simultaneously 'combated' and facilitated migration, taking handsome rewards as smugglers-cum-enforcers while threatening Europe with further 'invasions'. Meanwhile in Sudan, the violent paramilitary Rapid Support Forces have gained substantial political capital from positioning themselves as border security sentinels (Andersson and Keen 2019).

What can be done? The incentives for engaging in this escalation have to be dampened down, and the best way to do so is to ensure migration cannot easily be turned into an 'emergency' at the first opportunity. Irregular entries into southern Europe by land and sea, bar 2015, are small by comparison to other means of entry. With incentives in place for safe passage, a consistent politics of protection, and a saner politics with the EU's 'neighbourhood', it will be much harder for those neighbours to co-opt the EU's security playbook. Indeed, Russian attempts to

‘weaponise’ large-scale Ukrainian displacement amid the ongoing war (Düvell and Lapshyna, this issue) has not yet paid its dividends given the very different political and social treatment of Ukrainian arrivals, as other contributors detail in these pages. None of this will *prevent* the escalating border brinksmanship entirely – and clearly the wider political conflicts also need to be addressed, as the Ukraine invasion so urgently reminds us. But reversing the mechanisms that keep fuelling further escalation on both sides of the rich world’s borders is of the essence in any effort to move towards a humane, rational and consistent politics of international movement.

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