**John Torpey** 00:04

Thousands of desperate migrants have gathered at the Belarussian-Polish border encouraged by the Belarusian President, Alexander Lukashenko, to go there in the hope of gaining access to EU territory. The results so far have been heartbreaking and tragic, including a number of deaths. What's going on?

**John Torpey** 00:27

Welcome to International Horizons, a podcast to the Ralph Bunche Institute for International Studies, that bring scholarly and diplomatic expertise to bear on our understanding of a wide range of international issues. My name is John Torpey, and I'm Director of the Ralph Bunche Institute at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. Today we explore the migrant situation on the Polish-Belarusian border with Nick Micinski, Assistant Professor of Political Science and International Affairs at the University of Maine. He is a PhD in Political Science from the CUNY Graduate Center, and has written extensively on EU border control and immigration policy.

**John Torpey** 01:11

Thanks so much for joining us today, Nick Micinski.

**Nick Micinski** 01:14

Thank you.

**John Torpey** 01:16

Okay, so let's launch right in. Maybe you could just start by explaining for our listeners, what exactly is going on at the Polish-Belarusian border. Those gathered there, as far as I can see, are primarily from Syria, Iraq and elsewhere in the Middle East. You know, how did they get there? What are they doing there?

**Nick Micinski** 01:35

Absolutely. So first off, there are thousands of Iraqi Kurds and Yazidis, Syrians, Afghans, also some people from other random places in the world on the border with Poland and Belarus. They're attempting to cross into the EU, presumably to claim asylum; I think it's important to mention that it's not just migrants, they are coming to claim asylum. The numbers are a bit rough: about 4000 people crossed into Lithuania in 2021; that's a huge uptick from Belarus, mostly to claim asylum.

**Nick Micinski** 02:09

And somewhere between three and ten thousand people have been trying to cross the Polish border, but most of those have been pushed back. And so there are many people making repeated attempts; so the numbers get inflated, of course, because of those repeated attempts.

**Nick Micinski** 02:23

So how did these people get to Belarus? Well, reports suggest that Lukashenko has encouraged, or in some cases actually organized, people to travel to Belarus in order to cross into the EU to claim asylum, going so far as to take out advertisements in the Middle East. The Belarusian state-owned airline added direct flights from Baghdad, Damascus, and Istanbul directly to Minsk. And the state-owned travel agency has helped organize visas for many of these people. Once in Belarus, people are staying in government-owned hotels in Minsk, and then taken by bus en masse to the border. Many then just try to cross again and again or are left in these forests, which are freezing, overnight, and the temperatures are really, really drastic, and it's a humanitarian crisis.

**Nick Micinski** 03:18

On the Polish side, the Polish government has called this a hybrid attack and accused Lukashenko of using migrants as a weapon. In August, Poland declared a state of emergency and has stationed some 15,000 troops on the border. And they created a restricted zone and have prevented journalists and aid workers from going near the border. Actually, I've heard from some friends to say that they are getting text messages. Migrants as they approach the border, or even journalists near the border, are getting text messages from the Polish official saying the border is sealed go back to Minsk. Many people have attempted to cross and actually the Polish police are violently pushing them back, although some have gotten across and claimed asylum. And this has left thousands of people stranded in the border area.

**Nick Micinski** 04:10

So just this week, many people were moved on the Belarusian side to a warehouse and started receiving some aid. And earlier this week, I guess last week now, 500 people were voluntarily repatriated to Iraq. So there's some sort of de-escalation going on there, I think.

**Nick Micinski** 04:24

So first, in May, this year, we saw the Ryanair flight forced down with an activist, and the EU sort of freaking out. What does this mean that European airlines can be bullied by Belarus? In June, the EU, US, UK, Canada put additional sanctions on Belarus, so they have travel bans, asset freezes, other sanctions, and the EU put economic sanctions specifically on Belarusian airlines. And then I think, interestingly, in August, a Belarusian runner at the Olympics claimed asylum, specifically saying that she was being forced back to Belarus by her coaches. And in fact, the country that she got asylum from was Poland. Now, I think this is all important for how we think about what's happening next. And at this point, we see Lukashenko strategically emerging with this weaponization of migrants against the EU, and specifically Poland. So I'll stop there, and we can go into more detail in other areas.

**Nick Micinski** 04:29

I think overall, we should take a step back and look at how Belarus got to this part. Maybe we can talk about last year's election, because this is a key turning point for how Lukashenko is thinking about its relationship. So, of course in August 2020, there was an election that was obviously very corrupt and the EU, the US, and others don't recognize Lukashenko as the president anymore. It's been in power for 27 years, but that election was completely flawed [with] huge protests afterwards. Again, this sort of leads to the tensions between the EU and Belarus. Some economic sanctions started back after the elections, and sort of a gradual escalation of seemingly, I think, erratic but strategic moves by Lukashenko about how to make trouble with the EU.

**John Torpey** 06:32

Great. Well, that's very helpful. I mean, one point you made that I think we really need to follow up on is the claim that this is more about asylum-seeking than migrants. I mean, what I have seen suggests that that's, that may not be the case that many of these people are not really could not in any realistic sense be expected to be classified, as you know, asylum seekers, refugees. Could you explain, you know, why you say, you think this is an asylum situation?

**Nick Micinski** 07:06

Well, the first reason is that most of the people who come to Europe right now, Syrians, Iraqis and Afghans, the legal pathway that they come is through asylum. So in Greece, when they came to Germany, or when they come to Italy, they apply for asylum, and then their cases get heard from there. So in that respect that's what I mean, is that the way that they would be crossing the border, they're going to apply for asylum, and then judges in Poland or elsewhere, will adjudicate if it's a legitimate asylum claim. So that's the first reason.

**Nick Micinski** 07:40

The second would just be that, I mean, these are the locations that they're coming from have historically had higher asylum rates than anywhere else. So most of the people who are being sent back from the EU are going back to Nigeria, or Ethiopia, or Congo. These places that have much lower asylum rates, whereas Yazidis have very high asylum success rates in the EU. So that would be my first thing. And then the last is that we don't know people's claims for asylum until they go through the the process and Europe has some of the most rigorous asylum systems. So we should let them go through those processes before we prejudge actually what their situation is.

**John Torpey** 08:28

So I mean, do you know what the rates of acceptance or of recognition of asylum have been? I mean, what are their chances?

**Nick Micinski** 08:38

I don't know. I mean, these cases specifically are going to take years or months before we find out. In the period that I did my research, we had Syrians getting something like 90% asylum cases positive during the 2015-16 time period. Iraq was a little lower 70 to 60, Afghan was much lower, but I think you could make a case now that the Afghans would have a much higher rate. So in many of these situations, it's individually tied, of course, right? Like asylum is a individual persecution so that you have to get their specific situation. But we will see.

**Nick Micinski** 09:18

Of course, I think we can also clarify that just having the financial means to buy a plane ticket to get to Minsk doesn't disqualify people for asylum. Right? And most asylum seekers have some sort of money to be able to move. Those who don't have any money can't be moving, right? So that shouldn't disqualify and doesn't disqualify people from claiming asylum.

**John Torpey** 09:43

So we've talked primarily so far about Belarus and it's interest in all of this, and it's seemingly cynical use of these people for its own political purposes, which is certainly what you hear out of the mouths of people who are stuck at the border, which, as you say, is not a particularly terrific place to be, and fortunately, there is some humanitarian intervention now. But what what about the Polish side of this? I mean, what did they get out of holding the line on letting these people in?

**Nick Micinski** 10:17

Yeah, this is a very important part of the politics here. Poland is not exactly the favorite child of Europe right now. And the ruling party is the Law and Justice Party, the far-right, conservative and they actually came to power in 2015 during the original, migration [crisis]. Migration crisis has been happening for decades in Europe, but the recent migration crisis in 2015, was one of the onuses for the Law and Justice Party gaining so much momentum, and their strict immigration policies that they were proposing.

**Nick Micinski** 10:58

I mean, migration is a very populist issue in Europe, and so it can shore up support for them in that way. I think the second point we need to think about is that Poland has been in the European Court of Justice for breaking, supposedly, EU law. The Court of Justice ruled against Poland twice in the last few months saying that Poland was not holding up EU law and has actually been fining them a million dollars a day because of they're in violation of that. And so in some ways, Poland holding the line here and showing to Europe that immigration is a serious issue and "you have to take our concern seriously," throws it back at the rest of Europe saying, "actually, this is how you are going to be doing migration policy in the future."

**Nick Micinski** 11:47

It directly plays into their hands: you need a strong Poland to be able to hold this line for them. And in fact, former European President Donald Tusk, he's actually the former Polish Prime Minister, and suggested earlier this month that they could invoke Article Four of NATO to try to get even NATO in on this. Now, the EU doesn't want that to happen; they want the European institutions to be how they coordinate the response. But all of this will be framed and is being framed as a security issue.

**John Torpey** 12:24

Could you explain what Article Four means?

**Nick Micinski** 12:26

Of course. That would be if one, one country's attacked, everyone has to come into defense. And that would be quite an unusual use of Article Four.

**John Torpey** 12:38

So, you know, the situation seems to be very different than the situation that unfolded in 2015. And I've seen something to the effect that the outgoing German Chancellor, Angela Merkel, sort of supports Poland in its stance with regard to this group of people. And of course, famously, in 2015, she said, you know, "we'll manage this will handle this" when a million, you know, mostly Syrians and Afghans showed up on Germany's doorstep. What's going on there? Of course, part of this is no doubt that she's leaving the chancellor's office after 16 years, but what would you say is going on?

**Nick Micinski** 13:20

I think, what's different is threefold. One is that Lukashenko is different than other authoritarian leaders. Poland is different than it was, and the internal problems of the EU are different from 2015. So first, Lukashenko is a unique authoritarian leader on the border of Europe. The EU has decided that it cannot deal with Lukashenko the same way that it's dealing with maybe Erdogan or Al-Sisi in Egypt. Those other leaders, they've sort of decided that they can hold their breath, make a deal. And, in fact, they've made several very specific immigration deals, right?

**Nick Micinski** 14:06

So one of the ways that the big migration flows in 2015 stopped was that the EU made a deal with Turkey; they agreed that for 6 billion euros, Turkey would agree to host many of the Syrians who are coming across and prevent onward migration and in exchange, the EU would give the 6 billion euros in aid and start up accession talks with Turkey again, and liberalize some of their visas. So this deal was sort of a success. The migration numbers went drastically down straight after the deal was signed. And the EU sort of said, "we're okay with this deal because of its costs." Now, Erdogan is not the same as Lukashenko. And I think those politics are clear. The EU is not going to do exactly the same sort of deal with Lukashenko.

**Nick Micinski** 14:58

Now, if the pledges that states had fell short, the commission could request and urge other states to have a fair share, but who knows if that would actually work. Now that pact has not been signed, it hasn't gotten through, and Eastern European countries are still toeing the line that they don't want to have to do with any sort of fair share on migration. I think this situation we're in now, I mean, clearly, these three things have shifted the dynamic and there is not going to be a big welcoming, like Merkel had in 2015.

**Nick Micinski** 15:05

The second is that -- I'd already talked to before that Poland is a different actor than Greece, as Italy; they are sort of the rogue state right now in in Europe along with Hungary, pushing against European institutions. The EU can't afford another Brexit and has to have unity within the European Union. And coming to Poland's support is part of that, that they're going to hold the line and support Poland on this.

**Nick Micinski** 15:38

The last is that migration is a toxic topic for the EU. And since 2015, the idea of sort of a burden sharing mechanism, a everyone taking their fair share through a quota, is again, toxic. I mean, in 2015, they agreed on a relocation scheme. Right? This is the idea that we could relocate all these thousands of migrants (there was actually 160,000 migrants from Greece and Italy). We'd evenly distribute them across Europe, sort of based on your GDP or population size. So Germany would take a whole bunch, whereas Poland, I think their number was like a thousand that they were supposed to have.

**Nick Micinski** 16:19

Well, that scheme completely failed. First, because logistically, they weren't able to relocate many people; they only really relocated 30,000 --so that was 20%. And many of the countries completely rejected their quota and said, "Hell no, we're not going to resettle them." And that actually leads into where my book project looks at. I showed how the EU delegated responsibility instead of sort of getting the member states to be able to respond, they paid UNHCR and IOM to host many of these refugees in Greece and are continuing to house and feed many of the refugees.

**Nick Micinski** 17:00

The last thing is that the EU thought this last year that they had a new solution; they call it the New Pact on Migration and Asylum. And this is their hope for how we're going to change the asylum system in Europe. And the idea was that if there was an influx of migrants, they could have two ways that member states could participate: one would really relocate, just sort of the quota system. And the other, if the states didn't want to take refugees, they could sponsor returns and sponsor deportations. So if you're a hardliner, you could just participate in the deportation side.

**John Torpey** 18:07

Interesting. So I mean, I wonder, I can't help thinking about the fact that, as you surely know, Joe Biden's approval ratings are kind of in the pits, I think they're lower than any president has been at this point in their presidency since they started collecting the data in the 50 or 75 [years], a long time. And, one of the things that people point to in this regard has to do with immigration and the perception that, you know, it's not so much on the front page, I think, right at the moment, but the widespread perception that things are kind of out of control at the southern border. I mean, are there any lessons in the European situation for Joe Biden?

**Nick Micinski** 18:50

Hmm. Well, one of the things I would like to say, I think that we haven't covered is that there's a common strategy across the EU and the US. And that is both deterrence and externalization. Both the EU and the US wants to deter migrants from ever coming to the countries and they externalize the policy to get countries that neighbor them to do the migration policies that they want. So if we think about deterrence, I mean this is literally trying to prevent people who are claiming asylum from ever getting to your borders, so the EU and US have put in things like carrier sanctions. I mean, this is the idea that airlines will be fined if they actually take someone to a country without a proper visa or if they claim asylum.

**Nick Micinski** 19:38

I don't know if you've heard, but David Fitzgerald has this great line in his recent book about "The Asylum Catch 22": states promise to not kick you out if you come here, but we won't let you come here. And I think that sort of epitomizes this overall sort of asylum thing. We have great asylum systems in the EU and the US, but we don't want to get to them. The externalization part is that both the EU and the US pay neighboring countries to try to also prevent. So the EU-Turkey deal is a great example there, Libya is also another example; the EU is pouring money into the Libyan coast guard to prevent migrants from coming across. And the same is happening with Biden. Biden has promised Mexico and other Latin American countries huge aid packages in the hopes that they will continue to prevent people from coming across.

**Nick Micinski** 20:31

I think what this and the Belarusian crisis shows that these aid deals, this externalization, the refugee regime more generally, creates perverse incentives for states to use asylum seekers as weapons against the US and the EU. This great book by Kelly Greenhill calls it "Weapons of Mass Migration," and she talks about how the states use migration strategically to push people against and undermine or target their enemy state. Actually, she shows that it's not a new thing; Belarus isn't the first one to do that. There are 60 plus cases that she says. Others were Cuba or Haiti or Libya sending migrants, I mean, this is back in the 80s, when they are doing similar things. I think what she points out, though, is that: one, is weak states which do it because they're in a weak position; they don't have other sort of diplomatic tools to pressure states. And the other is that democracies like the US or in Europe, have a hypocrisy cost that if you don't treat these migrants or refugees who are coming to your border in humane ways, then it actually looks worse on you.

**Nick Micinski** 21:48

I think that's something that we have yet to see on the border with Poland. Is there going to be a hypocrisy cost against the EU for seemingly violating the human rights of asylum seekers on the border. And, in a perverse way, they're trying to punish, Lukashenko for his authoritarian practices, and now are implementing their own authoritarian practices at their own border, which is kind of a nasty process that migration policy sort of pull in liberal democracies into very authoritarian things that the border.

**John Torpey** 22:25

Well, I mean, as you said before, I mean, this is obviously a populist issue. And so I think, to some extent, what Biden is doing is trying to, I mean, people complain that he's continuing Trump's policies at the border, but I think there is this concern that this is a big part of his disapproval ratings, and that if things get out of control, that can be politically very costly. And I mean, I assume that the politicians in the European Union, Ursula von der Leyen are making roughly the same calculation. I mean, it so happens that von der Leyen is German, so she's perhaps particularly attuned to this particular dynamic. But wouldn't you say that that's kind of, that they're basically worried about the political fallout from this. And possibly encouraging more people to show up at that border, some other border?

**Nick Micinski** 23:27

Absolutely. I mean, it is absolutely political. I mean, the impact of asylum and immigration on domestic politics is clear. It has very clear populist ramifications. Asylum and refugee status has also always been politicized; the asylum regime emerges during the Cold War in this time when asylum was given to defectors from the Soviet Union as a very strategic way, trying to embarrass the Soviet Union in a similar way. And I think in one version that you could go forward to say, "okay, let's embrace that asylum and refugee status is thoroughly politicized, and embrace that, know it, and then use it strategically to offer it as much and as strategically as possible." There's always going to be a political backlash there, but there is a sort of strategic tool hidden in that.

**Nick Micinski** 24:22

In the Belarusian side, they are able to use it strategically against the EU, but the US and Europe can also use asylum strategically on the other side. I mean, offering asylum to Afghans post the withdrawal can be strategic. The way the US offered a massive resettlement of Vietnamese after the pullout was strategic; we embraced that this was our responsibility and then have had a huge success with Vietnamese community in the US since then. Not always politically viable, but also there are opportunities to all of these crises.

**John Torpey** 25:01

So I mean, there is a way in which what's going on on the Polish-Belarusian border is part of a much larger European migration/asylum policy, which alas, often gets in the news because of would be crossers drowning, capsizing a boat in the Mediterranean and those kinds of tragic stories. And I wonder, I mean, partially, of course, this is simply to do with the fact that Europe and North Africa are separated by the Mediterranean and at the US border, it's basically the Mexican border. But, you know, it does seem that there's an awfully large share of tragic outcomes on Europe's borders insofar as their border some of them are water rather than land. But, you know, is that something that's going to get fixed anytime soon? Is that something that we can hope for better outcomes so that people aren't dying, trying to get into into European Union territory?

**Nick Micinski** 26:08

This is very hard. It's a very, very hard situation. Thousands of people dying in the Mediterranean because of the capsized boats. I consider this a crisis of reception, not of refugees, right? In Europe, it means Italy and Greece having much more reception capacity and be able to host people. It means organizing a much more coordinated search and rescue campaign throughout the Mediterranean. And, frankly, the EU's deal with the Libyan coast guard is a sort of scar on their human rights record. We have documented cases of EU-assisted Libyan coastguards who take asylum seekers from the middle of the Mediterranean, and push them back to the Libyan coast where they're put in detention centers that --I'm sure you saw these photos --looked like a slave auction at one point. This is shocking that the EU could participate in that.

**Nick Micinski** 27:10

And the hard part here is that we know what has to happen. Search and rescue is not logistically that hard of a thing, you have to fund it, you have to put money into it. And after the 2014 sort of Lampedusa crisis in Italy, Italy actually expanded their search and rescue capacity and had huge success. I mean, they were able to save thousands and thousands of lives because they expanded that capacity. Now, the political backlash to that meant that they had to cut it and the EU also cut theirs, which led to the 2015 and 16 and 17 crises. But we know what to do: expand the search and rescue and save people's lives. Politically, very, very hard but humanitarian wise, there's a very simple answer.

**John Torpey** 27:13

I mean, it used to be not so long ago, it seems to me that there was a pretty robust discussion of the fact that Europe is not exactly a growing population and that it's, in fact, an aging population. I remember a relatively recent book by Zbigniew Brzezinski, he said something like, "Europe's major political aspiration these days seems to want to be the world's most comfortable retirement home". And so, just as in, say, Japan it seems that they're going to have to make some changes in their policies in order simply to take care of the aging population that they have. Now, that obviously requires overcoming a certain amount of cultural, religious. and other kinds of sort of lack of understanding or, you know, unfamiliarity/racism, etc. So do you see that playing a role at all in kind of changing immigration policy into into Europe?

**Nick Micinski** 29:02

Possibly. I think the best case scenario is that there are expanded guest worker circular migration programs and the US and some countries have very targeted schemes like that for nurses or some sort of higher skilled thing. The difficulty with those are circular migration programs always presume that you're supposed to leave at the end, and that this is just a temporary moment. And that doesn't solve either the labor crisis or the immigration issue. Circular [migration programs] only sort of pushes it off for another generation or another thing, and people don't necessarily want to live their lives in these halfway points. I mean, circular migration had always happened between Morocco and Spain. The sort of undocumented migration that occurred in the last 20 years was because they shut down then sort of natural circular migration that had always happened back and forth. And so people didn't feel like they could return back home, because they wouldn't have a way to come back to their job or wouldn't have a way to go back and see their family.

**Nick Micinski** 30:10

So, I mean, there are ways of organizing really rigorous immigration schemes and helping people fill both labor gaps and their aspirations for economic opportunities. But it means expanding and creating these opportunities for many more people, many, many more people. And that is very --the schemes that have been proposed so far are in the thousands, not hundreds of thousands. And, the hundreds of thousands are the levels that Europe needs in terms of the capacity. So ambition on that side needs to be expanded and broadened by magnitudes there, much more.

**John Torpey** 30:50

Right. Right. But it is a tough problem, as you say. I mean, obviously, there's concerns about letting people in and whether that affects the job market, and sort of the cultural differences between the groups that would be coming and Europe's historic ability or otherwise to take in culturally different immigrants. I mean, it's definitely a tough problem. And, of course, is the famous comment that you were probably thinking about, as you spoke, that I can, blanking now, whether it was Max Frisch, but the famous comment about "we wanted workers, but people came," and of course, they had lives and they build families, and then they weren't particularly inclined to leave. And, of course, this has helped transform the face of modern Germany and France and Italy and the UK, etc. So, I mean, less so in Eastern Europe, but that's probably part of the Polish lack of enthusiasm for what's happening at their Belarusian border.

**John Torpey** 31:57

So maybe you could just say, in closing, what do you think is going to happen here? It does seem that some steps, some positive steps have taken place in this past week, as you mentioned, maybe you could say a little bit more about that and, you know, what you think and hope is going to happen there.

**Nick Micinski** 32:15

It's very difficult to predic It could both escalate, or deescalate. We'll see as it happens in the next few weeks. I mean, on one side, there are thousands of people still in Belarus that didn't cross the border and could be in dire humanitarian situation in the next few months to a year, right? Are they gonna apply for asylum in Belarus? Could be a hard scenario to see a lot of these people staying in Belarus because of that. On the other side, if they are genuine asylum seekers who are fearing for their life in Iraq or Syria, then Belarus is a safer place for them, so they could stay. The question is, if Belarus will legalize them, provide some sort of aid or allow them to work now, that would be amazing if they actually did; not necessarily a really feasible or a likely scenario.

**Nick Micinski** 33:08

The other side is will the EU take in many people? I think that's unlikely as well, they're not going to create a resettlement mechanism from the Belarus side to EU. What will happen is that the few people who get across the border will apply in Poland and have their cases seen and actually have support and aid from there. There are some optimistic things that I have seen in a few reports about Polish citizens providing humanitarian aid to those who do get across putting green lights up in their window to show that it's safe to come to them for support. And that is one of the optimistic sides I think of Europe's approach to migration is that citizens have a huge outpouring of support, not necessarily politically to the populist moon, but through on the ground aid. I mean, this was a common thing in Greece in Italy, when the migrants came and stayed is that people volunteered and donated across all of Europe to provide support for them. So we could see that on the on the Polish side as well.

**Nick Micinski** 34:12

And then a common and easy response for the EU is to pour humanitarian aid into the country into Belarus side from sort of a UNHCR or an IOM; that's the UN refugee agency or the International Organization for Migration. This is classic strategy that instead of getting aid money dirty by putting it through the Belarusian government, you get the UN to implement it on the ground there. And I think that's probably the most likely thing: that you'll get a UN agency in there to provide direct humanitarian support. The long term likelihood of what's going to happen is that politically Belarus is still trying to get the EU to pay attention to it and to sort of warm relations, and I don't see that necessarily happening because of this migration crisis.

**John Torpey** 35:03

Right. Well thank you very much for all these insights about what's going on in this very unfortunate situation. That's it for today's episode of International Horizons. I want to thank Nick Micinski for sharing his insights about the migrant crisis on the Polish-Belarusian border.

**John Torpey** 35:22

Remember to subscribe and rate International Horizons on SoundCloud, Spotify and Apple podcasts. I want to thank Hristo Voynov for his technical assistance as well as to acknowledge Duncan Mackay for sharing his song International Horizons as the theme music for the show. This is John Torpey, saying thanks for joining us and we look forward to having you with us for the next episode of International Horizons.