

Weaponization of migrants gains momentum

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KYLE HIEBERT - Opinion

IN late August, as the world fixated on the political and refugee crises in Afghanistan, a different type of refugee crisis was unfolding in eastern Europe. Belarus's embattled President Aleksandr Lukashenko had for weeks been exploiting migrants as pawns in retaliation against the European Union for imposing sanctions on his regime over its crushing of a pro-democracy opposition movement.

With hardline nationalism now mainstreamed globally, and displacement and migration set to skyrocket, the growing trend of using human beings as political fodder is an ominous development.

Lukashenko's scheme saw his officials arrange for thousands of refugees, mostly from Iraq and Afghanistan, to pay hefty fees to fly into Belarus under false promises of being transferred to safe haven countries in western Europe. They were instead dumped at the borders of neighbouring EU member states Latvia, Lithuania and Poland — countries notably unequipped and unwilling to deal with irregular immigration.

The gambit proved sufficiently destabilizing to provoke the three Baltic countries into each declaring states of emergency, erecting razorwire fences, and deploying hundreds of troops to the area.

Earlier this year, Morocco allowed some 6,000 African migrants to enter the Spanish enclave of Ceuta in one day amid a dispute with Spain's government. Turkey's strongman President Recep Tayyip Erdogan since 2015 has also routinely threatened to "open the gates" and funnel portions of the 3.6 million Syrian refugees Turkey hosts into Europe to gain concessions from Brussels on everything from financial aid and visa-free entry to Europe for Turkish citizens, to natural gas drilling rights in the eastern Mediterranean.

This trend isn't unique to Europe. Kenya recently announced it would close two massive camps containing over 200,000 Somali refugees by next June – a decision conspicuously coinciding with an ongoing political rift with Somalia. And it's not limited to physical relocations either, as rich donor nations are now strategically tying foreign aid and development assistance to recipient nations' efforts to stem migrant flows.

The Biden administration in April struck an undisclosed deal with Guatemala, Honduras and Mexico for their security forces to forcibly block Central American migrants from reaching the southern U.S. border. After Europe's 2015 migrant crisis, the EU has provided hundreds of millions of dollars and high-tech surveillance equipment to abusive paramilitary units in Libya, Niger and Sudan — gateway countries for Africans seeking to cross the Mediterranean into Europe.

For two decades, globalization's principle of transnational movement of labour, capital, goods and ideas has lifted hundreds of millions of people out of extreme poverty and partially lessened global inequality between nations. But it has also fuelled rising inequality within them, including in Canada, where the top one per cent of earners have amassed over one-quarter of this country's wealth.

One consequence: a tremendous backlash against immigration and multiculturalism. Reactionary movements like those behind Brexit and Trumpism have harnessed disinformation and the reality-

distorting technologies of social media to frame immigration and minorities as being responsible for economic malaise and alienating levels of social change.

Yet this all may pale in comparison to how volatile migration issues could become in the future.

World Bank forecasts predict that absent major action on climate change, 216 million people could be newly displaced within Latin America, Africa, Asia and the Pacific and Eastern Europe by 2050, almost triple the 82 million already displaced globally. Sheer desperation will motivate a very small but not-insignificant percentage to use the climate crisis to strive to reach the global north through whatever dangerous and unauthorized channels possible. Many will succeed.

Much of the developed world, meanwhile, is already reliant on immigration to prop up their economies amid declining birth rates and aging populations. These dynamics — and alternately, pandemic-related public fears of foreigners importing any new variants of contagion — will only increase. Such converging and competing pressures risk clouding the judgment of partisan governments and politicizing immigration policies based on short-term domestic political agendas, sabotaging their long-term viability.

Leaning too far right and restrictive could stoke xenophobia, prioritize heavy-handed militarized solutions, undermine international laws and encourage a nationalist turn inward in a world in which pressing issues all require collective action. Leaning too far left and open may underestimate the social and economic complexity of immigration, resulting in newcomers being isolated and underemployed, disadvantaged domestic groups being marginalized even further, and developing nations subjected to crippling levels of brain drain.

The first approach neglects the immense value immigration can deliver; the second fails to appreciate the deep societal challenges it poses. Adhering too closely to either would be a mistake.

Kyle Hiebert is a Winnipeg-based researcher and analyst, and former deputy editor of the Africa Conflict Monitor.