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Information activities during the migration crisis on the Polish-Belarusian border as a threat to society's resilience

Introduction

Dynamic changes taking place in the information environment, including the internationalisation of information activities, have affected the security of individual states and the realisation of political and military goals. Moreover, the escalation of hybrid tactics was caused by the activity of Belarusians, who organised the transport of migrants and instructed them on how to behave in order to destabilise the situation in the border region.¹ The informational campaigns conducted by Belarus shaped the desired image of reality and changed the perception of society both on the Polish and the Belarusian side. These campaigns were supported by the Russian Federation, which tried to present itself as a peacemaker in the conflict, in effect maintaining its role as the hegemon in Central and Eastern Europe.

The aim of this article is to answer the question of how information activities² have affected the society during the migration crisis on the Polish-Belarusian border, which arose as a result of the influx of migrants from Middle Eastern countries.

¹ T. Giczan, "Lukashenka's Dark Games Menace the EU's Border", 10 November 2021, CEPA, <https://cepa.org/lukashenkas-dark-games-menace-the-eus-border> [accessed: 6 February 2022].

² Doctrinal document DD-3.10(A) *Operacje informacyjne*, Bydgoszcz: Centrum Doktryn i Szkolenia Sił Zbrojnych, 2017, p. 15. See: Z. Modrzejewski, *Operacje informacyjne*, Warszawa: Akademia Obrony Narodowej, 2015, *passim*.

Research methods from the field of scientific research methodology typical for social sciences (the comparative method and the method of content analysis) were used to study the undertaken research problem.

It is important to address this issue because for the first time Poland and NATO have had to face a migration crisis on the eastern flank. Information activities concerning the migration crisis posed a challenge to ensuring security in this part of Europe. Due to the recency of the issues raised, no studies exploring this subject have been published so far. The conclusions of the article can be a starting point for further research. It should be recognized that the issues discussed in the article are important for both the representatives of academia and the military.

Information activities

Over the years, together with the Russian Federation, Belarus has conducted an intensive information campaign aimed at achieving its strategic goals in Central and Eastern Europe. This became clearly visible when the Polish Central PSYOPS Group was accused of organising protests during the presidential election in Belarus (2020). The aim of the attack on this unit was to depreciate it among the Polish society and to accuse it of preparing aggressive acts against the Belarusian authorities.³

When analysing the information activities carried out in the information environment regarding the migration crisis on the Polish-Belarusian border, the main goals of Belarus government should be distinguished:

1. Undermining the legitimacy of legal authorities in Central and Eastern Europe.
2. Disparaging the Republic of Poland internationally and calling into question its credibility among allies.
3. Portraying the ineffectiveness of international institutions (NATO, the European Union) as outdated entities which fail to meet the challenges of the 21st century.
4. Destabilising NATO's eastern flank.
5. Criticising the principles of European humanitarianism.
6. Decreasing the sense of security among the population through destabilisation of the region.
7. Changing the perception of the border region population in order to support the actions carried out.

The information activities carried out by the Belarusian regime constituted a threat to the resilience of the Polish society as they influenced the public opinion

³ See "Information Resilience: Countering Russian Propaganda and Disinformation", 7 October 2021, RUSI (NS), https://rusi-ns.ca/information_resilience/ [accessed: 1 February 2022]. Cf.: B. Fraszka, "The Situation on the Poland-Belarus Border: Background, Geopolitics, Narratives", 23 December 2021, <https://warsawinstitute.org/situation-poland-belarus-border-background-geopolitics-narratives> [accessed: 6 February 2022].

and exerted public pressure on the state administration. Capacities and information techniques coordinated as part of information operations (INFO OPS) included, e.g., psychological operations or disinformation.⁴ Their intensification contributed to shaping and preparing the region for a potential conflict in Eastern Europe.

Information capabilities and techniques

The exegesis of source material made it possible to distinguish the information capabilities and techniques used by the adversary during the migration crisis to create an alternative reality.

Psychological operations

Psychological operations consisted in conveying created content through various methods and means of communication to the audience in order to induce the expected change in perception, attitudes and behaviour.⁵

Belarus government spread hostile propaganda and influenced the public awareness and consolidation of unfavourable attitudes by arguing that the Republic of Lithuania and the Republic of Poland were responsible for the migration crisis because they deliberately did not accept migrants. The public opinion was manipulated by fuelling anti-migrant sentiments and popularising the Russophobic attitude of Poles.⁶ In addition, the narrative that Poland was an aggressive state posing a threat to Belarus and the Russian Federation was spread, which is why the Belarusian side was prepared to use weaponry.⁷ Propaganda justifying the actions of the Belarusian authorities was directed at the Belarusian society, while in the Russian society the ethicality of the actions undertaken by the Polish side was questioned,

⁴ Information operations (INFO OPS) “consisting in analysing the information environment, planning, integrating and evaluating information activities in order to obtain the expected effects of influencing the will to act, understanding of the situation and the opponent’s abilities.” Doctrinal document DD-3.10(A) *Operacje informacyjne*, op. cit., pp. 15, 23–33.

⁵ Doctrinal document DD-3.10.1(B) *Operacje psychologiczne*, Bydgoszcz: Centrum Doktryny i Szkolenia Sił Zbrojnych, 2017, p. 14. See: T. Kacała, *Działania psychologiczne wybranych państw*, Toruń: Wydawnictwo Adam Marszałek, 2016, pp. 181–195.

⁶ See B. Bodalska, “Sondaż: Polacy nie chcą migrantów, a winą za kryzys obarczają Białoruś”, 8 October 2021, EURACTIV, <https://www.euractiv.pl/section/migracje/news/polska-migranci-kryzys-bialorusi-granica> [accessed: 7 February 2022].

⁷ Rzecznik Prasowy Ministra Koordynatora Służb Specjalnych, “Polska jako wróg”, 7 October 2021, <https://www.gov.pl/web/sluzby-specjalne/ataki-medialne-na-polske-w-zwiazku-z-wydarzeniami-na-bialorusi> [accessed: 1 February 2022]. See: A. Legucka, F. Bryjka, “Russian and Belarusian Disinformation and Propaganda in the Context of the Polish-Belarusian Border Crisis”, *PISM Bulletin*, no. 212 (1908), 9 December 2021, <https://pism.pl/publications/russian-and-belarusian-disinformation-and-propaganda-in-the-context-of-the-polish-belarusian-border-crisis> [accessed: 7 February 2022].

comparing the actions towards migrants to the infamous practices from the times of the Second World War.⁸ A strategy of demoralisation was carried out towards the Polish society, the fears of the Polish society were amplified, and the situation was compared to the migration crisis on the Greek-Turkish border in 2020.⁹

What is more, a propaganda message was built to arouse a sense of injustice, so examples of actions negatively affecting the lives of people in the border region were given. Sensitive issues which resonated well in the local environment were raised, e.g., the damage suffered by the population due to the migration crisis and the destruction of roads and meadows by military trucks were pointed out. Apart from the media space, the awareness of local communities was directly affected through the use of urban space, as exemplified by the inscription “4 zmarłych, wasza wina” (Polish for: “four dead – your fault”) on the building of the Multinational Brigade of the Land Forces Command LITPOLUKRBRIG.¹⁰ The action was taken in order to depreciate the service of soldiers and to blame them for the death of migrants. It should be pointed out that arousing strong emotions and turning the society against uniformed services was a constant element of the information campaign of the adversary.

Another example of psychological actions was the dissemination in the information environment of images from the border, which showed the push-backs of migrants to the Belarusian side or oppressive actions taken against them, such as the use of water cannons.¹¹ Such visual materials were distributed not only in the Polish information environment, but also influenced the international community, including the United States of America (CNN, BBC), as well as Arab countries (Al Jazeera), shaping the awareness of recipients in accordance with the assumed objectives of the operation.¹²

⁸ “Vyacheslav Volodin called on parliamentary organizations to develop unified standards to overcome migration crises”, 29 November 2021, The State Duma, <http://duma.gov.ru/news/52863/> [accessed: 6 February 2022].

⁹ J. Pawlicki, “Strach w strefie zakazanej”, 13 November 2021, Newsweek, <https://www.newsweek.pl/polska/spoleczenstwo/kryzys-na-granicy-z-bialorusia-reportaz-z-granicy-uchodzcy-w-strefie-zakazanej/604ecj4> [accessed: 6 February 2022].

¹⁰ P.P., “4 zmarłych, wasza wina”, 20 September 2021, <https://www.dziennikwschodni.pl/lublin/4-zmarlych-wasza-wina-napis-na-murze-wojska-w-lublinie,n,1000295712.html> [accessed: 1 February 2022].

¹¹ M. Roache, “In the Standoff Between Belarus and Europe, Migrants are Being Used as Human Weapon”, 17 November 2021, Yahoo! News, <https://news.yahoo.com/standoff-between-belarus-europe-migrants-105414247.html> [accessed: 1 February 2022]. See: K. Bachman, “Kryzys polsko-białoruski i kwestia migracji. Międzynarodowy kontekst i możliwe sposoby zarządzania”, Fundacja im. Stefana Batorego, https://www.batory.org.pl/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/K.Bachman_Kryzys..polsko-bialoruski.i.kwestia.migracji.pdf [accessed: 1 February 2022].

¹² “A new humanitarian crisis unfolds at the Polish-Belarusian border”, 24 November 2021, Al Jazeera, <https://www.aljazeera.com/gallery/2021/11/24/photos-a-new-humanitarian-crisis-unfolds-at-the-polish-belarusian-border> [accessed: 1 February 2022]; A. Pikulicka-

As part of the psychological operations carried out by the adversary against the society, the image of migrant children asking for help was used to lend credibility to adversary's message, to arouse compassion and to present the passivity of Western countries. This propaganda message was reinforced by journalist Tomasz Lis (rule of authority), who published on his profile an alleged photo of children staying at the Polish-Belarusian border, which in fact was taken during the conflict in Serbia.¹³ Children were also used as a tool to escalate emotions in society during other armed conflicts, e.g., in Syria or during the annexation of the Crimea. Moreover, the publication of images of children in the information environment contributed to the initiation of bottom-up controlled quasi-events, such as demonstrations. These types of events played an important part in the creation of internal divisions within the society. The protests related to turning back migrants, including children, to the border with Belarus by the Border Guard in Michałowo were an example of social polarisation.¹⁴ It should be noted that the society was influenced by a shocking visual message, while the Belarusian regime used all available resources and means of information confrontation.

Disinformation

Another threat to public resilience was disinformation.¹⁵ Disinformation operations created informational chaos to prevent the public from critically assessing the situation and seeking context. They were conducted in order to weaken Poland's position in the international arena and to undermine allied commitments and

-Wilczewska, "How Poland influences opinion over the Belarus border crisis", 16 December 2021, Al Jazeera, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/12/16/how-poland-influences-opinion-over-the-belarus-border-crisis> [accessed: 6 February 2022]; K. Fox, "Tensions are rising on the Poland-Belarus border. Here's what you need to know", 21 November 2021, CNN, <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/11/11/europe/belarus-poland-crisis-explainer-cmd-intl/index.html> [accessed: 1 February 2022].

¹³ "Nie, to zdjęcie nie przedstawia dziecka przy polskiej granicy", 13 October 2021, Demagog, https://demagog.org.pl/fake_news/nie-to-zdjecie-nie-przedstawia-dziecka-przy-polskiej-granicy [accessed: 1 February 2022].

¹⁴ "Dzieci z Michałowa uwięzione w lesie. Jedna z dziewczynek ma ranną nogę", 13 October 2021, Onet, <https://wiadomosci.onet.pl/kraj/granica-dzieci-z-michalowa-uwiezione-w-lesie-jedna-z-dziewczynek-ma-ranna-noge/kfy2mly> [accessed: 1 February 2022]; "Belarus/Poland: Abuse, Pushbacks at the Border", 24 November 2021, Human Rights Watch, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/11/24/belarus/poland-abuse-pushbacks-border> [accessed: 1 February 2022].

¹⁵ Disinformation is "all activities aimed at misleading an opponent by manipulating, simulating and preparing evidence, provocative activities that harm their own interests". Doctrinal document DD-3.10(A) *Operacje informacyjne, op. cit.*, p. 29. See: M. Wrzosek, "Wojny przyszłości. Doktryna, technika, operacje militarne", Warszawa: Fronda, 2018, *passim*; L. Sykalski, *Rosyjska geopolityka a wojna informacyjna*, Warszawa: PWN, 2019, pp. 80–101.

depreciate the uniformed services.¹⁶ Disinformation operations focused on spreading the narrative of inhumane treatment of migrants. An example of this was the presence of a small group of migrants in Usnarz Górny, who wanted to cross the border illegally. The image of refugees fleeing war rather than economic migrants (technique: switching terms) and the callousness of the Border Guard (technique: criticising and judging) was used to influence the perception of the migration crisis. Suggestive messaging undermined the disproportionate forces and measures used against migrants, consequently lowering trust in the state.

The inability of Polish journalists to report on the situation from the border region contributed to the development of such a narrative, which prevented the rapid neutralisation of false information, and the media coverage provided came only from the Belarusian side. A lack of sufficient information divided the Polish society and created space for the enemy's information activities. A threat to the resilience of the society was the spread of fake news. An example of false information intentionally introduced into the information environment was the shooting of a Belarusian border post from the territory of Poland. The opponent also disseminated fake news concerning poor living conditions of soldiers serving on the Polish-Belarusian border, which shaped the image of inefficient state institutions.

Disinformation operations were reinforced by provocations organised by Belarusian forces, such as blinding soldiers with lasers, throwing stones at them and accusing them of using violence against migrants. The Belarusian authorities spread a false narrative and qualified the actions on the Polish-Belarusian border as a crime against humanity.

Another example of disinformation operations was the use of a personal source to poison the information environment. By reproducing interviews of the deserter Emil Czezczo in the Polish information space, the alleged mechanism of killing migrants by soldiers of the Polish Armed Forces was presented. In his statements, Czezczo addressed the issue of shooting migrants and burying them in mass graves. He tried to blame his desertion on the Polish Armed Forces and portray himself as a victim, thus arousing compassion in the audience. Disinformation operations were focused on destroying the image of the Armed Forces of the Republic of Poland among the public and accusing them of actions violating the law in force.

Considering the above examples, it should be noted that in the information environment, the adversary imposed the desired sequences of logical reasoning that targeted information influenced the reflection process of the recipients and kept them in a dual process of decision-making.

¹⁶ See: J. Eyal, "Belarus, the EU and the Refugee Crisis: Opportunities Missed", 19 November 2021, <https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/belarus-eu-and-refugee-crisis-opportunities-missed> [accessed: 1 February 2022].

Key Leader Engagement

The key leader engagement at the national and local level influenced the behaviour, attitude and perception of the migration crisis. The statements of opinion leaders, such as the Permanent Representative to the EU, Andrzej Sadoś, who said that “the goal is to discredit countries and efforts to protect borders and sow divisions in Europe”, as well as the reports on the border situation by the medics from the Granica Group.

Information activities carried out by the opponent were reinforced by opinion leaders (rule of authority), who spoke out on the migration crisis and influenced the public perception, including the dissemination of stereotypes. On the one hand, in the public space there were authorities supporting the demands of migrants; on the other hand, leaders prioritised security issues over humanitarian ones. This division polarised the society and contributed to heightened emotions in the public debate.

Poisoning the information environment occurred also through the activity of the Belarusian secret services which supported the media and exposed the lack of reaction of Western countries to the migrant situation. This message was reinforced by “useful idiots” in Poland and other Western countries who reproduced the narrative lines propagated by the Belarusian regime.¹⁷ Additionally, scientific and cultural centres in the West were used to disseminate propaganda identical with the arguments presented in the public space by the Belarusian authorities. What is more, the opponent hit “sensitive” topics and targeted groups which could strengthen its narrative, e.g., environmentalists, politicians, and journalists. A theme which emerged during the construction of the wall preventing illegal border crossings was the closing of migration routes for animals. The Polish Border Guard denied fake news and assured that this aspect was taken into account during the construction of the wall.

Key leaders became triggers of change in the society: their attitude and opinions shaped emotions around the crisis. A significant threat was the galvanisation of the society for activities during the crisis, which were part of the Belarusian information war plan.

Other

When analysing the threats posed by the enemy’s hybrid warfare, attention should be drawn to activities which increased the effectiveness of the conducted impact operation in Eastern Europe.

Violations of the Polish airspace by unmanned aerial vehicles aimed at tracking the officers of the Polish Border Guard and collecting information necessary for the

¹⁷ “Kryzys na granicy i wojna informacyjna. Jak dezinformuje Moskwa?”, 7 December 2021, Demagog, https://demagog.org.pl/analizy_i_raporty/kryzys-na-granicy-i-wojna-informacyjna-jak-dezinformuje-moskwa [accessed: 1 February 2022].

operation were observed. Besides that Belarus collected data and information through all available channels also from devices using electromagnetic waves.

In the case of the migration crisis on the Polish-Belarusian border there were no significant actions in cyberspace due to the implementation of a wide range of activities carried out in real life.

Actions building up social resilience

When analysing the migration crisis on the Polish-Belarusian border, it should be noted that the opponent's information activities were actively counteracted and social resistance to potential attacks was built. As part of neutralising the actions of the enemy, direct communication was conducted in the border region in order to reduce social tension and build a sense of security by Polish government, e.g., providing medical assistance, preventing illegal border crossings. Additionally, representatives of local governments were educated in the field of counteracting threats in cyberspace so as to minimise damage to government administration.

Another important form of building the society's resilience was the application of the principle of Posture, Presence and Profile, i.e., uniformed services were open to providing assistance to local communities through joint meetings or supplying necessary items to the elderly, thus consequently building the credibility of their message and mutual trust. Within the framework of broadening the local population's awareness of the situation, soldiers of the Territorial Defence Forces distributed specially prepared material of the *Polska Zbrojna* monthly to borderland residents.

Furthermore, uniformed services were constantly present in the local community during their everyday patrols ensuring the safety of Polish citizens and, at the same time, deterring the enemy. In addition, a positive image of uniformed services was shaped by exposing articles and billboards in the information space as proofs of local residents' gratitude for their actions.¹⁸

The above-mentioned activities strengthened the society's immunity to threats resulting from offensive actions carried out by the enemy and made it possible to ensure safety in times of crisis.

Conclusions

The information activities of Belarus had an impact on society as they were aimed at changing the perception of reality, to arouse certain emotions, and to create a new order at the international level. The most important conclusions resulting from the

¹⁸ KE, "Niespokojna granica", 2 December 2021, *Polska Zbrojna*, <http://www.polska-zbrojna.pl/home/articleshow/35920?t=Niespokojna-granica> [accessed: 1 February 2022].

adversary's information activities during the migration crisis on the Polish-Belarusian border are as follows:

1. Belarus conducted information activities in every domain (physical, cognitive, and virtual) of the information environment.
2. Information activities of Belarus differentiate states and societies in terms of susceptibility to disinformation.
3. Belarus has poisoned the information environment with the aim of destabilising Eastern Europe and preparing the region for a wider conflict.
4. The information activities conducted by the Belarusian regime were a test of NATO's defensive information warfare capabilities and a test of narrative coherence and member state effectiveness.
5. The information activities made it possible to divert the attention of international relations entities from other activities carried out by Belarus and the Russian Federation in the international arena.
6. Information activities were aimed at influencing public attitudes and perceptions. They affected the public will and understanding of the situation and created an alternative reality.

Information activities during the migration crisis on the Polish-Belarusian border marked the beginning of a redefinition of security in Eastern Europe; their escalation expanded the sphere of influence, changed diplomatic relations between Belarus and Western countries, and aroused negative emotions in the society. Moreover, taking into account the experience of other conflicts, information activities preceded strictly military actions.

The broad spectrum of information capabilities and techniques used by Belarus posed a threat to the resilience of the Polish society, which was subject to constant influence. A psychological war was waged to win "hearts and minds" of the society in order to lower the level of support for actions taken by Poland and to depreciate the uniformed services.

This article does not exhaust or does not address many other aspects, which is an incentive for further scientific research.

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Abstract

The main purpose of the article is to describe the information activities and their impact on society during the migration conflict on the Polish-Belarusian border and to systematise the information on this subject. Therefore, the following question was asked: how did information activities affect society during the migration crisis on the Polish-Belarusian border?

Research methods from the field of scientific research methodology typical for social sciences were used to analyse the undertaken research problem (the comparative method, the method of content analysis).

The article consists of three parts. The introduction presents information activities as an important element of military activities. The second part shows the INFO OPS information capabilities and techniques which allowed the creation of an alternative reality. The last part includes conclusions from the conducted information activities which intoxicated the information environment.

The research allowed for identifying information activities which undermined European humanitarianism, showed the incompetence of European institutions, and aroused emotions in society which, in turn, exerted psychological pressure on decision-makers.

These information activities threatened the resilience of society because they left people in a dual process of decision-making. In order to counter information threats, awareness of the current situation was built, and their effects were actively neutralized in the information environment.

Key words: information activities, information operations, migration crisis, resilient society, disinformation