



## HYBRID THREATS AND SECURITY RISK MANAGEMENT

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### ABSTRACT



Hybrid threats is one of the most complex challenges in security management systems faced by the European Union (EU) and its Member States, public sector organizations and businesses. States and their organizations are looking for innovative security solutions in order to quickly respond to and be resilient against threats such as cyber-attacks, irregular migration, cross-border crime, disinformation.

The case of instrumentalization of migrants organized by the Belarusian authorities at the EU's Eastern borders is presented in this article. It illustrates that organizations (state border security, private companies implementing security solutions) must establish a security risk management system based on

the response mechanism regarding hybrid threats.

The risk management process requires an understanding of external and internal factors in order to assess risk in the field of border protection. Managing risks that pose a threat to border security includes risk identification, analysis and evaluation.

### Link to ISO 31000

Establishing the context, defining the external and internal parameters for managing risk, risk assessment, legal and regulatory requirements.

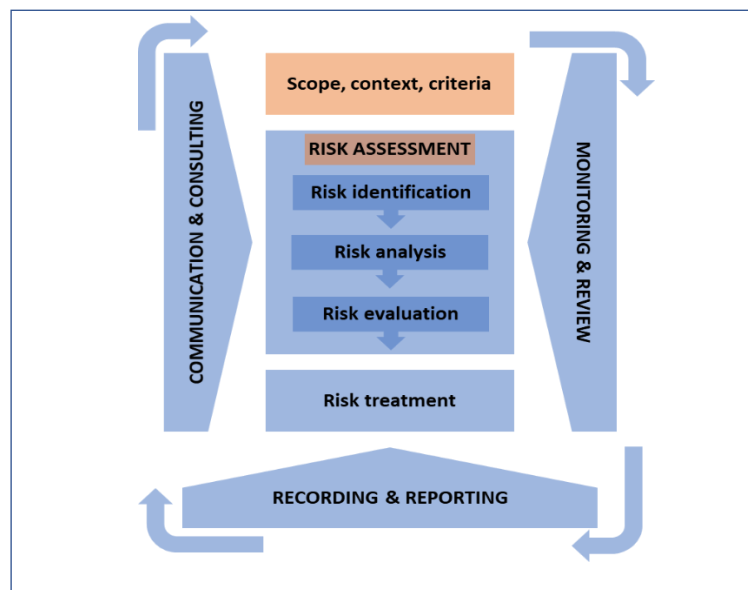


Figure 1. Risk management process (adapted from ISO 31000:2018)



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## 1. Introduction

In recent years, the topic of *Hybrid Threats* has dominated the national security landscape in the EU. The state and institutions that take care of its security are looking for new security tools and technologies to address vulnerabilities across multiple domains. The concept of *Hybrid Threats* has been increasingly transformed from military context to public security realm.

The term *Hybrid Threat* refers to an action conducted by state or non-state actors, whose goal is to undermine or harm a target by influencing its decision-making at the local, regional, state or institutional level. *Hybrid Threats* are characterized as: (a) coordinated and synchronized action that deliberately targets democratic states and institutions' systemic vulnerabilities through a wide range of means (e.g. hybrid attacks using people, technologies, false information), (b) activities that exploit the thresholds of detection and attribution, as well as various interaction points. This means that hybrid threats use tactics that make it difficult to identify and respond to them, often operating across different locations, organizations, or groups of people (e.g. in the context of internal and/or external security, local and or state security, national and/or international security). For example, imagine a scenario where a country uses cyberattacks to disrupt another nation's critical infrastructure, such as power grids. At the same time, they spread disinformation through social media to create confusion and panic among the population. This combination of cyber warfare and psychological manipulation makes it difficult for the targeted nation to respond effectively, as they are dealing with both physical disruptions and misinformation. This illustrates how hybrid threats can operate across different domains, complicating detection and response efforts.

Countering hybrid threats relates to national security and the maintenance of law and order. Efforts to respond to hybrid threats have to be underpinned by a capacity to detect early malicious hybrid activities, internal and external factors, and to understand the possible links between often seemingly unconnected events.

This first changed with the hybrid aggression by Belarus in mid-2021 through the creation of an artificial migration route to EU Eastern countries (Latvia, Lithuania, Poland) - which brought thousands of refugees at the EU's doorsteps, and posed EU/national security and border management challenges for years to come<sup>1</sup>. These may include a rise in human trafficking, especially women and children, an increase in smuggling of weapons and other illegal goods, as well as terrorism and radicalization.

When managing security risks stemming from hybrid threats, organizations (state or non-state) should establish an external and internal environment in which the organization seeks to achieve its security objectives. In this context, it is important to understand and determine external and internal parameters, which should be taken into account when managing risk: (a) social and cultural, political, legal, regulatory, financial, technological and economic environment, whether international, national, regional or local; (b) key drivers and trends having impact on the security objectives of the organization; (c) relationships with stakeholders; (d) governance, organizational

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<sup>1</sup> Irregular border crossings to the EU increased significantly in 2022, as FRONTEX – the EU's border agency – noted a rise of 64% from the previous year estimating “around 330 000 irregular border crossings were detected at EU's external border, according to preliminary calculations. Last year, EU and Schengen associated countries faced unprecedented challenges at their external borders. These have ranged from the state-organized migration perpetrated by Belarus from 2021 onward to Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.



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structure, roles and accountabilities; (e) policies and the strategies that are in place to achieve security goals; (f) capabilities and knowledge (e.g. budget, people, processes, information systems and technologies), etc.

## 2. Case

From June 2021 onwards, the number of migrants seeking to cross from Belarus into the territory of neighbouring Latvia, Lithuania and Poland in an irregular manner increased dramatically. The Belarusian authorities contributed by organizing the transfer of refugees and immigrants from Iraq, Afghanistan, and other countries of the Middle East and Africa across the Belarusian-Lithuanian and Belarusian-Polish-Latvian border.

According to statistics, the number of unauthorized attempts to enter Poland stood at 3,500 in August, 7,700 in September and 17,300 in October 2021, and Polish border services recorded approximately 2 thousand attempts to cross the Polish-Belarusian border every month illegally (Statista, 2023).

In 2021, the number of people crossing the Lithuania-Belarus border increased more than thirtyfold compared to the previous year. Between 1 January 2021 and 31 January 2022, 4 150 irregular migrants (including 2 891 persons in July 2021 alone) were de facto detained in Lithuania (State Data, 2023). According to the Lithuanian Border Guard Service, 20,679 migrants were prevented from entering Lithuania between 3 August 2021 and 1 July 2023 (Lithuanian State Border Guard Service, 2023).

In Latvia, the number of persons detained for irregular border crossing was almost 15 times higher in 2021 (446 attempts) compared to 2020 (30 attempts), 10,394 instances of border-crossing deterrence (i.e. push-backs) were recorded from 2021 until 20 July 2023 (Latvia State Border Guard, 2023).

The majority of migrants were citizens from Middle Eastern and African countries (Iraq (Kurds and Yazidis, Iraqi Arabs) Syria, Iran, Afghanistan, Congo, Cameroon, Sri Lanka).

The Belarus–European Union border crisis was recognized as “hybrid attacks” by the Belarusian authorities resulting in increased pressures relating to migration and asylum at the Belarus border with Latvia, Lithuania and Poland (CoE Parliamentary Assembly Resolution 2404 (2021)). The migrant crisis was triggered by the severe deterioration in Belarus–EU relations, following the 2020 Belarusian presidential election, the 2020–2021 Belarusian protests, the Ryanair Flight 4978 incident and subsequent sanctions on Belarus. The “hybrid attacks” began around July 7 2021, when Belarus's President threatened to “flood” the EU with “drugs and migrants”. Those who arrived in Belarus were then given instructions about how and where to trespass the EU border, and what to tell the border guards on the other side of the border.

Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia have described the migrant crisis as a “hybrid attack”, using migrants as weapons and calling the migrant crisis an incident of human trafficking of migrants, waged by Belarus against the EU. In the EU agenda, this phenomenon was named as “the instrumentalization of migration” - capacity to control irregular migratory flows (Rashe, 2022), and a response mechanism was initiated by 3 EU Eastern countries in order to establish a risk management system for external border security. Migration is increasingly framed as a security issue because immigrants are presumed to bring risks of terrorism, human trafficking, cross-border crime and



illegal immigration (Dekkers et al., 2016). This situation indicates that contemporary security challenges are highly complex and inter-related, requiring more cross-sectoral, transdisciplinary and cross-country cooperation in all risk management phases both at the EU and Member States levels.

### 3. Best practices on EU external – Eastern borders' security management

#### 3.1. Risk Analysis and Controls

External border security is affected by phenomena such as geopolitics, migration, cross-border crime, terrorism, and hybrid threats that are fluid and multidimensional in nature, thus requiring a flexible approach to their understanding, analysis and management.

Border Security Agencies within EU Member States are using Common Integrated Risk Analysis Model (CIRAM)<sup>2</sup>, which focusses on the security threat dimension. The analysis of different risk categories provides a comprehensive picture of challenges and threats that jeopardize the security and functioning of the EU's external borders. Risks are grouped into three broad categories: irregular migration (clandestine entry, document fraud), , secondary movements and returns, and cross-border crime (smuggling of illicit drugs, firearms smuggling, detection of stolen vehicles and vehicle parts, tobacco smuggling, trafficking in human beings).

*Security Risk Management* is the ongoing process of identifying these border security risks and implementing plans to address them. *Risk Analysis* refers to the systematic examination of components of risks to inform decision-making. For the management of the security of external borders, *risk* is defined as the magnitude and likelihood of a threat occurring at the external borders, given the measures in place at the national borders and within the EU, which will affect the EU internal security and national security of Member States.

Risk in the context of the management of the security of external borders can be viewed as having 3 components: (1) the threat that will be assessed in terms of magnitude and likelihood; (2) the vulnerability to the threat – in other words the level and efficiency of response to the threat; and (3) the impact – should the threat on the EU internal and/or Member States' national security materialize, or on the security of the external borders, as well as the bearing on the efficient management of bona fide border crossing. In the practice of security risk management, magnitude refers to the size or severity of a threat (e.g. a large-scale cyberattack could have a high magnitude), and impact is the effect or consequence of that threat if it occurs (e.g. a high-magnitude threat typically leads to a more significant impact, such as financial loss, or loss of life. In essence, the greater the magnitude of a threat, the more substantial the potential impact it can have on security. Both magnitude and impact are interconnected for assessing risks effectively.

Risks are identified and assessed, in view of their level of threat, vulnerability and impact, and then communicated to the decision-makers. While the analysts are responsible for identifying and assessing the threat, decision-makers are responsible, within the remit of their decision-making

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<sup>2</sup> Common Integrated Risk Analysis Model (CIRAM) developed by FRONTEX, the European Border and Coast Guard Agency. The purpose of the CIRAM is to establish a clear and transparent methodology for risk analysis in order to facilitate efficient information exchange and cooperation in the field of border security. See: Common Integrated Risk Analysis Model (CIRAM): summary booklet, Version 2.1 (2021), FRONTEX - European Border and Coast Guard Agency, <https://prd.frontex.europa.eu/document/common-integrated-risk-analysis-model-2-1/>



capacities, for managing the risks. Risk analysis implies a reference period – a day, a week, a month or a year – consistent with the level of decision-making it is intended to inform.

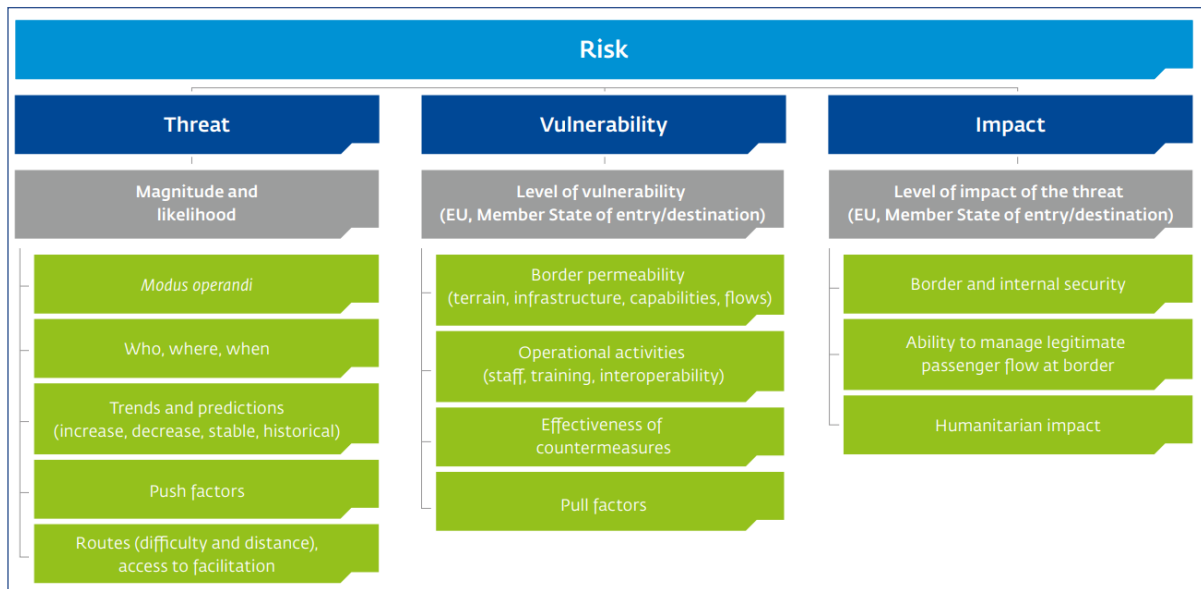


Figure 2. Scheme for the Risk Analysis using CIRAM tool<sup>3</sup>

*Example of Controls.* Risk analysts of national border security agencies communicate risks to the Management Board, so that it can take informed decisions about annual budget allocation regarding a variety of risks. Risk analysts at border crossing point (BCP) level communicate operational risks to the head of the BCP, so that he or she can take informed decisions when allocating staff for controls and surveillance. Risk analysts should state that the threat of illegal border-crossing between BCP X and BCP Y is very likely, given evidence from the past and intelligence currently available, whereas it is unlikely between BCP Y and BCP Z. This information enables decision-makers to allocate resources as well as to the area between BCP X and BCP Y as a priority.

National integrated border surveillance systems driven by risk analysis should have a stable capacity (organizational, administrative and technical) and in a continuous state of alert. This is necessary to prevent and detect unauthorized border crossings, to apprehend persons who have crossed the border illegally and to ensure that such persons are subject to coherent and comprehensive referral procedures (i.e. screening procedures) that respect their fundamental rights, to intercept transportation means, such as vessels, used for illegal border crossing, to counter cross-border crime, such as smuggling, human trafficking and terrorism, as well as to respond to threats of a hybrid nature.

<sup>3</sup> Common Integrated Risk Analysis Model (CIRAM): summary booklet, Version 2.0 (2013), FRONTEX - European Border and Coast Guard Agency, <https://frontex.europa.eu/what-we-do/monitoring-and-risk-analysis/ciram/>



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## **3.2. Response to Hybrid Threats**

### *3.2.1. Operational support by EU agencies*

In the peak of irregular migration influx (July 2021), the Lithuanian Government requested support from specialized EU agencies – FRONTEX (European Border and Coast Guard Agency) and the EUAA (EU Agency for Asylum). FRONTEX and EUAA in dealing with irregular migrants related problems are aimed at preventing the flow of irregular migrants through Lithuania to Western EU countries.

FRONTEX quickly launched a Rapid Border Intervention in order to bring immediate assistance to an EU Member State that is under urgent and exceptional pressure at its external border, especially related to large numbers of non-EU nationals trying to enter its territory illegally. During the Rapid Border Intervention, FRONTEX deployed about 120 officers, 36 patrol cars and 2 helicopters to conduct border surveillance and control activities in support of the Lithuanian State Border Guard Service (SGBS). FRONTEX officers also assisted in data gathering on irregular border crossings and exchange of operational information.

The EUAA has been providing operational support and deployed 73 personnel working in the areas of registration and processing of asylum applications – including by conducting interviews and drafting opinions – and enhancing the capacity to manage the reception of applicants. Also, the Lithuanian State Border Guard Service (SGBS) received support to enhance management of the first line reception, in particular onsite management, communication, information provision, as well as assistance in expanding reception capacities.

### *3.2.2. Physical Barrier*

By implementing the Law on Installation of a Physical Barrier (2021), the Lithuanian Government approved the installation of a physical barrier at the end of August in 2021, after the Belarusian regime launched a hybrid attack against Lithuania, resulting in an influx of illegal migrants into the country. The physical barrier is being installed in accordance with the requirements of the State Border Guard Service (SGBS) – a concertina prism was installed on the national border, and fence segments topped with concertina spiral coil are being built next to it. The total height of the fence with the concertina is approximately 4 meters above ground. During the construction of the physical barrier, 530 kilometers of new fence segments were installed, and 357 kilometers of concertina prism were built. The total length of the Lithuanian border with Belarus is 679 kilometers. More than 100 kilometers of the national border runs along the banks of rivers and lakes, where there are no plans to install physical barriers.

### *3.2.3. Automated state border surveillance system*

In order to maximize a state border protection, it is essential to ensure that the entire section of the border with Belarus is monitored using the latest technologies. Lithuania has installed the automated state border monitoring system, equipped with CCTV cameras and motion detectors, on a 640 km stretch and will monitor 100% of the state borders with Belarus. Also, the Lithuanian State Border Guard Service uses drones, reconnaissance aircraft, offshore sensors and satellite remote sensing to track illegal migration.



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#### 3.2.4. Refuse entry

In early July 2021, the Lithuanian Parliament declared that the country is in a state-level emergency due to a massive influx of migrants. The Lithuanian Parliament adopted amendments to the Law on the State Border and Protection (25 April 2023), legalizing the turning away of irregular migrants at the border under a state-level extreme situation regime or a state of emergency.

The amendments to the Law on the State Border and Protection (2023) introduce a possibility to refuse entry to Lithuania during a state-level extreme situation, and due to an influx of foreigners; also to those foreign nationals who intend to cross or have crossed the state border at places that are not designated for that purpose or at places designated for that purpose but having violated the procedure for crossing the state border. The officers of the Lithuanian State Border Guard Service (SBGS) have the right to turn away irregular migrants only along the border – up to 5 km inland.

The provision on turning away migrants applied individually to each foreigner and would not apply in certain cases to ensure entry or humanitarian access to Lithuania's territory for foreigners fleeing military aggression or persecution. An assessment of the need for assistance was carried out for foreigners who had not been allowed to enter. If found to be in need, migrants would have to be provided with necessary urgent medical or other assistance.

The amendments to the Law on the State Border and Protection (2023) make a clear distinction between natural migration and the instrumentalized migration facilitated by the Belarusian regime and that the legislation is necessary to safeguard Lithuania's national security interests.

### 3.3. Legal Framework for Risk Management of Border Security

In October 2021, the European Council invited the Commission to propose any necessary changes to the EU's legal framework to respond to the state-sponsored instrumentalization of people at the EU's external border with Belarus. Article 78(3) of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) provides for the adoption of provisional measures in emergency migratory situations at the EU's external borders. The objective of the proposal is to support Latvia, Lithuania and Poland by providing for the measures and operational support necessary to manage in a humane, orderly and dignified manner, fully respectful of fundamental rights, the arrival of persons being instrumentalized by Belarus.

The main features of the emergency migration and asylum management procedure at the EU external borders (Lithuania, Latvia, and Poland) are:

- ◆ possibility for the Member States concerned to register an asylum application and offer the possibility for its effective lodging only at specific registration points located at the vicinity of the border including the border crossing points designated for that purpose
- ◆ registration deadline for applications for international protection extended to up to four weeks
- ◆ possibility to apply the accelerated procedure at the border for all applications, and thus limiting the possibility for Belarus to target for instrumentalization third-country nationals to whom the border procedure cannot be applied
- ◆ return procedure at the external borders



- ♦ material reception conditions –to cover only basic needs. Latvia, Lithuania and Poland need to ensure that any actions respect basic humanitarian guarantees, such as providing third-country nationals on their territory with food, water, clothing, adequate medical care, assistance to vulnerable persons and temporary shelter

The European Commission's proposal is in line with the comprehensive approach set out in the New Pact on Migration and Asylum. The Pact is designed to establish a common approach to migration and asylum that is based on solidarity, responsibility, and respect for human rights. The Pact has delivered various outcomes, e.g. determined an EU mechanism for preparedness and management of crises related to migration, developed an early warning and forecasting system allowing prompt identification of migration situations, enabling effective preparedness and response, addressed situations of crisis and force majeure in the field of migration and asylum, established the EU integrated border management system – a coordinated framework ranging from border surveillance to anti-smuggling and to returns of migrants.

The European Commission's forthcoming proposals to reform the Schengen Borders Code will include strengthening the EU's legal framework to give better tools to Member States to protect the external borders in situations of instrumentalization of migrants, while ensuring full respect for fundamental rights. They will also contain measures that will help those Member States who see unauthorized movements of migrants including the repercussions of instrumentalization far away from the external border.

The European Commission's proposal is the latest in a series of coordinated EU actions that include: targeted measures for transport operators that facilitate or engage in smuggling; diplomatic and external action; stepping up humanitarian assistance and support for border security and migration management.

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