EVROS, CEUTA, AND BELARUS: MIGRATION POWER ON THE MARGINS OF EUROPE

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Introduction: Staging the Border

In recent years, Türkiye, Belarus, and Morocco have each used cross-border migration as a tool of strategic engagement as they sought to challenge regional hierarchies, unsettle bilateral rivals, and draw renewed attention from the European Union. These episodes, from the Evros border crisis in 2020 to the Ceuta crossings in May 2021, and the Belarus-Poland standoff later that same year, are often described as "hybrid threats" or acts of weaponisation (for recent work on this, see Sharp, 2025). Yet, such framings obscure the strategic layering at play. These were less one-off provocations than acts of *migration diplomacy* (İçduygu and Aksel, 2014; Tsourapas, 2017). They became deliberate efforts to shape the foreign policy behaviour of neighbouring states and supranational institutions through control over mobility and the calibration of crisis.

Moving beyond accounts that frame migration as a crude instrument of coercion, this analysis approaches it as a strategic practice that operates across three levels: domestic, bilateral, and supranational (on this three-level approach, see Tsourapas, 2025). States deploy migration policy to manage internal pressures, unsettle rivals, and shape their standing within international institutions. The objective is less about triggering disruption than about reclaiming leverage by forcing recognition, securing concessions, or reframing relationships on their own terms. To demonstrate this, this article draws on the concept of *migration power* to examine how Türkiye, Belarus, and Morocco have used mobility as both method and message (Fernández-Molina and Tsourapas, 2024). In each case, migration served as a tool of *refugee rent-seeking* and a performance of geopolitical agency (Freier et al., 2021; Delacloche, 2024), designed to convert movement into visibility and crisis into calculated influence.

I. Domestic Level: Performing Migration Power at Home

Migration diplomacy begins at home. For each of these three states, the decision to instrumentalise migration was shaped by internal political pressures, regime insecurity, and the need to perform strength before domestic audiences.

In Türkiye, the February 2020 border opening followed a stunning military failure in northern Syria and growing frustration with the 2016 EU-Turkey Statement. Erdoğan's government was facing economic decline, rising anti-refugee sentiment, and growing nationalist pressure from

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within the political establishment. By releasing migrants toward the Greek border, Ankara shifted attention outward while simultaneously performing a protective stance at home. The crisis was framed as a betrayal by Europe, which justified confrontation and reinforced a narrative of self-reliance.

Belarus, by contrast, acted from a position of isolation. In 2021, the Lukashenko regime was reeling from protests, sanctions, and international condemnation following the fraudulent presidential election and Ryanair hijacking. Facilitating the movement of migrants to the EU's eastern border allowed the regime to reassert control, frame the crisis as evidence of Western double standards, and recast domestic repression as a form of sovereign defence. As with Türkiye, the West was positioned not as a normative authority but as a selective actor that was eager to externalise responsibility while evading the burdens of regional instability. For Lukashenko, as for Erdoğan, migration became a way to expose this gap and redirect internal weakness into a posture of confrontation.

Finally, Morocco's tactics followed a slower build. Migration control became a means of asserting state authority, closely tied to the monarchy's defence of national sovereignty, especially over Western Sahara. The 2021 Ceuta incident came after Spain admitted Polisario leader Brahim Ghali for medical treatment, a move Rabat viewed as a direct challenge to its territorial claims. Domestically, the state framed the sudden border breach as a signal that Moroccan sovereignty would not be compromised without consequence. For Rabat, the ability to release or contain migratory flows became a demonstration of power, projecting resolve not just to Spain and the EU, but to Moroccan citizens as well. In this context, mobility was governed less as a policy tool than as a performance of national pride and geopolitical status.

Across all three cases, the use of migration served more than external strategy. It reinforced internal authority, converted domestic vulnerability into postures of control, and positioned the state as an embattled, albeit capable, guardian of national interest. These performances of migration power at the domestic level laid the groundwork for the confrontations that followed, both at the border and beyond.

II. Bilateral Level: Crisis as Leverage

Once the domestic groundwork is set, migration diplomacy turns outward. Türkiye, Belarus, and Morocco each arguably employed cross-border movement to provoke, punish, or reposition themselves in relation to a neighbouring state. Rather than being examined as breakdowns in enforcement, these should be approached as tactical disruptions aimed at shifting the balance of bilateral engagement.

In Türkiye's case, the 2020 Evros border opening targeted not only the European Union but Greece specifically. After months of tension over maritime claims and refugee management, Ankara released thousands of migrants toward the Greek land border. Athens responded with force, and the standoff escalated rapidly. Erdoğan's government framed Greece as violating international norms, while simultaneously blaming Europe for failing to uphold earlier

agreements. Migration here functioned as a pressurising tool; it sought to punish Greek intransigence while pushing for a renegotiation of the broader European approach to asylum and border governance.

Belarus pursued a starker version of this tactic in 2021. Following EU sanctions, Lukashenko's regime opened direct air corridors for migrants to Minsk, funnelling them toward the borders of Poland and Lithuania. The move was framed as retaliation, a way to make neighbouring states feel the costs of their support for opposition forces and EU alignment. Border militarisation, legal derogations, and human rights violations followed. Not unlike Türkiye, Belarus used migrants to destabilise relations and amplify its disruptive relevance.

Morocco's targeting of Spain around the Ceuta crisis was somewhat more ambiguous, but equally calculated. After Madrid allowed Brahim Ghali entry for medical care, Rabat relaxed border enforcement, allowing thousands, including many unaccompanied minors, to cross into the enclave. Spain was caught off guard, and the diplomatic temperature rose quickly. Rabat later denied formal responsibility, but the message had landed that Spanish support for the Polisario would incur a price. In effect, Morocco had turned the border into a bargaining chip. Across all three cases, the tactic was aimed to reshape the terms of political engagement and force a response on altered ground. Beyond coercion, migration was instrumentalised to generate visibility, disrupt diplomatic routines, and signal the costs of exclusion or defiance. These episodes reveal how cross-border mobility functions as a mode of confrontation where foreign policy is enacted through the movement of people, and bilateral disputes unfold across the bodies of the displaced. This is migration power in its bilateral form: it is targeted and theatrical, while also calibrated for maximum friction with neighbouring states.

III. Supranational Manoeuvring: Turning Crisis Upward

Beyond the bilateral stage lies the EU. All three states targeted Brussels as the ultimate interlocutor, not only to extract refugee rent but to contest the architecture of European migration governance. Migration diplomacy here arguably involved two simultaneous moves: destabilisation and demand.

Türkiye's turn toward the EU in 2020 was overt. After years of stalled accession talks and unmet promises under the EU-Turkey Statement, Ankara reframed the refugee burden as a failing of Europe itself. Erdoğan rejected new offers of financial assistance, insisting that solidarity was lacking and that the EU had broken its word. At the border, Greek actions were cast as violations of humanitarian norms. Within the EU, the crisis triggered emergency funding and rhetorical support for Greece, but also internal disquiet. Türkiye used migration to force the EU into reactive mode by performing crisis to reassert its regional indispensability.

Belarus went further as it sought exposure, rather than dialogue. The 2021 border crisis was choreographed to highlight what the regime portrayed as European hypocrisy. Migrants trapped in the forests between Belarus and Poland became living symbols of EU inconsistency: upholding human rights principles rhetorically, while fortifying borders physically. Belarus forced a spectacle of legal confusion over whether this is a security crisis, a humanitarian emergency,

or both. Perhaps predictably, the EU struggled to respond coherently, revealing both internal fragmentation and the limits of its normative authority.

Morocco's use of supranational leverage followed a different rhythm. By relaxing controls at Ceuta, Rabat reminded Brussels of its role as Europe's southern gatekeeper. The move followed patterns of what could be termed conditional cooperation. On the one hand, when recognised and supported, Morocco plays the role of stabiliser; on the other, when sidelined (especially on issues like Western Sahara), it can easily unmake that role. In this way, Morocco signalled that migration control was no longer technocratic, but political. The flows could be restarted or stemmed based on the diplomatic climate each time.

What these cases show is how often migration diplomacy at the EU level operates through calibrated disruption rather than formal negotiation. Forced mobility becomes a mode of communication that exploits the EU's deep internal divisions and reliance on external partners. By producing crises at the periphery of Europe, these states sought reframe the centre. They revealed the limits of externalisation and the fragility of supranational consensus. Above all, they made visible what EU policy often denies: that border governance is not a neutral function. It is a field of power; one that can be contested from its very margins.

Conclusion: Reckoning with Migration Power

In sum, a comparison of these three cases reveals how migration diplomacy is rarely improvised. Instead, it is deliberate, multi-scalar, and increasingly central to how regional powers assert themselves. Across Türkiye, Belarus, and Morocco, control over human mobility served to manage bilateral tensions or distract from domestic vulnerabilities. But, importantly, it also became a structured means of negotiating a place within an unequal international order.

Treating these practices merely as coercive or as instances of "weaponisation" risks flattening their political complexity (Koinova, 2025). Migration diplomacy operates through a spectrum of power relations ranging from formal agreements to informal pressure, from explicit threats to tacit bargains. These acts draw from and exploit the EU's institutional fragmentation, normative contradictions, and heavy reliance on external partners to manage its borders (Tsourdi and Zardo, 2025). At the same time, the externalisation of migration governance often redistributes power within partner states in ways that reinforce authoritarian structures and sideline democratic reform (Faustini Torres, 2025). Financial flows, technological assistance, and delegated enforcement reshape not just borders, but domestic political fields. The result is a diplomacy of movement that blurs lines between cooperation and coercion; or, put differently, between performance and negotiation.

Rather than viewing migration diplomacy as an aberration or threat, it must be recognised as a strategic grammar of asymmetrical politics. It is a language used to demand recognition, project status, and contest exclusion. Until the EU confronts the structural conditions that sustain this asymmetry, it will remain subject to its expressions, whether at Evros, Ceuta, or the forests of the Belarusian border.

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