Who Gets Blamed? European Responses to Instrumentalised Migration

29 SEPTEMBER 2026

Elisabeth Schäfer



Photo by Carl Gruner on Unsplash

The recent influx of migrants into the Spanish exclave of Ceuta has prompted comparisons with previous cases of instrumentalised migration, including the 2021 crisis at the Belarusian–Polish border (Noss et al., 2026). Despite important similarities, European reactions to the Belarus crisis and to the 2026 events in Ceuta differed considerably. In 2021, European responses largely targeted Belarus; in Ceuta, parts of the response also targeted Spain itself (Muñoz, 2026; Council of the EU, 2025a; Parrock, 2021).

Migration itself is already highly securitised in European politics, making the topic particularly relevant to the issue of instrumentalised migration, as external actors can exploit an issue that already generates strong political and societal divisions. Instrumentalised migration refers to the exploitation of migrants by state or non-state actors to exert political or financial pres-

sure, often as part of a hybrid conflict aimed at imposing costs or generating division within targeted states (Talik, 2024). Because the term "weaponised migration" risks framing migrants themselves as weapons or security threats (Chetail, 2026), this article uses "instrumentalisation of migration" instead. In addition, the term "migrants" is used as an umbrella category without making assumptions about individuals' legal status or motives.

This article asks how European reactions to the two cases differed and what may explain this variation. It argues that this variation can be understood primarily through two factors: the clarity of attribution to an external actor and pre-existing intra-European divisions over migration policy. Whether the 2026 Ceuta events ultimately constituted deliberate state-sponsored instrumentalisation remains contested. The article, therefore, compares not only the events themselves but also how European governments interpreted and responded to them.

Pressure from the East: The EU's External Borders in 2021

Following the repression of peaceful protesters after Belarus's presidential election in August 2020, the EU imposed sanctions (Council of the EU, 2026a). In response, the Belarusian government, under its authoritarian leader, Aljaksandr Ryhorawitsch Lukashenko, orchestrated an influx of irregular migrants towards Poland, Latvia and Lithuania beginning in the summer of 2021 (Grześkowiak, 2022). To facilitate the influx, Belarus eased visa and travel access, promoted travel to Belarus on social media, and cooperated with travel agencies that helped migrants reach the EU's eastern borders (Adams, 2021; Grześkowiak, 2022; Forti, 2023). Reports described Belarusian border guards directing migrants towards the border and, in some cases, cutting through Polish border fencing to facilitate crossings (Reality Check, 2021). Frontex recorded 8,184 irregular border crossings in 2021, a tenfold increase from the previous year (Frontex, 2024).

The affected member states responded by rapidly reinforcing their borders. Lithuania declared a state of emergency and appealed for European support, while additional troops were deployed at the Polish and Lithuanian borders and Poland constructed a barrier along the Belarusian frontier (BBC, 2021; Chołodowski, 2021; Wlodarczak-semczuk & Sytas, 2021). All three states subsequently modified their legal migration and asylum frameworks, substantially restricting access to asylum (Forti, 2023).

The EU consistently attributed the influx to Belarus and framed it as a hybrid operation aimed at destabilising the Union (Council of the EU, 2021a; Directorate-General for Communication, 2024). Although Belarus never officially acknowledged orchestrating the influx (Vardanjan, 2026), the EU responded by sanctioning 166 individuals and 15 entities (Council of the EU, 2021b; Parrock, 2021).

The EU Commission also introduced emergency asylum measures for the affected states, which were criticised for shifting the burden of instru-

mentalisation onto migrants rather than the responsible third country (Forti, 2023). The broader response also raised human-rights concerns, particularly regarding pushbacks and treatment at the border (Greener & Ożyńska, 2025).

The response subsequently became institutionalised, as the EU maintained sanctions and strengthened the eastern border while Poland, Lithuania and Latvia further tightened their border and asylum policies (Directorate-General for Communication, 2024; Council of the EU, 2025b; Council of the EU, 2026b).

Pressure from the South: Ceuta in 2026

Ceuta is one of two Spanish exclaves bordering Morocco and has repeatedly been a source of diplomatic tension between Madrid and Rabat, which does not recognise Spanish sovereignty over Ceuta and Melilla (Noss et al., 2026). These tensions had already intersected with migration in May 2021, when around 8,000 migrants entered Ceuta after Morocco suspended border controls (Zimmermann et al., 2026).

Ceuta experienced a sudden influx of migrants on July 30th, with estimates ranging from 50,000 to 80,000 crossings (Noss et al., 2026; Reddig, 2026; Zimmermann et al., 2026). Most migrants attempted to reach the exclave by swimming, with up to 141 fatalities reported (Will, 2026). By comparison, only 3,523 land-border crossings into Ceuta were recorded in all of 2025 (Noss et al., 2026). The influx was traced back to false claims on social media platforms that Spain's border was open and that migrants reaching Ceuta by sea could not be returned, apparently based on a misinterpretation of an April Supreme Court ruling (Nirmalshankar, 2026; Rawat, 2026). Spain and Morocco attributed the rumours to migrant smuggling networks, although allegations of Moroccan involvement emerged after some migrants reported being encouraged rather than prevented from crossing (Jerke et al., 2026). The Spanish Prime Minister Sánchez described the influx as an attack on Spain's territorial integrity, and the government deployed the military to return migrants to Morocco (Sánchez, 2026b). By the evening of 31 July, Foreign Minister José Manuel Albares stated that almost all those who had entered Ceuta had returned (Albares, 2026).

European reactions initially focused on border control, with several political leaders calling the situation unacceptable and urging Spain to regain control and prevent onward movement to the European mainland (Noss et al., 2026). Some politicians went further, attributing part of the responsibility to Spain itself. CDU/CSU deputy parliamentary leader Günter Krings, for example, argued that Spain's recent regularisation policy had created incentives for further irregular crossings (Noss et al., 2026). Other European actors instead emphasised solidarity and coordination. France and the United Kingdom offered assistance, while several European leaders called for a coordinated European response (Noss et al., 2026). Spain subsequently

reinforced the border around Ceuta, including by installing a swimming barrier (Noss et al., 2026).

The crisis also triggered unilateral measures within the EU. Italy introduced controls on air and sea connections with Spain, while France and Germany introduced or extended border controls (Noss et al., 2026). According to former EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs, Josep Borrell Fontelles, "under EU law, no Member State can unilaterally suspend another's participation in Schengen" (Borrell Fontelles, 2026). It should also be stated clearly that, even though the Spanish exclaves belong to the Schengen Area, special provisions – including border checks – apply, so that "no one can travel from Ceuta or Melilla to mainland Spain without being identified by the National Police at the port or the airport" (Ministerio de Asuntos Exteriores, Unión Europea y Cooperación, 2026). Spain strongly criticised these measures as divisive and called for respect for EU treaties and European unity (Sánchez, 2026a). Sánchez argued that some member states' reactions were "driven by prejudice, fake news, ignorance, or political interests" (Maturana, 2026). The dispute escalated when Spain imposed retaliatory checks on connections with Italy on 8 August (Will, 2026).

On September 17th, the European Parliament condemned the instrumentalisation of irregular migration as a tool of hybrid warfare, called for stronger protection of the EU's external borders, including enhanced Frontex capabilities and greater cooperation with EU agencies and with Morocco (European Parliament, 2026). At the same time, however, it criticised Spain's regularisation of around 500,000 undocumented migrants and asylum seekers as a potential "pull factor" (European Parliament, 2026). Finally, it called on Morocco to fulfil its border management and migration cooperation commitments and reaffirmed Spain's territorial integrity and sovereignty over Ceuta (European Parliament, 2026).

Same Instrument, Different Response

Despite important similarities, the two crises generated very different European responses. Two differences are particularly apparent: how responsibility was attributed, and the degree of solidarity with the affected member states. In 2021, European responses largely treated Poland, Lithuania and Latvia as targets of an externally orchestrated operation and directed countermeasures primarily against Belarus. In Ceuta, by contrast, responsibility remained more contested, and parts of the European response were directed not only towards external actors but also towards Spain itself.

The first factor that may help explain this variation is the clarity of attribution. In 2021, the comparatively clear attribution of responsibility created a clear distinction between the external actor and the affected member states. In Ceuta, by contrast, the mobilisation mechanism was identifiable, but Moroccan state involvement remained contested. This ambiguity left greater room for competing interpretations of responsibility, including crit-

icism directed at Spain itself. Therefore, differences in attribution appear to have shaped the response. This contrast may also have been reinforced by the broader political context. Belarus was already subject to EU sanctions and openly confronting the European Union when the migration crisis began, whereas the evidence presented here does not show an equally confrontational EU–Morocco relationship. Moreover, Spain itself attributed the influx to migrant smugglers rather than to Morocco, a position that may have reflected its reliance on Moroccan cooperation in migration management.

A second factor was the political context in which the Ceuta crisis occurred. Spain's migration policy had already become a source of disagreement within Europe before the July events. In January 2026, Spain had regularised around 500,000 undocumented migrants and asylum seekers, placing its approach at odds with more restrictive positions elsewhere in Europe (Jones & Kassam, 2026). The evidence presented here does not establish a causal link between Spain's regularisation and the influx itself. However, the fact that both individual politicians and, later, the European Parliament linked this policy to the influx of migrants in Ceuta shows how an existing migration-policy cleavage became part of the interpretation of the crisis. The subsequent dispute over border controls and Schengen, therefore, reflected not only concern about the immediate influx, but also wider disagreements over European migration policy.

Strategic Lessons and Their Limits

The comparison points to broader lessons for future cases of instrumentalised migration. Firstly, attribution matters. A coordinated European response appears easier when responsibility can be clearly attributed to an external actor. In 2021, relatively clear attribution allowed European measures to focus both on supporting the affected member states and on sanctioning the presumed perpetrator.

Second, existing political divisions can constitute vulnerabilities in their own right. Migration is already a highly contested and securitised policy field, making disagreements over migration policy particularly susceptible to political exploitation – a mechanism previously shown in the literature on instrumentalised migration (Vardanjan, 2026). The case of Ceuta illustrates how such cleavages may shape the response itself: rather than focusing exclusively on a possible external actor, parts of the European debate shifted towards Spain's own migration policy. Where responsibility remains contested, policymakers should distinguish carefully between verified external involvement and domestic political disputes, since competing interpretations can themselves fragment the response.

These conclusions should, however, be treated cautiously. The cases occurred five years apart under different political conditions and also differed substantially in scale and duration. While 8,184 irregular border crossings

were recorded at the EU's eastern external borders over the course of 2021, an estimated 50,000 to 80,000 people entered Ceuta within a few days in 2026. Belarusian state involvement was also considerably better documented, whereas responsibility for the Ceuta influx remained contested. These differences may themselves have shaped the intensity and form of European reactions. The comparison, therefore, identifies plausible explanatory mechanisms but cannot isolate their individual causal weight.

Overall, the comparison suggests, in line with existing research on instrumentalised migration, that European responses are shaped not only by migration pressure itself but also by how responsibility is attributed and by the political context in which a crisis occurs. The two cases, therefore, show that the cohesion of European responses depends not only on what happens at the border but also on how the crisis is politically interpreted.

Sources

Adams, P. (2021, Oktober 21). How Belarus is helping 'tourists' break into the EU. BBC News. https://www.bbc.com/news/world-58952867

Albares, J. M. (2026, Juli 31). La práctica totalidad de quienes entraron en Ceuta han vuelto ya a Marruecos. No es posible trasladarse de Ceuta y Melilla a la Peninsula sin identificarse en un control de policía. La integridad del espacio Schengen está absolutamente garantizada. Basta de confusión interesada [Tweet]. Twitter, [@jmalbares]. https://x.com/jmalbares/status/2083258896106332256

BBC. (2021). Belarus migrants: Poland PM blames Russia's Putin for migrant crisis. https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-59226226

Borrell Fontelles, J. (2026, Juli 31). 1. After thousands of migrants crossed into Ceuta from Morocco this week, Italy threatened to "suspend Schengen with Spain." It just can't. Under EU law, no Member State can unilaterally suspend another's participation in Schengen. [Tweet]. Twitter. https://x.com/JosepBorrellF/status/2083118059309473999

Chetail, V. (2026). The Weaponisation of Migration and the Mirage of Hybrid Warfare in International Law: A Critique (SSRN Scholarly Paper Nr. 6474598). Social Science Research Network. https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.6474598

Chołodowski, M. (2021). „We're Gonna Build a Wall and It Will Be Impenetrable". Kaczyński Pledges to Seal the Polish-Belarus Border. Wyborcza.Pl. https://wyborcza.pl/7,173236,27689246,we-re-gonna-build-a-wall-and-it-will-be-impenetrable-kaczynski.html

Council of the EU. (2021a). Belarus: Declaration by the High Representative on behalf of the European Union on the situation at the European Union border [Press release]. https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2021/11/10/belarus-declaration-by-the-high-representative-on-behalf-of-the-european-union-on-the-situation-at-the-european-union-border/

Council of the EU. (2021b, November 15). Belarus: EU broadens scope for sanctions to tackle hybrid attacks and instrumentalisation of migrants. Consilium. https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2021/11/15/belarus-eu-broadens-scope-for-sanctions-to-tackle-hybrid-attacks-and-instrumentalisation-of-migrants/

Council of the EU. (2025a, November 15). Belarus: EU broadens scope for sanctions to tackle hybrid attacks and instrumentalisation of migrants—Consilium. consilium.eu. https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2021/11/15/belarus-eu-broadens-scope-for-sanctions-to-tackle-hybrid-attacks-and-instrumentalisation-of-migrants/

Council of the EU. (2025b, Dezember 15). Belarus: Council broadens scope of sanctions regime to cover hybrid activities against EU member states. Consilium. Consilium. https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2025/12/15/belarus-council-broadens-scope-of-sanctions-regime-to-cover-hybrid-activities-against-eu-member-states/

Council of the EU. (2026a, Februar 26). EU sanctions against Belarus. Consilium. https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/sanctions-against-belarus/

Council of the EU. (2026b, Februar 26). EU sanctions against Belarus. Consilium. https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/sanctions-against-belarus/

Directorate-General for Communication. (2024). Commission proposes measures to strengthen border security and counter hybrid threats. European Commission. https://commission.europa.eu/news-and-media/news/commission-proposes-measures-strengthen-border-security-and-counter-hybrid-threats-2024-12-11_en

European Parliament. (2026). Ceuta: Parliament demands stronger protection of EU's external borders | News | European Parliament [Press release]. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20260911IPR47470/ceuta-parliament-demands-stronger-protection-of-eu-s-external-borders

Forti, M. (2023). Belarus-sponsored Migration Movements and the Response by Lithuania, Latvia, and Poland: A Critical Appraisal [Text/html,PDF]. European Papers – A Journal on Law and Integration, 2023 8, 22238. https://doi.org/10.15166/2499-8249/648

Frontex. (2024). Migratory routes—Eastern Borders Route. frontex.europa.eu. https://www.frontex.europa.eu/what-we-do/monitoring-and-risk-analysis/migratory-routes/migratory-routes/

Greener, C., & Ożyńska, D. (2025). Brutal Barriers: Pushbacks, violence and the violation of human rights on the Poland-Belarus border. Oxfam International. https://www.oxfam.org/en/research/brutal-barriers-pushbacks-violence-and-violation-human-rights-poland-belarus-border

Grześkowiak, M. (2022). "Guardian of the Treaties" is No More? The European Commission and the 2021 Humanitarian Crisis on Poland–Belarus Border. Refugee Survey Quarterly, 81 – 102, 42(1, March 2023). https://doi.org/10.1093/rsq/hdac025

Jerke, L., Sales Padro, S., & Sprothen, V. (2026). Ceuta: Marokko macht Falschinformationen für Krise in Ceuta verantwortlich | DIE ZEIT. DIE ZEIT. https://www.zeit.de/politik/ausland/2026-08/ceuta-marokko-spanien-migration-grenze-tote

Jones, S., & Kassam, A. (2026). Spain approves decree to regularise half a million undocumented migrants | Spain | The Guardian. The Guardian. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2026/jan/27/spain-decree-regularise-undocumented-migrants

Maturana, J. (2026, Januar 8). Ceuta: Dieses Schreiben schickte Sánchez an Von der Leyen. euronews. https://de.euronews.com/2026/08/01/ceuta-sanchez-eu-staaten-von-der-leyen

Ministerio de Asuntos Exteriores, Unión Europea y Cooperación. (2026, Januar 8). Ceuta, Melilla and the integrity of the Schengen Area. https://www.exteriores.gob.

es/en/Comunicacion/Exteriores-explica/Paginas/2026_Articulos/Ceuta%2C-Melilla.aspx
Muñoz, M. (2026). Spain's PM denounced EU reaction to influx of immigrants in Ceuta | National Post. National Post. https://nationalpost.com/news/world/spain-slams-selfish-reaction-from-some-eu-states-to-ceuta
Nirmalshankar, M. (2026). TikTok, rumours, and refugees: How false narratives fuelled a disaster in Ceuta. @theweek. https://www.theweek.in/news/middle-east/2026/08/13/tiktok-rumours-and-refugees-how-false-narratives-fueled-a-disaster-in-ceuta.html
Noss, M., Kohler, S., Sprothen, V., Rampe, H., & Wendt, J.-F. (2026). Spanien und Marokko: Die Lage in Ceuta. DIE ZEIT. https://www.zeit.de/gesellschaft/zeit-geschehen/2026-07/migration-ceuta-melilla-spanien-marokko-grenze-liveblog#event_id=eouSbNPR2uzB6Cvm3vtb
Parrock, J. (2021). Lukashenko is „using human beings" in an „extreme act of aggression towards the EU", says Johansson | Euronews. Euronews. https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2021/08/25/lukashenko-is-using-human-beings-in-an-extreme-act-of-aggression-towards-the-eu-says-johan
Rawat, M. (2026). Explained: The Supreme Court Verdict Behind Spain's 60,000-Migrant Crisis. TimesNow. https://www.timesnownews.com/world/europe/explained-the-supreme-court-verdict-behind-spains-49000-migrant-crisis-article-155226168
Reality Check. (2021, November 26). Belarus border crisis: How are migrants getting there? BBC News. https://www.bbc.com/news/59233244
Reddig, S. (2026, Oktober 9). Migration: Frontex meldet ein Drittel weniger illegale EU-Grenzübertritte. DIE ZEIT. https://www.zeit.de/politik/ausland/2026-09/irregulaere-migration-eu-frontex-ceuta-mittelmeer-schleuser-gxe
Sánchez, P. (2026a, Juli 31). La solidaridad y la empatía son opcionales. El respeto a los tratados europeos y a los datos, no. 🔢 Número de entradas irregulares entre 2021 y 2026 según Frontex: Por Italia: 478.600 Por los Balcanes occidentales: 340.600 Por Grecia: 259.800 Por España: 234.760 Por la [Tweet]. Twitter, [@sanchezcastejon]. https://x.com/sanchezcastejon/status/2083213292231635378
Sánchez, P. (2026b, Juli 31). Lo que ha sucedido es un ataque a la integridad territorial de España y merece nuestra más rotunda y enérgica condena. Toda España está con la ciudadanía de Ceuta. El Gobierno de España está con la Ciudad Autónoma. Gracias por la cooperación que siempre hemos mantenido con el https://t.co/ZqKdUdu7Oy [Tweet]. Twitter, [@sanchezcastejon]. https://x.com/sanchezcastejon/status/2083158407679189165
Talik, M. (2024). Between Security and Human Rights Addressing State-Sponsored Instrumentalization of Migration by Belarus and Russia [Pulaski Policy Papers]. Fundacja im. Kazimierza Pułaskiego. https://pulaski.pl/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/Pulaski_Policy_Paper_No_13_2024_ENG-Malwina-Talik.pdf
Vardanjan, T. (2026). The instrumentalization of migration flows as state-sponsored pressure on the Belarus–Poland border: A model of coercion below the threshold of armed conflict. Military Studies: Journal for Strategy Technology and Defense Sciences, 9. https://doi.org/10.65932/military-studies-2026-1-1
Will, D. (2026, August 9). Migrationsstreit: Spanien weist erste Reisende aus Italien zurück. Die Zeit. https://www.zeit.de/politik/ausland/2026-08/grenzkontrollen-spanien-italien-ceuta

Wlodarczak-semczuk, A., & Sytas, A. (2021, November 22). Poland says Belarus border crisis may be prelude to „something worse“. Reuters. https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/poland-says-belarus-keeps-bringing-migrants-its-border-2021-11-21/

Zimmermann, K., Kemper, H., & Hoß, D. (2026). Spanische Exklave: Spanien schätzt Zahl der nach Ceuta gelangten Menschen auf etwa 60.000. DIE ZEIT. https://www.zeit.de/gesellschaft/zeitgeschehen/2026-07/melilla-migranten-marokko-grenze-spanien-gxe

EPIS