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THE EUROPEAN UNION'S HARD POWER IN THE INTERNATIONAL ARENA: THE CASE OF MIGRATION POLICY

ABSTRACT

Objectives: *The aim of this article is to demonstrate the European Union's hard power in its response to international migration. To illustrate the importance of hard power in EU migration policy, an analysis of the set of tools and mechanisms through which the European Union and its member states project their power and exert pressure on other actors in international relations is conducted.*

Material and methods: *The research process utilises a case study that examines the military operation EUNAVFOR MED Sophia/Irini, the issue of instrumentalisation of migration in the context of the border crisis between EU Member States and Belarus, and partnerships with third countries, illustrated by the example of the EU's relations with Tunisia.*

Results: *The research hypothesis assumes that while the European Union continues to base its actions on soft and normative instruments, it is increasingly using hard power in its migration policy. Key factors driving the EU to use hard power in migration policy and border protection are the shifting balance of international power and the growing challenges associated with managing migration flows.*

Conclusions: *Today, hard power serves not only a deterrent function, related to border control and the use of coercive measures, but is increasingly becoming a tool for legitimizing EU' actions in the international environment. It is therefore an increasingly systemic element of EU migration policy, influencing both the perception of the EU as an actor capable of exerting influence and its ability to shape practices in the area of international migration.*

KEYWORDS: *European Union, hard power, migration, externalisation of state borders, migration management*

INTRODUCTION

The European Union (EU) is one of the most developed and complex entities acting in the international arena. As integration processes progressed, the desire to enhance its role as an active and effective global player intensified. Although for many years the European Union was considered a *giant* economically, its foreign policy activities were controversial. The EU was even described as a *political and military dwarf* (Willa, 2014, p. 277). For years, the European Union possessed considerable political capital, promoting democracy and human rights worldwide while employing numerous peaceful means. Therefore, in international politics, it was often assigned the role of a *stabiliser* or *bridge* between different nations and cultures (Milczarek, 2003, p. 36).

However, due to the methods and means of action employed by the EU in the international environment, its position was analysed for many years as a non-military power (soft power). This approach, however, was later supplemented by the more complex and contemporary concept of normative power, which emphasises the EU's ability to shape the international order by promoting norms, values, and standards. This role of the EU, based on a set of values adopted by the member states (including peace, freedom, democracy, the rule of law, and the protection of human rights), was directly linked to the so-called conditionality principle, formally applicable in Community policy. Under this principle, third states have the opportunity to obtain financial support from the EU if they adhere to the democratic standards it has adopted (Milczarek, 2003, p. 45).

In recent years, in response to security threats, the European Union has increasingly begun to use hard power. Described by European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen as a *watershed moment*, Russia's aggression against Ukraine further opened up space for actions previously perceived as undesirable or impossible in EU policy. In the changing international environment of the EU, these previously undesirable tools have become part of the community's international activities. (Juncos, Pratt, 2025).

This article analyses the European Union's hard power in its actions addressing the problem of international migration. To illustrate the significance of hard power in the EU migration policy, it is crucial to examine the set of tools and mechanisms through which the EU projects its power and exerts pressure on other actors in international relations. Therefore, the paper employs a case study as its primary research method. It examines the military mission – EUNAVFOR MED Operation Sophia/Irini, the instrumentalisation of migration in the context of the crisis on the border between EU Member States and Belarus, as well as partnerships with third states, as exemplified by relations with Tunisia. The research hypothesis states that while the European Union continues to base its actions on soft and normative instruments, it is increasingly using hard power in its foreign policy on migration. The key factors driving the EU towards the use of hard power in migration policy are the transformations in the balance of international power and the growing challenges associated with managing migration flows.

1. SOFT, SMART, AND HARD POWER IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

The concept of soft power, formulated in 1990 by Joseph S. Nye, aimed to conceptualise the changes that occurred with the shift in the United States' (US) strategic position in the world (Fijałkowski, Polus, 2014, pp. 255-256). Soft power is a type of power belonging to the domain of political values, cultural patterns, and ideas. Its essence lies in the attractiveness of the presented patterns and the power of reputation. Edward H. Carr already drew attention to the mechanisms of soft power, distinguishing three categories of power: military, economic, and the power of influence. The latter is precisely the means and ability of entities to influence the opinions of others, related to the power of attraction (Łoś, 2018, p. 132).

The influence of *soft power* is therefore considered more subtle, among other things by reaching out to groups dissatisfied with the current order and strengthening their importance in public debate even before a crisis situation occurs (Łoś, 2014, pp. 235-236). Nicu Popescu addresses this issue in his analysis of Russia's soft power, which placed a significant emphasis on influencing the situation in the Commonwealth of Independent States by reaching non-governmental organisations with its message. In this context, they were to *be informed about the problems they should address and the goals for which they should act* (Popescu, 2006, p. 1).

The concept of smart power, developed by Nye in 2003, assumes a strategic approach that enables the achievement of more effective and better results. It refers to the adoption of policies that combine elements of both hard and soft power. This concept emphasises the importance of intelligent action, determined by specific needs and resources. It is a model driven by engagement, as it forces the formation of partnerships at various levels of intervention, while valuing diverse participation. Smart power, like soft power, avoids the mass deployment of armed forces and is based on a diplomatic approach to conflict resolution. However, it may be underpinned by real military or economic power (Brito, 2010, p. 114).

Hard power, on the other hand, relies on material force, economic pressure, and political violence. It leverages the influence that comes from the use

of direct coercive measures. Hard power is typically employed in situations where soft diplomacy has failed or when it is unlikely to be effective. Therefore, the use of hard tools may be necessary to protect national security or advance national interests (DiploFoundation, 2025). According to Barry Blechman, James Siebens and Melanie W. Sisson, there are two strategies for employing hard power. According to the first, to *achieve a direct goal*, this force is used not as a tool of coercion but as an act of war. In the second situation, when an actor wants to achieve a desired result not directly, but *through the influence of force on the perception of the other entity*, we are dealing with an act of coercion (Blechman, Siebens, Sisson, 2020).

According to Hans Morgenthau, *when we sneak of power, we mean man's control over the minds and actions of other men* (Morgenthau, 1949, p. 12). Military power strives for military conquest, economic power for the economic exploitation of other nations, and cultural power, in turn, for the displacement of one culture by another (Morgenthau, 1949, p. 38). However, Morgenthau considers military force to be the most obvious means (Morgenthau, 1949, p. 39). Edward H. Carr also emphasizes the paramount importance of the military instrument. It is based on the fact that the ultimate measure of power in international relations is the war potential of a state. Therefore, every action of a state, considered in terms of power, is directed towards war, not as an end in itself, but as a weapon whose use may become necessary in the last resort (Carr, 1946, p. 109). Military force, therefore, constitutes, to a significant extent, hard power and remains a key element of international politics. Its traditional use by major global actors not only demonstrates the importance of the military dimension of power but also determines the shape of security programs and foreign policy strategies. Military potential also significantly influences allies, facilitating the use of soft power, for example, through humanitarian actions with the necessary military protection (Łoś, 2018, p. 136).

2. FROM SOFT POWER TO HARD POWER: THE EUROPEAN UNION IN THE INTERNATIONAL ARENA

Explaining the role of the European Union in the international system posed a significant challenge for realist scholars due to its complex and non-state nature (Ajao, 2024, p. 228). According to Hedley Bull, the strength of European defence policy was primarily created by individual EU member states. Therefore, he advocated developing the capacity for autonomous European defence, based on recognised interests and values. In his view, the key to recognising the EU's political subjectivity was its autonomous military capability (Europe puissance), based on national interests, ensuring joint security against the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), the need for strategic independence from the US, and loyalty to citizens (rather than supranational European institutions) (Bull, 1982, pp. 163-164). Bull's critique was widely accepted and set the tone for the realist *security paradigm* (Özer, 2012, p. 67). Analyses of structural constraints in European political and institutional history regarding defence and the establishment of a common European army indicate that the EU exerts influence in the international arena primarily through its peacekeeping and foreign policy missions. Initially, these included a police mission in Bosnia and Herzegovina (2003-2004) and a military operation in North Macedonia. In subsequent years, EU forces operated in additional states on three continents, and the literature has characterised them as an expression of the EU's *cultural power* and a *strong advocacy for the expansion of peacekeeping forces to include non-military elements* (Pastorella, 2023). Consequently, the EU's role has generally been that of a civilian power or a normative superpower. This position has been explained, in part, by the EU's relative weakness in terms of military capability. In theory, the actions of a normative power entail various strategies that allow it to influence other actors in the international arena. At the same time, they enable it to respond to unconventional (soft) threats. As Matteo Pastorella notes, being solely a normative/soft power carries numerous risks in the face of conventional threats that require a military response. Therefore, in the face of the possibility of armed threats, being solely a normative, not a military, power, the European Union finds itself in a critical position in the international system (Pastorella, 2023).

Tajudeen Olajide Ajao points out that, in light of challenges such as the migration crises and climate change, a certain inconsistency in the EU's foreign policy is emerging. Although the organisation emphasises cooperation, interdependence, and the promotion of norms and values in its international policy, and its normative nature is evident in the global promotion of democracy, human rights, and the rule of law, the use of economic and military potential increasingly overshadows the EU's normative efforts (Ajao, 2024, p. 228). This is undoubtedly a consequence of processes taking place within the international order that underpins European integration, whose liberal character is currently in retreat. Consequently, the institutions and norms used by the EU have begun to be increasingly questioned, and the traditional EU model of promoting soft power through the dissemination of normative values has begun to yield diminishing returns (Wunderlich, 2025).

In the 2016 EU Global Strategy (EUGS), the community therefore set itself the goal of *strategic autonomy*, intended to provide political guidance on the EU's level of military ambition (Palm, 2021, p. 2). This was the result of the *existential crisis* Jean-Claude Juncker spoke of during his State of the Union address on 16 September 2016. He stated then that *Still, even though Europe is proud to be a soft power of global importance, we must not be naive. Soft power is not enough in our increasingly dangerous neighbourhood [...] Europe needs to toughen up. Nowhere is this truer than in our defence policy. Europe can no longer afford to piggyback on the military might of others* (Juncker, 2016).

The importance of military power was also emphasized during the Raisina Dialogue 2020 by Josep Borrell, High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, who pointed out that in today's world, where everything is being transformed into a weapon—from trade agreements, technology, currency, to devaluation—being a soft power is no longer enough (Moser, 2020). In his opinion: *The rules-based international system is being challenged by a logic of power politics, which is more unfair, unpredictable, and conflict-prone. [...] Europeans are beginning to realise that we have to learn to speak the language of power if we want to be able to take our destiny in our hands* (European External Action Service, 2020).

However, Trineke Palm offers a contrasting perspective: instead of a purely realist understanding of strategic autonomy, she suggests that building on the EU's

normative power can provide an alternative form of autonomy. This approach can strengthen the EU's normative power. The significance of normative power in EU strategy lies in drawing attention to the importance of norms as a long-term strategic interest. Normative instruments, from the EU's perspective, are the opposite of the effects of global power politics, which are short-lived and take little account of international treaties and regulations (Palm, 2021, p. 3).

Yet, doubts about the sufficiency of normative power are growing in Europe. In 2024, Josep Borrell emphasized that the EU remains *very far from becoming a hard power because [it is] not a super state with a unified military force and a common command centre*. But today, people no longer believe in the sole virtue of the benevolent soft power that once was the EU: *We used to be a benevolent soft power and now we are a 'semi-hard' power in the making. A 'semi-hard' power and not a full-fledged one because the EU is not and will never be a super state. But a hard power in the making because we have the capacity to coerce our foes directly or indirectly and to react to their coercion* (Borrell, 2024). Today, the EU is therefore an emerging 'semi-hard' power. This means that the EU is not a fully hard power, as it is not and probably never will be a superpower. Nevertheless, using hard power tools, the EU has the ability to appropriately respond to threats, exert direct or indirect pressure on its enemies, and respond to their coercion.

3. THE EVOLUTION OF EU MIGRATION POLICY – TOWARDS HARD POWER

As early as 2011, the tragic fate of migrants in the Mediterranean and the ensuing humanitarian crisis in Lampedusa shocked not only Italian but also European public opinion (Węc, 2017b, p. 279). Therefore, in the early years of the migration crisis, representatives of the European Union and its member states declared an open approach towards migrants leaving their countries of origin for fear of persecution or the negative effects of ongoing conflicts. In subsequent years, however, the discussion on the future of EU immigration and asylum policy began to be dominated by the view pointing to the need to restrict migration and strengthen controls at the EU's external borders. This shift in position was primarily influenced by the continuous

increase in the number of arrivals and the controversy surrounding the *nature of observed migration movements* (Potyrała, 2016, pp. 300-301). Fears of Islamisation, rising crime, and the threat of terrorism also became a significant issue, fuelled increasingly by some politicians in numerous statements. In the context of security, two opposing definitions of the crisis began to dominate public discourse. For some, it was a challenge to be met, while for others, it was a threat to be effectively countered (Potyrała, 2016, pp. 300-301).

In 2015-2016, in response to the challenges posed by the refugee crisis, new humanitarian and financial instruments and aid programs were launched. These included search and rescue operations at sea, humanitarian and development aid, combating migrant smuggling networks, programs to stem the uncontrolled influx of migration, return programs, and voluntary resettlement programs (Węc, 2017, p. 26). Another important aspect in the context of attempting to limit uncontrolled migration flows is the issue of protecting the EU's borders (Topak, Vives, 2020, p. 69). Besides the militarisation of external borders, a defensive strategy and counteracting flows through cooperation with the governments of migrants' countries of origin and transit have become a significant aspect of the migration policy of the EU and its Member States (Topak, Vives, 2020, p. 68). Both host and transit countries, faced with a massive increase in migration, have begun to use deterrence as a political strategy aimed at increasing control over undocumented migration flows (Cárdenas Alaminos, 2023, p. 4).

3.1. EUNAVFOR MED OPERATION SOPHIA/IRINI

EUNAVFOR MED Operation Sophia was established in June 2015 under the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), constituting *one of the few widely accepted strategies for responding to the migration crisis*. The decision to respond militarily to the civilian crisis was somewhat surprising, given the European Union's operational focus on civilian missions and limited experience in deploying naval forces (Boşilcă, Stenberg, Riddervold, 2021, pp. 218-219). However, it represented a significant step in the EU's response to migration and an expression of European defence cooperation (Zichi, 2025, p. 114). Following the official announcement, deployment of units began with the participation of EU Member States, including: Belgium, Finland, France, Germany, Greece,

Hungary, Italy, Lithuania, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, and the United Kingdom. Of the European navies participating in the mission, Italy was the main participant. The aircraft carrier *Cavour*, commanded by Italian Rear Admiral Andrea Gueglio, was designated as the flagship, and eight other naval units and 12 air units (including the British ship *HMS Enterprise* and a *Merlin* helicopter) participated in the mission (Zichi, 2025, p. 119).

According to the Council decision of 18 May 2015, Mission Sophia *aimed to disrupt the business model of human smuggling and trafficking networks in the Southern Central Mediterranean* (Rada Unii Europejskiej, 2015, p. 2). It was therefore designed to *support the detection and monitoring of migration networks* (Zichi, 2025, p. 113). The EU's decision to launch a military operation was a response to the migrant and humanitarian crisis unfolding at its borders, the need to strengthen border protection, and growing concerns about the links between smuggling and terrorism (Boşilcă, Stenberg, Riddervold, 2021, pp. 218-219). It also reflected *Italy's strategy for addressing the security and humanitarian aspects of the migrant crisis* (Nováky, 2018, p. 198).

EUNAVFOR MED Operation Sophia was divided into three phases, in line with international law and with the consent of third countries. Their objectives were to: (1) support the detection and monitoring of migration networks through intelligence gathering and patrolling on the high seas; (2) conduct boarding and searches on the high seas of vessels (a), followed by the seizure and return of those suspected of being used for human smuggling or trafficking (b); (3) take all necessary action against the vessel and associated assets suspected of being used for human smuggling or trafficking, including their neutralisation or rendering them inoperable (Rada Unii Europejskiej, 2015, pp. 2-3).

Once launched, the operation lasted almost five years, operating in the high Mediterranean Sea from October 2015 to March 2019, and in the air over the high seas until March 2020 (Vos, 2023, p. 38). The mission's termination was a consequence of the COVID-19 crisis and the negotiations and stalemates of naval Operation Sophia in the Mediterranean (Alagna, 2020). However, the mission was replaced by Operation Irini, which was established primarily to implement the UN arms embargo on Libya *through the use of air, satellite and naval assets*. As a result of its secondary tasks, the operation is intended to contribute to the implementation of UN measures to prevent the illicit

export of crude oil from Libya, to build the capacity and training of the Libyan Coast Guard and Navy, and to disrupt the business model of human smuggling and trafficking networks (Rada Unii Europejskiej, 2020, p. 1).

Due to its cooperation with Libya, the actions undertaken within the EU mission were part of the second level of the *four-tier access control model* of the integrated border management policy (De Coninck, 2023, p. 345). Continuous modifications led to a situation in which the European Union, instead of directly rescuing all ships at sea, directed support to Libyan services so that they could operate independently within its area of responsibility (e.g., by providing Libyan coastal services with the coordinates of ships attempting to reach the EU). According to Joyce De Coninck, the extension of the operation and the supporting activities were carried out primarily to support the fight against illegal migration and to improve the management of the Libyan border to effectively limit the flow of migrants from third countries into the EU. Thus, by strengthening the securitisation of external borders, attention was inevitably diverted from the humanitarian objective and the prevention of human tragedies at sea (and respect for the *principle of non-refoulement and international human rights law*) (De Coninck, 2023, p. 347). Besides the controversy surrounding cooperation with the Libyan Coast Guard, accused of gross human rights violations and abuses, Operation Sophia became entangled in broader political disputes. In this context, Giulia Mantini points to, among other things, the ongoing instability in Libya, the Italian government's decision to close ports to ships carrying rescued migrants, and broader tensions within the EU regarding migration management (Mantini, 2019).

After the outbreak of the migration crisis in 2015, EU rhetoric and public discourse on EU operations in the Mediterranean placed significant emphasis on the need to implement search and rescue (SAR) operations. In reality, rescuing migrants was not fully reflected in the mission's operational activities (Cusumano, 2018, p. 4), and over time, this issue lost importance, ultimately disappearing entirely in the current Operation Irini. As Federico Alagna notes, this was due to three reasons: (1) the externalisation of borders and the detention of migrants outside Europe through agreements concluded with third countries; (2) restrictions on the activities of non-governmental organisations through the supervision and criminalisation of their search and rescue

activities – which helped reduce publicity and pressure on EU politicians (because, in public opinion, they managed to regain control of the migration problem at sea); (3) EU internal politics and subsequent elections – fearing the strengthening of far-right and Eurosceptic groups in Europe through the narrative of uncontrolled migration, Member States and EU institutions have become more inclined to even stronger support for tightening migration policy (Alagna, 2020). As a result, the European Union has withdrawn from the humanitarian narrative and has focused on strengthening its security strategy and migration control.

3.2. THE MIGRATION CRISIS ON THE EU-BELARUS BORDER

The crisis on the Belarusian border with three EU and NATO member states—Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia—began in May 2021 following the announcement of further EU sanctions imposed by the EU on the Lukashenko regime. It was linked to a record high number of attempts to illegally cross the Schengen Area border from Belarus (Yelisseyeu, 2023, p. 80) and the result of deliberate actions by Belarusian intelligence agencies. Initially, the Belarusian authorities aimed to divert attention from the internal situation in Belarus and undermine the EU's international position, thereby encouraging it to negotiate the imposed sanctions (Dyner, 2022). Migrants arriving in Belarus by plane on the basis of visas obtained through travel agencies, including in Turkey and Iraq (Liszkowska, 2023, p. 97), were allegedly assured by the Belarusian side that they would be transported to the Schengen Area border (and they then could continue their journey to Western European states). In reality, the instrumentalisation of migration against EU neighbouring countries has increased tensions at the borders. Some attempts to cross the border have begun to involve force, destroying fences or attacking border guards. The authoritarian government's exploitation of people and the creation of an artificial influx to exert pressure on other states has led to the phenomenon of migration being described as a *demographic weapon* or a *hybrid attack* (Śliwa & Olech, 2022) and illegal border crossings and refugee flows have begun to pose challenges in terms of their management and control (Toci, 2021).

Soon, all three EU member states built a fence on their border with Belarus, deployed troops, and declared a state of emergency in the border area. Such

actions, a manifestation of border militarisation (penetrating the civilian sphere), lead, according to Killian McCormack and Emily Gilbert, *to the normalisation and routinisation of practices characteristic of conflict and war* (McCormack, Gilbert, 2022). As it turned out, provoking a conflict below the threshold of war proved an effective way to significantly engage the opposing side's forces and resources. As a result of the multifaceted hybrid operation that emerged over time, mechanisms of control and coercion began to play a key role against the background of the European Union's traditionally favoured instruments of conditionality, cooperation, and other less stringent measures of influence (Dyner, 2022). The actions employed by the adversary Belarus, in cooperation with Russia, were characterised by irregular methods of attack (without an open declaration of war), unclear intentions of the aggressor, and a lack of attribution, which also referred to whether migration flows were being deliberately controlled (Koinova, 2024, p. 502).

Due to concerns that hybrid actions against EU and NATO members would increase in the future, the European Union was forced to strengthen its own resilience and cooperate with allies to counter such tactics and hybrid threats (Dyner, 2022). In February 2023, during a special summit of the European Council, leaders of EU member states condemned attempts to exploit migrants for political purposes. They called on the European Commission to immediately allocate significant EU funds to ensure security capabilities and infrastructure for surveillance measures (including aerial surveillance) and equipment. Two months later, the European Parliament adopted an amendment proposed by the European People's Party (EPP), which called for the use of European funds to support border security and surveillance. While the amendment did not directly address the walls, it did refer to the financing of *border infrastructure* (Nogueira Pinto, 2024).

The risk of escalation in the Baltic region, involving hybrid or armed actions, has contributed to closer cooperation between Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia, and on 19 January 2024, these states announced a plan to create the so-called Baltic Defence Line. This project involves the construction of a security and fortification system on the borders with Russia and Belarus. Although this program is described as a *fortification*, countering migration is not its primary goal. It is primarily intended to increase the defence capabilities of the Baltic

States in the event of armed aggression. In response to Russian aggression against Ukraine, Poland announced a similar project called East Shield on 18 May 2024. It is intended to be the largest operation strengthening the state's eastern border and, at the same time, NATO's eastern flank. The proposals by the Baltic States and Poland are intended to strengthen the security of the entire European Union and the military defence of its borders. To this end, they have requested funding for the project from the European Union budget.

The prolonged border crisis and its increasing intensity, linked to attacks on critical infrastructure, can therefore be interpreted as a test of the border's security capabilities (primarily in terms of military cooperation with other uniformed services). For both Russia and Belarus, the crisis represented an attempt to determine which military units could be operationally deployed in eastern Poland, the routes and pace of equipment deployment in this territory, how logistical support would be organised, and even the ultimate potential of the enemy forces, both in terms of numbers and weaponry (Dyner, 2022).

3.3. EU AGREEMENT WITH THIRD STATES – THE EXAMPLE OF TUNISIA

The EU's external migration policy encompasses a range of instruments, from mobility partnerships to broad-based aid and development programs, aimed at addressing the *root causes of migration* (Nogueira Pinto, 2024). The EU therefore cooperates with third states and international partners at the bilateral, regional, and multilateral levels to better manage migration along various migration routes and promote safe and legal alternatives to irregular migration. In line with its comprehensive approach to migration and asylum, the external dimension of EU migration policy is implemented in several key areas: (1) the protection of vulnerable migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees; (2) legal migration and labour mobility; (3) combating the root causes of irregular migration; (4) combating migrant smuggling and human trafficking; (5) strengthening partners' border management capacities; (6) the return of illegally staying migrants from the EU to their countries of origin; (7) support for voluntary returns and sustainable reintegration of returnees into their countries of origin (European Commission, n.d.).

These policies are embedded within broader migration partnerships, which are shaped by the interests and requirements of partner states. In these

partnerships, the EU often uses funding as a key policy tool (McGregor et al., 2025, pp. 47-48). Building on this, the EU has increasingly relied on a 'carrot and stick' approach, combining incentives with sanctions to influence the migration policies of origin and transit countries. This strategy aims to ensure cooperation across three main fronts: (1) reducing mixed migration, (2) externalising border security, and (3) increasing the effectiveness of return, readmission, and reintegration policies. Furthermore, in its new strategy and the Pact on Migration and Asylum, the European Commission even expands the conditionality mechanism, making support in areas unrelated to migration dependent on the active and effective involvement of third states in managing migration flows (Strik, Robbesom, 2024, p. 203).

In 2014, amidst difficult political and economic circumstances, Tunisia and the EU signed the Mobility Partnership (McGregor et al., 2025, p. 53). However, a readmission agreement has yet to be concluded. Negotiations on this matter began in 2016, but have been suspended since 2019 due to *Tunisia not yet expressing interest in resuming negotiations* (Statewatch, 2024). The EU's partnership strategy towards Tunisia is referred to in the literature as positive political conditionality. It offers compensation for policy changes, rewarding the country for achieving the policy goals set out in the partnership (McGregor et al., 2025, p. 53).

On 23 July 2023, Italian Prime Minister Giorgio Meloni, Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte, and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen met with Tunisian President Kais Saied. The purpose of the talks was to sign the Agreement on a Strategic and Global Partnership between the European Union and Tunisia (MoU). This agreement covers five thematic areas: macroeconomic stability, economy and trade, green transition, people-to-people contacts, and migration, which has become a key element of this and other similar partnerships (Aivatidis, 2024, p. 8). The partnership's stated goals include, among others, reducing irregular migration, better coordination of search and rescue operations, and increasing the number of migrant returns (Lehmann, Dimitriadi, 2023, p. 2). To strengthen cooperation in the field of migration control, the agreement is based on a conditional approach in line with the *more for more* principle. In September 2023, the European Commission announced a budget of 127 million euro to support the implementation of the agreement (including 60 million euro in budget support and a 67 million

euro migration package). However, it was not specified what commitments were made before the agreement was signed for 2023, nor whether any migration support for subsequent years was announced under the agreement (Strik, Robbesom, 2024, p. 209).

A significant portion of the EU's funding to combat irregular migration involves cooperation with the Tunisian Coast Guard on security and capacity building. Among the main projects under this initiative are the BMP Maghreb project and the Integrated Border Management (IBM) project in Tunisia. These EU-funded projects are complemented by bilateral projects, including those with Germany, which provided equipment, including motorboats, rescue boats, and vehicles (Raach, Sha'ath, 2025, p. 229). In practice, this means that the EU is, in a sense, delegating control over migration at other states' borders, turning the Tunisian security forces into the *policemen* of its migration policy. Significant funding has been allocated, among other things, to development aid to support migration control in Tunisia. This has sparked criticism from the public and humanitarian organisations (ECRE, 2023). According to them, such actions increase the risk of limiting migrants' rights and shifting responsibility from the EU to third states.

CONCLUSIONS

In recent years, the EU has experienced three major migration crises, which have intensified and even radicalised the debate on the migration phenomenon and the shape of the migration policies of individual member states and the entire community. The EU's situation, resulting from the shifting balance of power in the international arena and the growing challenges associated with managing migration flows. It has led to a shift in the EU and its member states' focus from values and the humanitarian protection of migrants to one of security and border control. Since the dispute between Belarus and Lithuania, Latvia, and Poland over the illegal entry of asylum seekers in the summer of 2021, the EU and its institutions have consistently promoted a narrative portraying migration as a hybrid threat coordinated by hostile powers.

This threat framing has allowed for the justification of using hard-line tools to address migration challenges. EU hard power has begun to manifest itself

through the use of both direct coercive measures, such as military support for border services, and indirect mechanisms of political and financial pressure on third states. To mitigate these multi-layered obligations, EU policy is evolving towards a policy of externalisation. This strategy involves concluding cooperation agreements on migration with third states, often along a shared border, and aims to limit or redirect its own migration obligations to a third party. By utilising hard power tools and instruments, the EU can thus strengthen its external security, shape the migration policy space beyond the borders of its Member States, and exert influence on its third-state partners.

Today, hard power serves not only a deterrent function, related to border control and the use of coercive measures, but is increasingly becoming a tool for legitimising organisations' actions in the international environment. It is therefore an increasingly systemic element of EU migration policy, influencing both the perception of the EU as an actor capable of exerting influence and its ability to shape practices in the area of international migration.

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